



IN THE NEW CASTLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, EXTENDING INVITATIONS TO EVERYONE

It was a dark, cold night in the middle of winter.

But in buildings across the New Castle Area School District, the lights were still on — and the atmosphere inside was anything but chilly.

In one classroom, a teacher hosted a “family traditions” night for students and their families. A parent volunteer made Mexican hot chocolate while families worked together on crafts and shared their favorite rituals. In another, teachers and parents — aided by a local artist — learned to paint, turning blank canvases into beautiful winter scenes.

These events were more than mere holiday celebrations, officials say. Then and now, they’re part of a deliberate, focused plan to engage every family in the district — and to do so in unique, joyful ways that build bridges between educators and families.

“We know how powerful those bridges can be,” says Tabitha Marino, the New Castle Area School District’s assistant to the superintendent. And in order to start building them, “one of the first things we did was conduct

empathy interviews. We wanted to get a better idea of how parents felt about our schools and what families wanted from us as a district.”

The interviews revealed several key themes. For one, families whose students weren’t involved with athletics had, historically, felt less included in the district. Other families wanted more communication on more channels, particularly via social media. Then there were the demographic changes: Where the number of Spanish-speaking students could have been counted on one hand just a few years ago, today, English language learners comprise a significant share of New Castle Area’s enrollment.

“We realized [through those interviews] that as a district, we couldn’t keep doing the same things we’d always done,” says Marino. “We needed to plan through the lens of engaging and welcoming all of our families. We needed to make sure that every parent and every caregiver felt comfortable coming through our doors. And we needed to build relationships to make that happen.”

The district’s focus on collaboration and inclusion led it to join the Western Pennsylvania Learning

2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — with support from The Grable Foundation — to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools. Led by local superintendents and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes to help districts like New Castle Area do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

“It’s been wonderful,” Marino says. “One of the biggest impacts, I think, is the opportunity to get together on a regular basis and learn about what’s out there. It’s one thing to poke around online and see what schools are doing. It’s another thing entirely to sit with other school districts and talk about what’s working. [The Alliance] has given us a community where we can push each other, partner with each other, and help each other better our districts.”

It’s also given each district a “Tugboat” grant to catalyze the changes they most wish to see. Officials from New Castle Area decided to put their grant to work welcoming families, using the funds to launch a series of family-engagement events across the district. A school building, for

example, might host family dinners — informal opportunities for families and teachers to meet, eat, and share whatever’s on their minds, whether it’s related to school or not.

Meanwhile, teachers can apply for mini-grants to fund classroom events of their own. “Because yes, we want families to come in and have fun and eat pizza,” Marino explains. “But we also want them to get to know their students’ teachers and get comfortable in their students’ classrooms.”

The mini-grants have proven enormously popular: Marino received 25 applications within the program’s first month, and applications continue to come in faster than the district can approve them. Teachers are hosting *lotería*, a Mexican board game similar to bingo. They’re bringing in community partners who can help families talk through difficult issues. And they’re creating unique events that help with academics and literacy: One teacher bought “Pop It” toys to show families how to sound out words with their children at home. To keep with the theme, she

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also made popcorn — and hosted the event on National Popcorn Day.

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Traditionally, Anderson says, “when parents heard from a school, it was because there was a problem. This is a total 180 from that. It’s a friendly, nurturing atmosphere where families come and see, ‘This teacher is just a regular person with the best interests of my child in mind.’”

And the effect goes both ways. Teachers, officials say, are now much more comfortable calling

home and enlisting caregivers’ support. There’s more cultural exchange, too, with educators and families getting to know each others’ interests, backgrounds, and dreams.

“I sometimes joke with Tabitha [Marino]: ‘Where’s next year’s grant?’” says Anderson, laughing. “Because we can’t stop doing this. We have to keep going. It’s just too important — and it’s just so powerful for our students and our district.”

