



OPENING DOORS TO OPPORTUNITY IN THE SOUTH ALLEGHENY SCHOOL DISTRICT

It was commencement in the South Allegheny School District, an evening marking the end of high school and — more importantly — the beginning of graduates' remarkable journeys ahead.

But David McDonald didn't feel like celebrating.

"I was asking students, 'Hey, what's your next step? What are you most excited about?'" he remembers. And from nearly half the district's students, the then-new superintendent heard the same disheartening answer: *I don't know*.

McDonald compares it to entering Pittsburgh through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, a moment so moving for many drivers that it's been immortalized in movies and books. (Pittsburgh has been called "the only city with a front door.") "You come through this long, concrete tube, and you're not quite sure what's ahead," he explains. "And then, there it is: the whole city, and all of its opportunities, explodes into view."

But for too many students at South Allegheny, it was as if that moment had never come — as if, instead, the tunnel had just kept going and going. "And that," McDonald recalls, "felt like a punch in the gut."

The district dove into its data. About half of its graduates, administrators realized, went straight to the workforce after high school. McDonald and his colleagues asked themselves a question: How might we create new "front doors" to high-occupancy, high-need fields for South Allegheny's students?

"We don't want our learners to have tunnel vision," he says. Instead, "We want each student to have a pathway to success because they've been exposed to every available opportunity, whether through college, trade school, or the workforce. That became our driving goal."

It also put South Allegheny in good company. The district's commitment to students' futures 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 South Allegheny do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

"It's been game-changing," says McDonald, "and I don't say that lightly. It's given us a place at the table that districts like ours don't always get to have. To be able to bounce ideas off our colleagues in other districts — even districts very different from our own — has been huge. And not only are we learning from them, we're also sharing what we're doing, and letting people know about all the great stuff that's happening here."

Case in point: the district's new Cybersecurity Academy, designed to provide a new "front door" to one of the world's fastest-growing fields. Last year alone, notes McDonald, some 7 million cybersecurity jobs went unfilled — jobs that typically offer benefits, family-sustaining wages, and upward economic mobility. The need for cybersecurity experts has grown so urgent that

the federal government has gotten involved, pouring tens of millions of dollars into programs designed to fill jobs and address what the White House considers “a national security imperative.”

Introductory classes now begin in middle school, with South Allegheny’s seventh and eighth grade students completing seven-week rotations through basic cybersecurity and computer skills classes. When they enter high school, they can take classes in South Allegheny’s brand-new cybersecurity lab, where they can earn real-world certification from CompTIA, the industry standard for launching careers in the field. Meanwhile, the district will partner with cybersecurity firms in adjacent communities to offer apprenticeships, internships, and more.

“We want to give our students a career pathway that doesn’t necessarily depend on them having a computer science degree,” says teacher Jesse MacPherson, a 17-year veteran of the district who now leads the Cybersecurity Academy. “And so we’re aiming to offer certificates that will be useful in getting good-paying jobs as soon as they graduate from high

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school. We’re trying to stay cutting edge and give our students the best opportunities we can.”

The eventual goal, he adds, is to open the academy to South Allegheny’s families and community members, too. “Our community suffered a lot of job losses with the demise of the steel industry 30 years ago,” says MacPherson. “So, we’re hopeful to give parents and other adults in our district the opportunity to land better-paying jobs themselves.”

The Cybersecurity Academy is only the latest effort to build new “front doors” for South Allegheny. Last year, the district also launched an aviation academy that offers certifications in everything from drones to aviation mechanics to flight. And a new innovation center at the district’s elementary school includes an art room, a television production studio, a recording studio, and more — all of which

expose students to the range of opportunities at the other end of the tunnel.

For David McDonald, the change has been energizing. Not only does he look forward to commencement again, but so do the rest of South Allegheny’s teachers, administrators, and students.

“We’ve really been blessed with our team here,” he says. “I’m so proud of our community and the way they say, ‘What do we want education to look like, and how can we best support that change in service of kids?’

“To be able to answer that question together — that’s cool. That’s culture. That’s what our students deserve.”

