



IN THE BALDWIN-WHITEHALL SCHOOL DISTRICT, STUDENTS FIND THE FLAME THAT LIGHTS THEM UP

The esports arena at Baldwin High School doesn't look like a classroom. With its flat-screen TVs; its comfortable, colorful furniture; and the purple flame graphics plastered across its walls, the room doesn't even look like *school*.

And that's partly the point, says Janeen Peretin, director of communication, innovation, and advancement for the Baldwin-Whitehall School District. "What we're trying to do," she explains, "is change things such that we engage every single student. We're making sure that every student finds a home here — that there's a place in every building where kids can walk in and feel excited to learn."

It's a feeling that's too often missing from students' school experience. As school districts nationwide grapple with chronic absenteeism, learning loss, and other symptoms of post-pandemic malaise, educators around the world are reimagining what school could be — dropping dull content and rote assignments in favor of something more engaging, more relevant, and more meaningful to students and communities alike.

Hence Baldwin High School's esports arena, where the district's teams practice for statewide competitions. And the district's

American Sign Language club, where more than 80 students choose to stay after school and learn to communicate with their deaf and hard-of-hearing peers. And Fly Like a Girl, where the district's girls can become FAA-certified drone pilots.

With these initiatives — and lots of others across the district — Peretin says, "we're helping more and more students find something they're excited about. And when students are excited to learn, amazing things start to happen."

That's something Baldwin-Whitehall knows from experience. From top to bottom, the district is reimagining itself to spark engagement and ensure that every student finds the flame that lights them up.

And they're not alone: The district is part of 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 Baldwin-Whitehall do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

"It's been an incredible opportunity for us to spark new ideas," says

Kara Eckert, the district's deputy superintendent for instruction and learning. "We talk a lot about what we want education to look like, and [the Alliance] keeps us connected to what neighboring districts and districts across the nation are doing. Essentially, we've been able to take the best ideas and 'Baldwin-ize' them — to make them work in the best, most meaningful way for our students, families, and staff."

Today, these ideas are surfacing everywhere, starting with teachers' instructional approach. Across the district, officials say, teachers are focusing less on lectures and more on strategies that require students' active, rigorous engagement with content.

By deploying visible thinking and learning routines like those developed by Project Zero — an initiative of the Harvard Graduate School of Education — "teachers are really getting kids to talk to each other and to push each other's thinking," Eckert explains. The district even hired four instructional coaches to work side-by-side with teachers, helping them deliver content in ways that ask far more of students than listening and note-taking.

The result? Livelier classrooms, deeper learning, and more personalized support for students and teachers alike.

The district is also reimagining the physical spaces in which students learn. Its brand-new, \$48 million R.A. Lutz Elementary School, for example, echoes the esports arena in its cutting-edge distinctiveness. Each classroom is equipped with hanging microphones that capture and amplify voices, along with 75-inch interactive display panels that are meant to encourage students' engagement with content. Large-group instruction rooms offer space for multiple classes to collaborate. Laser engravers and 3D printers abound, as do open spaces to display students' work.

"And as we move students into that fabulous new building, we're also looking at reinventing our other buildings," says Andrea Huffman, Baldwin-Whitehall's director of elementary education. "We're working with our building-level administrators to think differently about what kind of experiences our classrooms could create. Could we create a space that becomes a hospital, so that students as young as kindergarten can be exposed to careers in health care? What about a police station? How might we reinvent our spaces so that the

spaces themselves become part of daily instruction? The possibilities are really exciting."

To make time for those possibilities, the district is also "Baldwin-izing" its schedule, looking for ways to leave the typical eight-period school day behind. "We want to move towards something that really gives students something that's more immersive," says Jill Fleming-Salopek, Baldwin-Whitehall's director of secondary education. "How can we offer flexibility for things like internships and college courses and other things they might be interested in?"

It's a question the district has started to answer already. In addition to the Baldwin Bean — its inclusive, student-run coffee shop — and the college courses offered through a partnership with Robert Morris University focusing on the development of future special educators, Baldwin-Whitehall's students also run the Innovation Shop, where they make and sell jewelry, keychains, mugs, and more.

"Their focus is on making personalized products, and they're really responsive to what the market shifts are," says Marissa Gallagher,

the district's director of student services. Similar to the Baldwin Bean, the Innovation Shop operates under an inclusive model: Students from both gifted and special education programs collaborate to manage the business together. They've been commissioned to make medals for races, materials for conferences, and more — and of course, "they also make lots of Taylor Swift-related gifts for all their Swiftie friends."

For Janeen Peretin, those friendships — enabled by everything from the esports arena to the Innovation Shop — are just as important as academic learning. As the district's demographics change, even students in preschool "are learning how to work with peers who grow up maybe with a different set of values or come from a different set of experiences," she says. "And even at that early age, they're learning how to work together and they are becoming friends."

It's those friendships that "transcend the rest of students' educational careers — and make rich, rewarding environments where students can grow and learn together."

