

IN THE REGION MISTER ROGERS CALLED HOME, BEING THE KIND KID TAKES CENTER STAGE AT SCHOOLS

Allegheny Valley, Blackhawk, and Chartiers Valley



Bullying. Cliques. Feeling left out. *Being* left out.

For millions of American adults, these were elements of life as a school student. Today, our understanding of mental well-being has grown, and educators throughout the Pittsburgh region are partnering with students to create cultures of kindness and community that echo far beyond school walls.

Not incidentally, this progress is making for better students, too.

"If our students don't have that basic feeling of safety with one another, then learning is not going to occur," says Johannah Vanatta, Blackhawk School District's superintendent. "We can't see growth and great learning and high scores if we don't feel like we're in a safe mental space where we belong and we're included."

With that in mind, educators at Blackhawk and two other western Pennsylvania school districts — Allegheny Valley and Chartiers Valley — are partnering with their students to create deliberate cultures of community and belonging.

Through simple but powerful programs and events, these welcoming environments are stemming the tide of absenteeism that so many American schools are battling. They're also helping students to thrive academically and personally.

WELCOMING ALL

In an era when outsiders can face difficult paths, Chartiers Valley — which has a large population of families new

to the United States — is putting a lot of effort into the philosophy behind one word: welcome.

Drawing newcomers into the fold with mindful and focused efforts has taken center stage in the district. And there's a beneficial side effect: Kids who aren't new are embracing and appreciating that kindness, too.

"The kids of Chartiers Valley are more than kind. They're accepting, and they want to learn about everything," says Michael Sable, the assistant superintendent.

When longtime students at Chartiers Valley meet a new classmate, Sable says, "I think that really drives them to ask, 'Hey, what's going on with you? Tell me about your culture. Like, why are you fasting right now?' And they want to understand."

As a small district, Chartiers Valley has just one primary school, one intermediate school, and a middle and high school. Because of that, kids move through the system together, rather than emerging from feeder schools and having to get past the sense that they are separate.

Most of the schools are also physically close. The middle and high schools are connected and even share some teachers. This continuity reinforces a sense of belonging and familiarity, which helps in a district where students speak dozens of different native languages.

To build on that closeness, Sable says, "we have different 'buddy classes' where students in our life skills program will buddy up with students in our high

school. Our high school kids also go down to be buddies with the primary school students."

Authentic collaborations between life-skills students and kids on the standard track in the high school coffee shop also reflect the overall ethos of welcoming all kids into the fold: "It's not like, 'Hey, I'm going to do this for you,'" Sable says. "It's like, 'Hey, we're going to do this together.'"

"Doing this together" is an approach that all of these districts embrace beyond their classrooms. They belong to Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, these districts help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit their students and communities.

KINDNESS FRONT AND CENTER

At Allegheny Valley School District, where the hallways echo with welcoming words like "chain of kindness" and "positive influences," students have begun making a daily effort to elevate each other's lives.

That "chain of kindness" is a metaphor: "a chain of all the things we do for each other every day at the elementary school, specifically in grades five and six, because we know those are the growing years when we see some productive struggles as kids figure out who they are," says Jennifer Vecchio, Allegheny Valley's coordinator of curriculum and instruction.

"But we also have the literal chain. When someone does something kind

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for you, you actually write it on a piece of paper and add it to the paper chain that's going throughout the school."

This year's "chain of kindness" has grown so long that it drapes across the hallways, filling the school with a colorful celebration of caring. It's a daily, multi-colored reminder that has begun perpetuating a positive cycle.

At the center of Allegheny Valley's culture-building efforts is a program called Rachel's Challenge, dedicated to encouraging kindness and compassion. It includes things like bringing together a whole grade for breakfast and a discussion on positive influences in students' lives — and pivoting that discussion into a brainstorming session on how they can become positive influences for others "in their actions, in their words, and in their daily lives," Vecchio says.

And at the high school level, a buddy program called "Near Peer" will stack up what might be considered three generations for kindness mentoring: A teacher mentors an upper high school student, who works in turn with seventh and eighth graders.

In the end, it's all geared toward the same thing: building a sense of belonging and community, powered by kindness that is instilled early.

"We want students to be happy when they're here, and teachers, too," says Patrick Graczyk, the superintendent. "If we're happy to be here, we convey that to the students. Students are pretty good at sniffing out what you mean and what you don't mean. And if you are truly happy with the work you're doing and happy about working with children, that comes through."

BREAKING BREAD (OR DONUTS) TOGETHER

At Blackhawk High School, the simple but powerful tradition of "Donut Days" starts several mornings during the school year with students having

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breakfast with peers they wouldn't normally eat with.

Kids are told: "Grab two kids you don't know," says Addison Young, a social studies teacher at the high school. "Everyone gets a donut from a local donut shop and they all just sit and have breakfast together." No specific outcomes are required, except creating filaments of connections that reinforce the bonds of the school community.

Students who never spoke to each other find new reasons to say "hi" the next time they pass in a hallway. It's been inspiring for school leaders at Blackhawk to see how students have embraced this chance to meet new people.

"There's so much intention to sharing a meal with someone, and that's a regular thing for our high school students to do," says Vanatta. "The students are really intentional about creating this culture of, 'I want to make you feel welcome.' The fact that we have 15-year-olds and 18-year-olds doing that, and being purposeful, is just so kind."

Partnerships with local therapeutic services and a system of positive behavior support at the middle school are also helping kids realize that getting help with mental well-being and learning to manage feelings are positive things.

That understanding can cascade through the school population — one small act of kindness leading to another, one student regulating their emotions rather than disrupting a classroom, one smile from a student inspiring another to pass on the positivity.

THE POWER OF CULTURE

In all three of these districts, these actions and mindsets have added up to cultures of belonging that set the stage for real learning and growth. A student at Allegheny Valley or Blackhawk or Chartiers Valley who feels a sense of belonging may be more likely to raise their hand in class, pitch in during a group project, or even come to school on a day when they might otherwise have stayed home.

Sometimes, the smallest act of kindness leads to surprisingly big change.

At Chartiers Valley's intermediate school, Sable watched a counselor arrive with a new student who had just moved to the district from Erie. Other students were in the library working in small groups.

"A girl came up to the new student and said, 'Hey, you could join our group,'" Sable says. "It really touched me, watching that in real time. When I was in school, it didn't happen that way. If you were the new kid, you were kind of tossed to the side."

Just a short time later, Sable saw that the student was not just allowed into the group. She was at the center of it, deep in a robotics lesson rather than sitting off to the side wondering if she'd ever make friends at her new school.

And that's the goal of districts' kindness and belonging efforts. They're about more than simply feeling good, important though that is. They're about being included, about feeling part of something larger — and thriving as learners along the way.

