

AT THESE INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS, THE PURSUIT OF STUDENT HAPPINESS IS IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMICS

Baldwin-Whitehall, Duquesne City, and Purchase Line



Classroom teachers will tell you that kids who can understand and manage their emotions are better able to learn, collaborate with others, and stick with challenging projects.

Students thrive when they feel connected to peers, teachers, and the learning environments around them. That sense of belonging helps them to succeed academically, build resilience, and develop emotional skills that will serve them throughout their lives and careers.

But here's the challenge: There isn't one clear roadmap for school districts to follow as they look to support the well-being of the young learners who come to their buildings each day. And every child has different temperaments and needs.

"Too often, schools are missing the mark with student engagement — especially with the learners that don't necessarily fit the typical mold of school," says Marissa Gallagher, director of student services at Baldwin-Whitehall School District. "So, we've really been thinking about how we can get them engaged and excited."

The pursuit of whole-child well-being looks different at Baldwin-Whitehall than it does at Purchase Line or Duquesne City school districts. But each of these districts, all members of Future-Driven Schools, has been developing innovative ways to support their students.

Future-Driven Schools is 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.

Here's a glimpse into the innovation happening at these three Alliance districts.

A PATH TO WELL-BEING

The day at Purchase Line School District's elementary school begins in a very deliberate way: by paying attention to relationships.

This year, the school revised its schedule so every classroom has a half hour for a program called Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS). In practice, that means students and their teachers share a bit about how they're doing — building relationships in the process — before doing a PATHS lesson that prepares them to navigate conflict and big feelings.

"They learn how to say the problem, and they say how that problem makes them feel. And they talk about why it makes them feel that way and what they could do based on those feelings," says Jessica Lindsay, the district's director of curriculum and innovation.

Discussions are tailored for each grade and encourage listening, respect, and the sharing of ideas — principles that, conveniently, are good not only for well-being but also for dealing with the world. And at intervals during the year, each student is screened for

additional kinds of support they might need, so that teachers can personalize their discussions rather than offer a templated solution for all children.

Lindsay and her colleagues have seen real progress, especially among students who had been having trouble regulating their behaviors in the past.

"The beginning of the year was rough for them," Lindsay says. "Probably about the beginning of December, the students really started to implement this and were more able to verbalize what was causing their anger. They're able to identify the problem, and now they're actually able to focus on the academics."

The initiative teaches these self-reflection tools and thinking strategies to kids throughout elementary school.

When the kids reach junior high, they transition into Botvin Life Skills Training, a program recommended by the behavioral scientists and researchers who created PATHS. It includes strategies for coping with issues including drugs and alcohol, "along with the hormones and the healthy relationship pieces that the young adolescents need," Lindsay says.

"You're really putting them together to create that full picture and equip those students the whole way through."

A WIDE RANGE OF STRATEGIES

At Baldwin-Whitehall, equipping students the whole way through is a top priority. The district offers a variety

of tools to help infuse confidence and well-being into the student body across all ages.

Topping the cuteness chart at Baldwin-Whitehall is Lilly Belle, a therapy dog who reduces anxiety and stress while offering emotional support. This furry friend helps students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

The district also works with the nonprofit Open Up Pittsburgh to offer yoga and improv programming with groups of K-12 students. These classes help build emotional resilience and self-regulation.

There is a "Mindful Makers Club" where kids can express themselves with art in many forms, and the Legacy Lab, a partnership with the nonprofit Rivers of Steel that helps students explore leadership through graffiti art.

And then there's Horses with Hope, a new equine-assisted learning program. The idea: Horses serve as powerful mirrors, reflecting participants' emotions and behaviors and pointing the way toward self-understanding.

"They're not going to ride horses, but they're going to learn to care for and connect with horses," Gallagher says. "It's about really understanding emotion and connecting with others and animals. We want to support certain kids that we felt like maybe we're missing the mark with or not connecting with."

That message is clear at Baldwin-Whitehall: All kids are valued, and all kids will get the support they need.

A WELCOMING HOUSE FOR EVERYONE

That same message echoes through the halls at Duquesne City School District, and nowhere is it on more dramatic display than among the middle schoolers.

Duquesne City has adopted a version of the Ron Clark Academy House System, which is designed to create

"All our kids, whatever their own family structures might be, have this added family atmosphere waiting for them at school. And we see it live and in action how much they support one another."

a positive climate and help kids build character and relationships — and ideally, lifelong well-being.

The district superintendent, Sue Mariani, and her team visited the Ron Clark Academy and loved what they saw. They opted to create their own versions of the primary houses — ones that represent givers, friendship, courage, and dreamers — to help the middle schoolers draw together and feel part of something.

"We really tried to hone in on the family aspect of this. Whatever house you're in, that's your family," Mariani says. "All our kids, whatever their own family structures might be, have this added family atmosphere waiting for them at school. And we see it live and in action how much they support one another."

Each day, the message is reinforced: You're a part of something bigger. Kids are welcomed and needed as part of their house. The houses compete doing good things and the kids are excited about doing good on behalf of their houses.

Along with those memories, the middle schoolers at Duquesne City are also developing emotional skills: As they build pride in their houses and themselves, they are navigating conflicts with peers more smoothly, finding the resilience and the grit to work hard, and spreading kindness in new ways.

Recently, Duquesne City had about eight kids competing in the FIRST Lego League, and for the first time in three years, the school team made it to the state competition.

A group of teachers had organized a farewell assembly on a Friday as the Lego competitors set off for their competition. The entire school, pre-K through 8th grade, turned out for the celebration, "but it was the middle school kids who got me the most," Mariani says.

"They were cheering. They're jumping up and down, hooting and hollering. The middle school kids truly showed what it means to be family and how you support your friends. Because this wasn't an athletic event. These are academic kids. And yet they were giving them as much, if not more, cheering than when you watch football or basketball. That, to me, showed how much these kids get it."

