

GETTING BETTER ALL THE TIME: THESE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE OFFERING INNOVATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES THAT BENEFIT TEACHERS AND KIDS

Brentwood Borough, Franklin Regional, and Keystone Oaks



The daily grind can sometimes overtake our best intentions at achieving long-term goals. Sometimes, just getting through the day can take all the energy and smarts at hand.

As any teacher can tell you, this is particularly true in school classrooms. So how can school leaders ensure that teachers keep growing in ways that enrich their careers and elevate their skills for themselves, their students, and their schools?

Across western Pennsylvania, efforts to expand and personalize the options for professional development (better known as “PD”) are bringing teachers new skills and creative opportunities, leading them — and their students — closer to their long-term goals.

“Historically, a lot of traditional professional development in any district looked like, ‘OK, we have to do a particular type of training. Everybody meet in the auditorium. We’ll do that training all together,’” says Stephanie DeLuca, the coordinator of curriculum, instruction, and professional development at Brentwood Borough School District.

“Everybody was getting the same thing, versus really having voice and choice,” she says.

That’s changing in the Pittsburgh region. At districts like Brentwood,

Keystone Oaks, and Franklin Regional, voice and choice — and the benefits that come with both — have taken center stage for teachers as well as students.

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT FOR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Franklin Regional School District has a principle it stands by when it comes to teacher training: Teachers should have a voice in it. They’re trusted to know what they need for continued success, and they have many options for building their skills.

Whether it’s a Penn State program on teaching controversial topics, proven training for teaching AP courses, an on-site study of the civil rights movement, or simply asynchronous professional development chosen by an individual teacher, the district’s annual 28 hours of PD per teacher are flexible and malleable.

“I think that is maybe unique, compared to some other school districts,” says teacher Tony Bartolotta, who heads the high school social studies department. “We’re very fortunate that we have a lot of administrative support for that. There are a multitude of options that the school district pulls together for teachers.”

This approach has been several years in the making. Since the pandemic,

the growth of the “menu of options” for Franklin Regional’s teachers has accelerated.

This summer, Bartolotta will do a fellowship through the nonprofit Classrooms Without Borders, which creates immersive, travel-focused PD experiences for teachers. He will deep-dive into civil rights by traveling from Atlanta to Birmingham and Montgomery, through Selma and ending up in Memphis. “I’ll be able to take things from that fellowship and bring it directly into my classroom,” he says.

“It really highlights the relationships the teachers and our administrators have. They trust us to do what we need to do for our classrooms, and that’s not always present everywhere. It makes a positive working environment and it really benefits the kids.”

Listening. Trusting. Collaborating. These are approaches that are changing the landscape of teacher PD. And they’re habits that led all three of these districts to become members of 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.

CONNECTING TEACHERS WITH THEIR PASSIONS

The most powerful learning happens when teachers connect with things they love. That's certainly true with Andy Bell, a business teacher in the middle school at Keystone Oaks School District.

He loves hands-on learning. But just as important, he's a foodie and chef. So he and the school's family-consumer science teacher, Jessica Boronky, have collaborated on a project for seventh-graders that stands out for its uniqueness and excitement: they coach their students to bring a restaurant concept to life from scratch.

Some kids do marketing and business work. Others plan meals and cook. On the day the restaurant "opens," they serve the food to teachers. There's even something called "ClassDash," a play on DoorDash, where students bring meals to busy teachers in their classrooms. A live website — designed and built by students — even features reviews.

This project is done every seven weeks. By the time the year is ending and several restaurants have opened and closed, the students emerge with hands-on experience across disciplines, plus solid collaboration skills and some good food to boot.

"We started off with just the idea of it being a food truck, and I was like, 'Hey, let's push this a little further, a little further,'" Bell says. "And these kids have met our challenge in every way."

But Keystone Oaks didn't just encourage Bell to get creative in his classroom. He is one of more than 20 educators in his district who have received formal training from the Allegheny Intermediate Unit to host PD sessions for their peers.

"We recently completed a year of implementing project-based learning and shared our insights and

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experiences," Bell says. "Next year, we will be called upon to help guide other educators in our district."

His overarching message to other teachers: Be inspired by the restaurant project, but build your own path for your students — one based on the passions that bring you joy.

"Take the risk," says Bell, "and fail forward."

LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC'S CHALLENGES

COVID upended great swaths of education. Schools had to remake learning in real time in myriad ways. They emerged on the other end with some key conclusions. Among them: They realized that in-person time was something to be cherished, valued, and used well.

For Brentwood, that meant segmenting teachers' professional development into things that could be delivered effectively online — things like lectures and mandatory trainings — and make the most of time spent face-to-face.

"There's not a lot of great things that came out of COVID, but more comfortability with online platforms has really allowed us to take advantage of the time we do have in person, and to allow for some of those other things to happen when we have a captive audience," DeLuca says.

"Any time that we're together in person, we're really trying to have opportunities for our teachers to collaborate and learn from each other."

That has meant shifting to a "learning group model," in which teachers can do deep

dives into topics they're interested in. Today, 14 different learning groups are active, each based on teachers' particular interests — everything from building thinking classrooms (meaning to help more students think deeply about things they are learning) to mindfulness to project-based learning. "Each has taken on its own sort of identity," DeLuca says.

This program has been evolving from year to year, and it will continue to develop with feedback from teachers. DeLuca's advice for other districts: "Really listen to the teachers on what's working and what's not working."

Also: Let teachers learn from one another. At year's end, all of Brentwood's learning groups share what they've discovered with one another. Last year, they held a "gallery walk" built around artifacts from each group that told the year's story. They're now expanding that into a mini conference, where the groups can present in a more detailed way about the things they've learned.

These innovative and flexible approaches to PD are one more way that education is becoming less templated and more personalized. That benefits schools, teachers, and kids — and ensures that knowledge, expertise, and insight come not just from the top down, but from the classrooms up.

