

# SETTING THE STAGE FOR LEARNING AND GROWTH: HOW THREE SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE MAKING MENTAL WELL-BEING A PRIORITY

**Cornell, Clairton City, and Hollidaysburg Area**



**T**he world can be a challenging place, and students — even those in elementary school — aren't immune to the impact.

Today, communities are increasingly looking to school districts to help students with their mental well-being and emotional development. Schools are being asked to play a meaningful role in the village that helps kids build social skills and supports young people when they struggle.

So, how might school districts best approach this increasingly vital — and complicated — work?

At innovative schools in western Pennsylvania, the answers involve teaching the skill of emotional regulation, helping students develop character traits like perseverance and offering positive reinforcement along with clear rules and boundaries.

School leaders at three western Pennsylvania districts — Cornell, Clairton City, and Hollidaysburg Area — are tackling this challenge with a mix of programs and teacher training to help their students focus on learning even when life is challenging.

Each of these districts is a member 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.

## GIVING EVERYONE THE TOOLS THEY NEED

Aaron Thomas, the superintendent at Cornell School District, has watched a trend evolve over the past decade: Kids' behaviors are changing, and that means they're growing up differently.

"It's difficult being a student these days, especially with the use of social media, and with cell phones impacting what kids are like and what they do," Thomas says. "They're driving later. They're not dating as much as teens did back in the day. They're also not drinking or using tobacco as much, which is a positive. But they're not having some of the experiences they would learn from — things that might help them build resilience and emotional skills."

One upshot of these changes is that schools have become a place that provides more support services and opportunities for personal growth.

At Cornell, this includes creating two "student wellness rooms" for different

age groups where kids can seek a moment of calm during the school day.

Teachers, too, are a focus: The district has increased their professional development training around student mental health. This has led to better outcomes for everyone, Thomas says.

Instead of reacting instantly to a student's behavior, teachers and administrators are now more likely to take a deep breath and inquire about what's driving a student's actions. This proactive step has created a "significant difference in the climate of our school buildings since this approach was put in place," Thomas says. Discipline referrals and suspension rates have dropped. "It's just a calmer feeling."

It's important to note that the rules haven't changed. Thomas emphasizes that a compassionate approach does not mean that students are setting their own agenda.

"This is never a case of just letting the kids do what they want. [The adults] run this place," he says. "However, we have to acknowledge that some of our students are coming in with certain circumstances that may have put them in a bad mental space. And they just need a bit of help and support — some understanding. If we take four or five minutes to acknowledge that and address it, that saves a lot of work down the road."

It means, in other words, that teachers can get back to teaching and students can get back to learning. And if a child or teen needs a higher level of intervention, the school can look at next steps for that, too.

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## STRATEGIC MOMENTS

Like Cornell, Clairton City has created a school-day refuge for its students — a “Chill Room,” designed and managed in partnership with Allegheny Health Network. This peaceful space doesn’t look like any other room in the school, and that’s on purpose.

In the Chill Room, students find softer lighting, a calming fragrance in the air, and a mental health educator ready to listen to what’s on their minds.

Visits there are brief: Students can get permission to go to the Chill Room for 15 minutes during the day. A few of their peers might be in there as well, but the numbers are kept low. That way, the mental health educators can have substantive interactions with everyone.

But the Chill Program is more than just the room itself, says Maureen Shaw, Clairton City’s middle school/high school guidance counselor. The program offers education on emotional regulation and stress management. Kids in every grade, K-12, have a lesson each month.

The goal is to show kids that they can regulate their emotions anywhere: “We really wanted to send the message to the kids that rather than needing to escape to a specific place, you can regulate in the moment in the classroom,” Shaw says.

The program also helps faculty and staff stay aware of kids’ emotional states on a regular basis, providing an early alert system for students who might need further, more structured help.

The location of Clairton City’s Chill Room is actually an example of how well this program is working. This large room was once used for in-school suspensions. Now it’s a place where students learn to manage their behavior before trouble arises.

“We still have in-school suspension,

but it’s in a much smaller room and it’s not utilized nearly as much,” Shaw says. “That sends a message to everybody that we value support rather than being punitive.”

The district also offers a program called “Becoming a Man,” which teaches boys in grades 6-12 about character. The program covers everything from how to treat women respectfully to emotional regulation and goal-setting. The program’s facilitator is there every day, Shaw says, not only to coordinate the program but also to “provide a positive male role model.”

## CELEBRATING STRENGTHS

If you pay a visit to Foot of Ten Elementary School in the Hollidaysburg Area School District, young learners will be excited to tell you all about something they call “The Book Machine.”

When students behave positively, they may be rewarded with a trip to the book machine — a literal book vending machine located in the school’s lobby — where they can drop in a special coin and can pick any book they wish.

Students work on exhibiting one of several competencies that make up Hollidaysburg Area’s “Portrait of a Tiger,” which is their version of the “portrait of a graduate” that many districts in Future-Driven Schools have crafted.

These competencies are adaptability, communication, analytical thinking, citizenship, integrity, and perseverance. Each requires strengths like emotional regulation and patience.

When a student exhibits these traits at Foot of Ten, a teacher gives them a ticket, which is taken down to the office. At week’s end, the winning students’ names are announced, and they are given special coins that only work in the book machine.

“They’re able to put their coin in, make a choice, and have a brand-new book,”

says Marissa Cerully, the school’s principal.

Education leaders know that students have a harder time focusing on learning if they’re struggling with emotional health. When kids work hard on their Portrait of a Tiger competencies at Hollidaysburg Area, they get an emotional boost from getting recognized by a teacher. They also internalize that working on these strengths brings benefits.

The school focuses on one trait for six weeks, Cerully says, diving deep before moving on to the next one. To help drive home the learning, a group spearheaded by Foot of Ten Elementary guidance counselor Kyle Brown has created videos that illustrate the various traits.

These are distributed to the school community — including parents — so that they can be discussed in class and at home.

“The last one we did was perseverance, so they went out and talked with the cafeteria manager and the head custodian, and other staff, and we gave the students a message on why perseverance is so important and how they can embody that characteristic,” Cerully says.

Focusing on one trait for six weeks avoids the tendency to put out a message and then quickly move on. Instead, kids and teachers are discussing the issues repeatedly in lower-stakes conversations, which help these ideas sink in.

“They’re hearing the concept not just once, but over and over again during that six-week period,” Brown says.

This rhythm is deliberate, because it mirrors the way that emotional health and strength builds: piece by piece, step by step, as students grow. At Cornell, Clairton City and Hollidaysburg Area, school leaders and teachers are ensuring that students get the chance to build those skills, so that they can thrive as learners and as citizens of their communities.

It couldn’t be more important, because “if a student is not in an emotionally regulated state,” Shaw says, “they’re not learning. Period.”