

AS DISTRICTS FIND CREATIVE WAYS FOR COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS TO DRAW CLOSER, EVERYONE BENEFITS

Fox Chapel Area, New Castle Area, and South Fayette

For generations, it wasn't common for educators and parents to connect in substantive ways.

They might share brief hellos on back-to-school night. Perhaps there were phone calls (and, in more recent generations, emails), if problems arose. But months could pass without a word.

Teachers had few roadmaps for inviting parents to be their collaborative partners, and parents saw few inroads beyond volunteering at the occasional class party.

Today, though, that traditional distance is closing. Many school districts in western Pennsylvania — including South Fayette, New Castle Area, and Fox Chapel Area — are pursuing real engagement with their communities and building authentic connections with families.

A top priority, says Michelle Miller, superintendent of the South Fayette Township School District, is this: "How do we attract families and caregivers so that they really feel like they're a part of the school community?"

MUCH MORE THAN JUST A NICE IDEA

Tabitha Marino, assistant superintendent at New Castle Area, has found that attracting and connecting with families is not only possible; it's pivotal.

"It's easy for overloaded educators to assume that family-school engagement is an extra — a 'nice to have' item that districts simply don't have time for at this difficult moment," Marino says.

"Parents who feel genuinely welcome will partner with teachers in meaningful ways."

"But I have seen firsthand that family-school engagement is a vital way to improve students' engagement with learning, boost attendance, and make meaningful progress with behavioral issues."

New Castle Area has found that parents really do want to connect with schools. And parents sometimes need a bit of help figuring out how best to do that. If that help comes at moments that aren't filled with the stressors of discussing a child's performance and struggles, it can take root far more effectively.

Also, it helps for school districts to realize that parents who had their own less-than-positive school experiences may be tougher sells when it comes to outreach and engagement. Discrete initiatives to bring parents and community members into the fold can help both sides build a more stable and substantive relationship.

At New Castle Area, that has taken the form of designing animated "flip books" to show parents what their kids liked about school. It also can mean partnering with a local theater to sponsor a Spanish-language showing of "The Super Mario Bros. Movie," welcoming English as a Second Language families and showing them that the school is a meaningful part of the village that cares about raising their child.

"Parents who feel genuinely welcome will partner with teachers in meaningful ways," Marino says.

Adults are often styled as the teachers, and kids the learners. But in true community engagement, progress plays out in multiple directions. Kids can host their parents in their classrooms and demonstrate their learning, creating memorable moments and new connections.

Knowledge and understanding aren't only contained within the school walls. They lurk out there in the community in the form of friends, neighbors, and the people we do business with. Today, educators are seeing the value in that more than ever — and the result of their efforts strengthens not only schools themselves, but the communities they serve.

CREATING PATHWAYS TO ENGAGEMENT

Like South Fayette and New Castle Area, Fox Chapel Area School District has participated in the Parents as Allies family-school engagement project. The project pairs teams of parents and school staff to work together to build stronger bonds, and they aren't just focused on students and their learning. They're also thinking about how to turn it outward, to the larger community's benefit.

These districts 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 students and beyond.

At Fox Chapel Area, Dorseyville Middle School invites students to do acts of service around the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday in January. Students can choose from about 80 activities based on their individual interests, from working with the community's goats to creating care packages for senior centers. One group built a bench for the Children's Institute of Pittsburgh, which offers vital health and educational services to families.

Recently, kids also decorated cardboard coffee sleeves with



messages of kindness, which were handed out at local coffee shops.

Meanwhile, the district's annual wellness and safety fair has grown, with the help of a Tugboat Grant from Remake Learning, into a community wellness fair held at a centrally located municipal parking lot, rather than tucked inside a school building.

Emergency responders are on site to do blood-pressure checks and discuss public health. At a pop-up bike repair shop, folks "check the children's bikes to make sure that all of the nuts and bolts are tight, that they are safe to ride, and that their tires are inflated, which busy parents don't always have the time to check for," explains Mary Catherine Reljac, Fox Chapel Area's superintendent.

As kids test out their bikes in a "bike rodeo," neighbors enjoy free food and learn about community resources.

"Everybody can see everybody working together to keep the children safe, and they also meet all of the people to whom they can go to in their community for help," says Reljac. "It has been a focus area for us to engage in authentic ways with our community – to build those connections, to enhance the sense of belonging, and to help our children to understand their responsibilities as part of a community and that they can make a difference in someone's life."

PERCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

Part of the issue is perception: Sometimes parents and families don't feel welcome on campus.

It's not that they aren't. It's just that the touchpoints of schooling are often either staged events – sports, theatrical productions, ceremonies – or challenging moments when a student is struggling with academic or behavioral challenges.

How to get around that? The details can be unique to each district. But the key is to create opportunities for communication and collaboration that make interaction between the community and educators feel more normal. In short: lower the bar for contact.

"One of the things that we've really looked at in the past two years is being more invitational – really inviting people onto our campus, especially those who may not have always felt welcome before," Miller says.

At South Fayette, that might look like inviting parents to join a group of "key communicators" who meet multiple times a year with school staff to share feedback. By giving parents this meaningful seat at the table, and getting their involvement in initiatives and events geared toward other parents, the district has built bridges that didn't exist before.

South Fayette has also hosted a "Painting Unlocked" event where families and school staff navigated an escape room challenge to unlock painting materials, and then got creative together. The resulting artwork has become an art installation at the high school, serving as a daily reminder of the power of family-school engagement.

Through these events and more, they've found that sometimes the

simplest experiences are the most memorable.

Among the favorites that parents and staff still talk about: "Retro Recess," an indoor playground party for all ages, where families and staff challenged the kids to games of foursquare, jumped rope, and rocked a limbo contest. From the old fashioned gym-class parachute fluttering up and down to hopscotch, Connect Four, and duck-duck-goose, there was plenty of laughter. Families and teachers bonded while snacking at a penny-candy buffet.

"Each one of our events includes staff, faculty, families, children – everyone together. And that whole idea is to flip parental involvement on its head, where it's not all about the academics and everyone kind of being under the microscope and grading," says Kevin Maurer, middle school associate principal.

"It's just an opportunity to bring you and your family to the school and socialize with other families. Starting simple is powerful," Maurer says. "A lot of times in schools, we overthink things. We just analyze things. But all of these initiatives have been kind of from the ground up. We've made sure that we're looking around, asking who's at the table.

"I think we've realized the power of family engagement instead of just family involvement."

