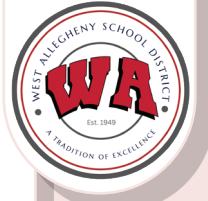


INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH ARE BENEFITING STUDENTS AND STAFF AT THESE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Frazier, Riverview, and West Allegheny



As a child in school, your days are spent trying to grasp new concepts while navigating a social environment that only gets more complex as you grow.

Group projects require not just knowledge and skills, but also the capacity to work with other people and modulate your behavior when frustration spikes. The adults around you are tasked with constantly evaluating your progress, and as you reach high school, the pressure to figure out your future looms large.

Even on good days, it's a lot for learners to handle.

That's why schools across western Pennsylvania are approaching mental health more creatively than ever before. Innovative, thoughtful approaches are helping to show learners the way toward success, mental well-being, and even happiness.

From "calming corners" to the uplifting presence of therapy dogs, educators at West Allegheny, Riverview, and Frazier school districts are finding creative ways to support the well-being of their students at every grade level.

"Parents tell us that they want their kids to think critically, and they want us to teach them to be good citizens," says Riverview's superintendent, Neil English. "It's an expectation we take seriously, so we're trying to build that out — teaching kids to be resilient, manage conflicts as they arise, and regulate their emotions so they can collaborate. These are skills we know they're going to need when they leave here."

MOMENTS OF QUIET DURING HECTIC DAYS

At Riverview, the consensus is clear: Everyone benefits from cultivating calm.

This year, the district's elementary schools have installed "calming corners" in every classroom. Each one offers soft seating and a cart packed with tools that students can use to take a moment, breathe, and practice self-regulation.

There are breathing-technique posters, fidget items, noise-canceling headphones, stress balls, and other support for sensory needs, and also cards that explain techniques for calming down.

"The purpose was for students to feel empowered, to recognize their emotions, and maybe take some proactive steps at managing them," says David Zolkowski, principal at Riverview's Tenth Street Elementary School.

When the Calming Corners were installed, the teachers modeled the proper use of these spaces. "We emphasize that time spent in the corner is brief, but it's purposeful," Zolkowski says. "Kids, when they have that moment, they just get up. Some color or draw, or use a fidget toy, and they're there briefly. Then they come back to their seat with a different sort of mindset. We've seen some positive results."

One big benefit: Increased learning in class, because there are fewer disruptions and fewer instances when a child needs to leave the room because of behavior issues.

"Often students are in the Calming Corner, and while they might not seem to be paying attention, they are. So, when they rejoin the class, they know

what's going on, because they didn't need to leave, take a walk, and be gone," says Christina Monroe, director of special education and principal at Riverview's Verner Elementary. "We're catching them — they're catching themselves — before the explosion, and so they're not disrupting everyone else."

For staff, the district has purchased the popular meditation app Calm for phones and offers free yoga classes. It's all aimed at showing that everyone is valued.

"We have a credo and climate and culture goals to make sure people feel valued and appreciated," English says.

All of this helps steer kids toward eventual career readiness. "Managing one's emotions and navigating conflict are vital skills at every stage of life," he says.

Throughout the district, grade-specific lessons are also used to make sure that skills and tools match students' ages.

Riverview's Junior High homerooms have monthly themes around skills like being kind and working hard. They work in teams, with the goal of "catching" students doing the right thing. Then the Junior High comes together at monthly "Recognizing Raiders" town hall meetings to showcase student talent and celebrate students who are making good choices related to the theme of the month.

These town halls, the brainchild of the Junior High staff, feel more like a rock concert than a school assembly: "Kids who are doing the right thing have a VIP section where they have snacks," English says. "We have presentations and performances and different fun things that they participate in. It's all part of supporting the social and mental well-being of the students."

COMFORT AND CALM FROM FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS

Both West Allegheny and Frazier have embraced similar approaches: Creating programs that teach emotional skills and letting students know that the adults are available with a listening ear.

Frazier and West Allegheny have both leaned into therapy dog programs that are having a powerful effect on students and staff alike.

Dogs visit classrooms as calming and productive influences, and they greet students in the hallways to offer friendly interaction that presents little emotional risk.

"When you're out walking your dog, people are more willing to say hello to an animal rather than a stranger," says Amanda Law, principal at Frazier's middle school.

Law's own dog, a 5-year-old labradoodle named Daisy, has trained to become the district's therapy dog.

Law took her cue from California Area School District, which works extensively with animals as well. That kind of collaboration — reaching out to discuss innovative possibilities with a school leader at another district — is a hallmark 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.

Daisy has been busy elevating students' lives at Frazier ever since her arrival.

She trained for eight weeks and practiced for two, while insurance was procured and board policy was written. In December, Daisy came to school for the first time. Not unexpectedly, she and the kids hit it off.

Now, Daisy visits at least once or twice a week. On those days, middle schoolers encounter Law and Daisy in the school's vestibule when they arrive. Smiles ensue.

"Even some of the students that you wouldn't think would be really interested — maybe they're really interested in sports and friends and different things — they ask, 'Did my mom turn in my permission slip? Did my mom say I can pet the dog?'"

Positive energy is generated. The day is instantly changed for the better, even if only by a little bit.

As the day goes on, Daisy visits at the beginning or end of some classes. Recently, she curled up on a carpet while students read poetry, creating a relaxing vibe as she received the occasional belly rub.

IMPACT FOR EVERYONE

"Even some of the students that you wouldn't think would be really interested — maybe they're really interested in sports and friends and different things — they ask, 'Did my mom turn in my permission slip? Did my mom say I can pet the dog?'" Law says.

The impact on everyone's mental well-being has been clear, Law says, and the positive effects of that — increased focus, a better mindset, a growing capacity for students to address feelings they may be wrestling with — are helping learning happen.

Similar scenes are unfolding at West Allegheny. Currently, two teachers bring their trained dogs to school and Jerri Lynn Lippert, the district superintendent, is getting her dog certified through a program at the nonprofit Animal Friends that dubs these animals "Therapets."

Because safety is important for humans and animals — not to mention issues like insurance and board approval — Lippert recommends that school districts take care in choosing the training programs their therapy dogs use.

"You want to partner with an organization that has a good reputation in certifying dogs," she says.

Also, it's valuable that "a lot of our Therapets are actually district employees'

pets," Lippert says. "That's always a great fit, because the kids know the staff members, so they're just an extension of the family, so to speak."

West Allegheny's therapy pet program "started out small," she says. "We prioritized two of our elementary schools that had specialty programs: our emotional support program and our life skills/autistic support program. And then we've grown it so that every school has had a Therapet."

Though the program is especially valuable for students who may be wrestling with anxiety or other mental health needs, the positive impact reaches everyone: "Once they're in the building," Lippert says, "they become kind of the little heroes of the school."

Recently, one of West Allegheny's therapy dogs visited with an elementary student who is nonverbal. The child looked in the dog's face and confidently began holding and brushing it. Communication was clearly happening. "To see it brings tears," Lippert says.

Not all interactions are as quietly dramatic, but they all point toward the same conclusion: Having trained therapy dogs on site can change what school means to the child. It can make them feel cared about and seen, and it can shift the emotional tenor of a classroom in an instant.

At all of these districts, school leaders are finding creative ways to ensure that these moments of joy continue. That way, even on the days when exams are raising stress levels or a student is facing a struggle, kids know they're surrounded by resources and caring adults — and animals — who are standing by to help.

