

WHEN THE STUDENT CAN BECOME THE TEACHER: EDUCATOR SHORTAGES ARE PRODUCING HOME-GROWN SOLUTIONS

Hempfield Area, Jefferson-Morgan, and New Brighton Area



There's an ancient saying, often attributed to Plato: Eventually, the student becomes the teacher. Today, in some western Pennsylvania school districts, that notion is becoming far more than metaphor.

As the nationwide teacher shortage continues, innovative educators are increasingly seeing students in a new light: as their potential replacements.

Programs at three Pittsburgh-region school districts are illustrating this ethos, creatively supporting the potential for kids to grow up, finish school, and train to be teachers in the very districts where they spent so much time as students.

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FIRST, OFFER A GLIMPSE

In the New Brighton Area School District, this year marked the beginning of a pilot program for aspiring teachers. High schoolers have the chance to help out elementary teachers and get a sense of what the teaching experience is really like.

New Brighton Area's elementary principal, Jason Hall, reached out to several elementary teachers at the start of this year to ask if they'd be interested in having high school students in their classrooms. Many said yes. So, about 15 high schoolers gave up study hall time

and made the short trek over to the elementary school.

Some high schoolers also served as reading buddies for kindergartners, giving them a taste of interacting professionally with the district's youngest students.

Much has already been learned in the first year of this program for aspiring teachers. Jeanette Pietro, a fourth-grade teacher currently mentoring a high schooler, says she has found that many teens are most comfortable helping out with the students in grades K-1.

"I had to really learn what the comfort level is of the kids that are coming over here and how they feel academically, and then try to tap into that and give them things to do with students where they feel most comfortable," Pietro says.

She mentions one high-school junior who "is just so good with the students." Pietro is thrilled to see that.

"She's learning to change her questioning as she's working with them. Or she will explain things in a better way," Pietro says. "To have

somebody who's working with my students one-on-one who can come and tell me, 'Okay, this is the part where this student needs a little bit of extra help,' is really helpful to me in the classroom."

STARTING THE PROCESS EARLY

The future teacher pipeline is likewise evolving at Jefferson-Morgan.

At their high school, the district's administrative staff and teachers look to help every student choose an initial career path before they get to graduation day. In an effort to help students test out a potential teaching career, Robinson and his team decided to make the most of the proximity between their middle/high school building and their elementary school. Students can easily walk between the two, so the district lets interested high schoolers help out at the elementary school during their free period.

A sixth-grade teacher has also hosted an online class for students to learn about teaching, adding some theory to go with their hands-on experience.

The program is growing from there. Wesley Loring, the district's middle

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school/high school principal, says educators in this small district try to give students what they think of as “large-school opportunities” to prep for their future careers. When it comes to career readiness for future teachers, Loring and Robinson are also drawing on their own experiences as students at Waynesburg University.

Both remember their years there fondly, and they’ve begun hosting current Waynesburg students as student teachers at Jefferson-Morgan. But they also remember that traditionally, education majors got only a theoretical understanding of what it’s like to be a teacher until they were finally placed in the field.

“Junior year, you got thrown into the ring with all these little kids, and you had to try to figure it out and survive,” Loring remembers. “So our goal is to do the reverse. We try to give these kids that classroom experience by sending them up to the elementary school. Because you’ve got to understand whether or not you like kids.”

Next up for Jefferson-Morgan, Loring says: adding formal job-shadowing requirements for seniors, so they can “bring those experiences back to us.”

As New Brighton Area and Jefferson-Morgan pursue these burgeoning programs, they’ve taken inspiration from their fellow 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.

BUILDING CAREER POSSIBILITIES INTO CURRICULUM

With more than 5,000 kids and a staff with many teachers approaching retirement, Hempfield Area School District — another Future-Driven Schools member — faces a rather urgent challenge. Repopulating its corps of teachers will require robust measures, says Superintendent Mark Holtzman.

An innovative program at Hempfield Area is now tackling that challenge, and in the process, it is serving as direct inspiration for other districts in the Future-Driven Schools alliance. A formal partnership with the Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center, located right across the street from Hempfield Area’s Stanwood Elementary School, the program gives high-school juniors and seniors pre-education training and the chance to earn college credits toward their education degree. High-school students are being trained at Stanwood to work with kids in classrooms and help with after-school tutoring.

They’re also getting solid training in education theory.

“Having them in the building helps them see behind the curtain: What does it look like to prepare for class? What does it look like to interact with kiddos and colleagues? It’s giving them a front-row experience of what being a teacher is like,” says Kimberlie Rieffannacht, the district’s assistant superintendent of elementary education.

Not incidentally, this hometown training might help them consider eventually working at Hempfield Area as teachers once they finish college.

“It’s challenging to find good candidates,” Holtzman says. “We have to be creative.”

Robinson agrees: “Think about your future as a school. We can’t do this job without teachers — and good ones. So one, we have to listen to our kids. And two, we have to recruit at an early age.”

The result, if it works, is not only productive and useful in an era of teacher shortages, but is also kind of wonderful: young adults teaching in the very buildings where they once studied, continuing a legacy of learning that lifts their own communities.

