

# SENIOR YEAR REIMAGINED: HOW DISTRICTS ARE REWRITING HIGH SCHOOL'S FINAL CHAPTER

## Avonworth, Burrell, and Butler Area

How do schools make sure their graduates possess the skills that will launch them successfully into their grown-up lives?

In the Butler Area School District, the road to developing strengths like responsibility, resilience, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills will be found not just in classrooms, but in places like the mayor's office and the local hospital.

And in the Avonworth and Burrell school districts, similarly innovative programs are ensuring that preparation for students' senior year begins as early as elementary school.

Each district is part of a research project called "Turning 12th Grade into Life's First Step, Instead of School's Last Step." Funded by a Moonshot Grant from Remake Learning and led by the Forum for Western Pennsylvania School Superintendents, the project brings six districts together for site visits, brainstorming, and deep conversation about reinventing 12th grade.

**"The stakes are pretty high: this is the end. This is where that transcript is finalized."**

In many ways, it's life-changing work.

"The stakes are pretty high: this is the end. This is where that transcript is finalized," says Tom Ralston, executive director of the forum. That's why developing new approaches to 12th

grade "sometimes requires people to get out of their comfort zone a little bit and think about the possibilities."

It's a challenge that these districts have embraced with enthusiasm. The project, district leaders say, has amplified the opportunities they were already leveraging through Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. The alliance helps teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students.

### Butler Area: Fostering experiential opportunities

For Brian White, superintendent of the Butler Area School District, the road to the real world must include not only the classroom, but also the community around it. A partnership with nearby Butler Hospital, for example, will work like this: On their "A" day, a cohort of 40 kids will spend three periods taking classes at school that include topics like first aid and medical terminology. Then, on their "B" day, they'll spend several hours rotating through departments at the hospital, such as phlebotomy and ambulatory care.

The district's juniors can decide if they want to continue this program during their senior year, when they can start earning credits at Butler County Community College, which will be paid for by the hospital in a kind of tuition reimbursement program. And it's not just students who will benefit: the community, too,

can count on more young people ready to do life-saving work.

Similar programs are planned with the Armstrong Business Group, whose portfolio of companies spans everything from high-speed internet to cable TV and HVAC. "[The group] wants to follow that same model of rotations," says White.

Like many districts in the Future-Driven Schools cohort, Butler Area has developed a Portrait of a Graduate that details the competencies their students need to build. The district's internship programs play a central role not just in building those competencies, but in measuring them: Students can earn "microcredentials" for their work in the community and receive academic credit by amassing all 12 competencies.

"We anticipate this will push a lot of learning into our community," White says, adding that his district and the Future-Driven Schools are "all sharing ideas."

"The work did not start with Future-Driven Schools," he says, "but it's been enhanced by our participation in it."

### Avonworth: Teachers' passions point toward careers

Jeff Hadley, superintendent of the Avonworth School District, is clear when he speaks about innovating to reimagine 12th grade: Districts like his aren't saying that current approaches to high school are wrong.

"There's not a problem," Hadley says. "But there is an opportunity."



Avonworth is working to harness that opportunity in a range of creative ways. That means in-house research, planning, and an open-minded flexibility that leaves room for small pilot projects and unexpected ideas. Visits to other schools throughout the Pittsburgh region and beyond have also been valuable, Hadley says, “just to get our wheels turning.”

To help students discover promising career paths, the district now offers a law class to high schoolers, and in-house internships are on the horizon. Meanwhile, many media-related activities — photography projects and video production — can help students develop skills while producing their own work.

Along with creating those career-focused electives, this work of researching and reimagining has also led Avonworth to leverage teachers’ existing passions and expertise.

Beyond benefitting students, this can lead to happier, more fulfilled teachers, says Hadley. If a science teacher has a particular interest in genetics, for example, he or she might offer supplementary programming that lets students “actually do some work related to that career in that content area, to bring that content even more to life than our teachers already do in their classrooms.”

Early success has led district leaders to ask all sorts of interesting questions. “Could we create internships where we really turn over a lot of the ownership to kids for some of the things that we need to see happening in the district?” Hadley asks. “Or, what if you wanted to teach a class that only met on Thursdays? And it could be done hybrid. And maybe it could take six weeks, it could take nine weeks, or it could take 12 weeks.”

In the end, not every idea will fly. But Avonworth has built a culture where innovative thinking is not only welcomed — it’s encouraged in the service of elevating senior year and the experiences that precede it.

## Burrell: Listening and personalizing

The Burrell School District is committed to helping students find their own paths on their way to high school graduation through a program called — appropriately enough — Pathways.

Autumn Turk, the district’s director of curriculum and development, calls the program “an alternate path to graduation for kids the traditional school system wasn’t working for.”

Like so many innovations, this one started during — and because of — COVID-19. Coming out of the pandemic, the high school noticed that a sizable group of students were in danger of not graduating. Teachers, administrators, and the district’s behavior specialist fashioned a sort of shadow senior year for students who weren’t flourishing in traditional classrooms, decamping to a church next door and offering alternate activities to earn the credits they needed.

“It was really about caring for the person first,” Turk says.

That effort evolved into the personalized learning program that exists today. It now helps all students at Burrell reach senior year prepared for what’s next.

Today, every school in the district has personalized learning coaches, with two at the high school focused on future readiness and project-based learning — approaches very much suited to the world beyond high school. The two coaches bring high schoolers out to places like the carpenters’ and metalworkers’ unions, local hospitals, manufacturers, nursing schools, and more — “any industry

a kid wants to enter or might have interest in,” says Turk.

Meanwhile, a program of “learner profiles” pioneered by Dan Pounds, the learning coach at the high school, helps teachers understand each student by sharing data about how individual students learn best. “Listening to the students allows us to make changes and adjust our instruction based on what the kids are actually saying, rather than making assumptions based on what we think they might need,” says Turk.

As a result, the path to senior year and beyond is becoming more personalized and more empathetic. And, not incidentally, more useful.

“No matter what career you go into, you’re going to have to learn how to include people who are not like you,” says Pounds. “You’re going to have to learn how to do teamwork — how to be the leader on the team, but also how to be the follower. So, the more that we can embed those kinds of things into what we do here, the more we can help them be prepared for whatever they want to pursue in life after graduation.”

