

HUMAN-CENTERED, FUTURE-READY: HOW PITTSBURGH-AREA SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE EVOLVING WITH PURPOSE

Brentwood Borough, Mount Pleasant Area, and North Allegheny

In the Brentwood Borough School District, a new elementary school is more than a construction project — it's a reset button, and a reason to think deeply about what students need today in order to succeed tomorrow.

Brentwood isn't alone. Across Western Pennsylvania, school districts are wondering what the future might bring. In North Allegheny, for example, leaders are grappling with how to navigate the fast-moving world of artificial intelligence. And in the Mount Pleasant Area School District, hands-on partnerships and immersive technology are opening doors to cutting-edge careers.

These districts are exploring different answers to the same questions: How might schools prepare students for a future that's still unfolding? How might classic elements of teaching and learning be preserved and celebrated? And how might high-tech classrooms, sophisticated software, and creative curriculum be deployed in thoughtful, intentional ways?

While their initiatives are unique, all three districts — Brentwood Borough, North Allegheny, and Mount Pleasant Area — remain grounded in human interaction and connection. As members of Future-Driven Schools, a collective of 47 school districts across the Pittsburgh region, they're helping teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

Brentwood Borough: Cross-disciplinary understanding

As the Brentwood Borough School District merges two of its buildings into a new elementary school this fall, it's also redesigning how students experience classes like art, music, and physical education.

Rather than treating these subjects as separate "specials," Brentwood is building an integrated model that connects them through shared themes and deeper purpose.

At the center of this shift is a set of "studio" courses, designed for kids in grades K-5, that help students explore multiple disciplines. Studio courses like Global Cultures, Nature and Wellness, Creative Futures, and Imagination and Design will replace the traditional rotation of disconnected classes. Instead of moving from art to music to gym as separate experiences, kids will engage with a single theme across all three disciplines, allowing ideas to build and connect.

The structure is intentionally dynamic to keep student interest high. A student might begin a Global Culture unit with the art teacher, studying visual traditions from around the world, then rotate to music to explore global rhythms and instruments. In gym class, they might learn games rooted in various cultures.

This holistic approach helps kids see how knowledge overlaps and reinforces itself across subjects. It might even offer students a peek at future career choices.



To support the transition, Brentwood Borough used a Moonshot Grant from Remake Learning to invest in teacher education. Educators immersed themselves in field experiences across the region, gathering ideas to shape the new curriculum and define the "big ideas" behind each studio course.

The process has been iterative and collaborative, with teachers writing, revising, and building on one another's ideas.

It's been an opportunity to think differently about traditional specials, "and to think about how we could break down some of those silos," says Stephanie DeLuca, Brentwood Borough's former coordinator of curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

At the same time, Brentwood Borough's elementary curriculum remains solidly grounded in the district's past success.

"This is not about scrapping all the things you've done in the past," says DeLuca. "It's about taking what you've done and thinking intentionally about how it fits and where it fits, and how we can look at it through another lens."

North Allegheny: Embracing the cutting edge

At North Allegheny, being future-driven means that leaders balance a deliberate and measured approach to the emergence of artificial intelligence, while being flexible and adaptable when it comes to using this rapidly evolving resource.

The district's leaders are prioritizing safety, transparency, and community input over speed. "A lot of school districts ran with AI development and they put everything in place real quick, and we kind of took our time," says Jim Cox, the district's director of technology and innovation.

This intentional, careful pace reflects a broader recognition that AI is already present in many classrooms. Rather than starting from scratch, Cox says school districts are best served by looking closely at what's happening in their classrooms and reining in what doesn't serve students and teachers.

"In a lot of districts, teachers are already using AI in a wide range of ways," says Cox, pointing to a popular project in which elementary schoolers celebrate the 100th day of school by dressing up as their 100-year-old selves. He's heard of teachers uploading photos of these costumed kids to AI-powered apps, editing the images to depict kids as actual centenarians.

"To a teacher who is not properly educated on the risks of AI, it seems like a harmless, fun, free app," says Cox. "But remember: When the app is free, your data is the payment. We've had to put the kibosh on deploying apps that do that."

North Allegheny is helping its teachers learn that student photos are a form of personally identifiable information, just like a Social Security number. "We don't want to thwart innovation, but we want to carefully and tactically transition to a safe environment and provide that safe haven for kids to use AI in the classroom with their teachers."

To that end, the district has developed a series of committees that are looking at every aspect of AI. In collaboration with parents, teachers, district staff, and community members, Cox says the district is working on a carefully crafted AI plan — one that will be rigorously researched, but also flexible enough to adapt to inevitable change.

Dave Deramo, assistant superintendent of secondary education, adds that North Allegheny is prioritizing transparency, deliberation, and

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Mount Pleasant Area: Designing for the future

At Mount Pleasant Area, strategic community partnerships are pointing students toward cutting-edge career paths that they may not have considered.

The purchase of an Anatomage Table, which lets students literally pull back synthetic layers depicting skin, muscle, and bone, allows for virtual dissections in science classes. But that's just the beginning.

"That teacher also brings in an orthopedic surgeon. He demonstrates what surgery is like using that table, so [students] are learning firsthand," says Beth Hutson, the district's former assistant superintendent. "Those experiences have inspired at least three students to choose careers in the health field."

The work at Mount Pleasant Area also includes the development of an immersive classroom that draws on expertise from local institutions. The district's students who attend

the Central Westmoreland Career and Technology Center to learn about construction trades will be involved in building this new space. Other students will work on creating the immersive experiences that will be projected on the walls of the classroom.

Meanwhile, connections with professors and students from Carnegie Mellon University and Chatham University — as well as partnerships with local companies including Roechling Industries and organizations like Catalyst Connection — are helping students connect the dots between their current interests and potential careers.

"There's a lot going on," says Hutson of the exciting ways that technology and a future-driven focus are reshaping education at Mount Pleasant Area. "The reason we exist is to prepare kids for life after school."

Note: During the course of reporting this story, Beth Hutson moved from her position at the Mount Pleasant Area School District to become the assistant superintendent of the Deer Lakes School District, and Stephanie DeLuca transitioned from her work with the Brentwood Borough School District into a new role at the North Allegheny School District as coordinator of continuous learning and innovative instruction.

