

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

Cornell, Peters Township, and Jeannette City

Senior year of high school is meant to be a launchpad. But for generations, it was often a time of waiting: hovering at the doorstep between childhood and adult life, teens might take a handful of classes, revel in early dismissal, and slowly count the days until they entered a trade, left for college, or applied for a job.

As the world accelerates, innovative school districts in Western Pennsylvania know that high school's senior year is due for an update. How might educators reframe that closing chapter of childhood as the first chapter of adulthood instead?

The Cornell, Peters Township, and Jeannette City school districts are seeking answers as 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.

Each district has developed its own mix of internships, college coursework, industry training, and other opportunities for seniors, so that 12th grade can be a powerful time for teens. They've also mapped the shifts needed to ensure that grades K-11 can effectively prepare students for all that senior year can be.

"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."

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.

Cornell: Building a better senior year

The Cornell School District has just 40 students in its graduating class. And the district's superintendent, Aaron Thomas, is determined to ensure every one of them is fully prepared for their future by the end of senior year.

The opportunities are wide ranging, and many benefit the entire school community. In a district facing a shortage of teachers' aides and assistants, students interested in teaching are now doing in-house internships. "These students can go down and help out a third-grade classroom or second-grade classroom," Thomas says, "and also get credits for that."

The district is also offering professional development pathways for teachers, including one that examines how high school schedules and course offerings might be adjusted to better support students as they approach graduation. To that end, Cornell is creating opportunities for teachers to visit other districts and attend conferences alongside administrators, ensuring that teachers' voices are heard as the district redesigns 12th grade.

Cornell's teachers have been visiting districts including South Allegheny, Jefferson-Morgan, California Area, and Beaver Area to explore their peers' approaches. They return to Cornell



with fresh ideas, Thomas says — and in some cases, with confidence that they're headed in the right direction.

The district is listening to students, too. Through a grant-funded program, a team of Cornell seniors has been workshopping ideas with teens from other Future-Driven Schools districts, including Peters Township, South Fayette, and West Allegheny.

"It's great that they could talk to some other kids and hear from them," says Thomas. "And we've asked them, 'What do you think that we should do differently?'"

The key, he adds, is authentically listening to their responses — and using that data in pursuit of progress.

Peters Township: Addressing every student's needs

At the Peters Township School District in McMurray, Deputy Superintendent Jennifer Murphy and her team are making sure that every senior gets the attention and opportunities they deserve.

It's a district with lots of students who are bound for college. But the number of students embracing careers in the trades has tripled in recent years as more families discover the path's potential payoff.

"We really want to focus on some more career-in-school opportunities for those students who could be career-ready just out of high school," says Murphy, who's been appointed to succeed her predecessor, retiring superintendent Jeannine French, as the district's leader.

Even before senior year, the district is looking to provide early access to internships and externships, as

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well as more exposure to different careers to help students find the paths they want — and to avoid investing in ones they don't.

Murphy cites the case of a young woman who went to a highly selective university and worked in a large city in a very good job, until she decided to return home and go to a trade school. Now she's building a new career in an entirely different field.

“Had we been able to shape that in high school, it may have saved her quite a bit of money and time finding that passion,” Murphy says. “She was a kid who never would have gone to our tech school, but could have done other things that helped bring out that passion” and been “able to already hit the ground running out of high school.”

Today, “we're getting to a space where parents and kids are embracing that and considering a different view of what their future could look like,” Murphy adds. “We still definitely have a major group of kids that will go to four-year schools and still want that highly selective track. But at the same time, we're making sure that we're meeting the needs of all students.”

Jeannette City: Seeding transformation

Like so many districts in the Future-Driven Schools cohort, Jeannette City is closely examining the preparation they're offering to high schoolers.

“Are we offering students — especially those students who are juniors and seniors — the coursework and the opportunities to allow them to step out of our building and be ready for the next phase of life, whatever that holds?” asks Matthew Jones, the

district's superintendent, who's charged with ensuring the answer is yes.

Jeannette City found that while the district was already offering a lot of workforce development opportunities, the work was happening in silos. A student would have to know about a particular course or training opportunity and seek it out.

“We were celebrating those kids and celebrating those opportunities,” says Jones, “but it wasn't really transformational work, because we weren't pulling that all together and saying, ‘OK, this is what it's going to look like when a student moves through our senior high, and this is what they can expect by the time they're a junior or senior.’”

As the district elevates its approach to senior year, they've found it valuable to meet with others in the Future-Driven Schools cohort and to visit schools outside the Pittsburgh area. Kelsey Kotun, assistant principal of the district's junior-senior high school, was inspired by a visit to Mayfield High School near Cleveland. There, ninth-graders choose from a selection of paths toward graduation and stick with those paths for all four years. That offers consistency and a clear trajectory that pays off on graduation day.

At Jeannette City, a handful of students have begun pursuing similar pathways. The goal, Kotun says, is to open those pathways to the entire high school. And — as in the Cornell and Peters Township school districts — Jeannette City's leaders are asking students what they want and need, and then listening

authentically to students' answers. “When we actually sat down with our students,” Jones says, “some of their responses were completely contrary to what I thought I knew.”

For example: some students want flexibility and internships, while others are eager to double down on advanced courses with teachers they know. One group wants to take trips into the community to see options for entering the workforce directly after high school. And others — including those who may be first-generation college students — want support with college visits.

“The quality feedback that they're giving us now will really inform that transformational work that we're going to be doing in the next two or three years,” says Jones. And it's helping Jeannette City ensure that every senior has access to the launchpad they need.

