

THE SUPERPOWER OF BEING SMALL: EAST ALLEGHENY, JEFFERSON-MORGAN, AND RIVERVIEW SCHOOL DISTRICTS LEVERAGE SMALLER SIZE TO DO BIG THINGS FOR STUDENTS

East Allegheny, Jefferson-Morgan, and Riverview

Michael Pochron is an English teacher at Jefferson-Morgan High School. But he understands what it's like to be a student in a small district: he was a member of the school's Class of 2017.

In turn, his students know Pochron's preferred pizza order, and they greet him with a smile when he drops by the shop where they work. Occasionally, he'll talk vocabulary words with the teens when he picks up pizza for dinner.

At Jefferson-Morgan, "You're not a face. You're not a number. You're certainly not a class rank, nor a GPA," says Pochron. "It's who you are and what you do with that human connection that really is the biggest strength of a small school."

Educators in the East Allegheny and Riverview school districts share similar sentiments. Small districts like these can experiment and pivot as needed, says Shaun Tomaszewski, executive director of curriculum, assessment, and innovation at East Allegheny. And deep relationships are the norm instead of the exception.

East Allegheny, Jefferson-Morgan, and Riverview are among the 47 districts that are part 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 students.

"Nobody falls through the cracks."

Riverview: Celebration, collaboration, and creativity

With an enrollment of just over 1,000 students, the Riverview School District embraces the perks that come from students knowing their teachers and teachers knowing their students.

Unexpected as he sometimes finds it, Junior High School Principal David Turk enjoys that a few parents even refer to him as "bestie" in emails and text messages. That comfort level makes his job easier, he says, erasing the distance that might exist between school staff and parents or students in larger districts.

That means that if a student is struggling or has a particular need, "nobody falls through the cracks," says Turk.

Sometimes students may wish they could fly under the radar instead of having that level of visibility. But students who've had problems in other districts are able to find their way at Riverview because of the connections they make there.

"They can't hide — that's what we always say," says teacher Marlee DeLuca with a smile. DeLuca teaches math at the district's junior high school, where she helps lead monthly

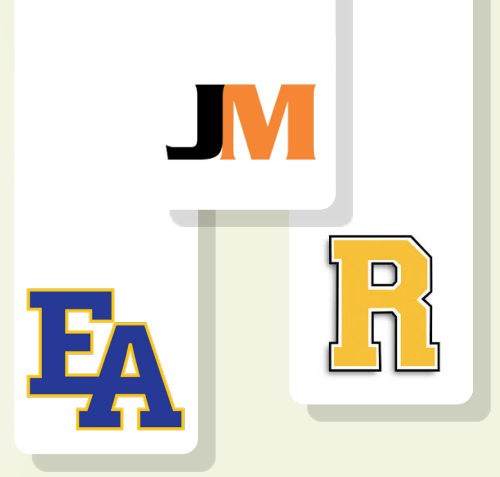
"town hall" events designed to recognize and celebrate students.

Riverview gathers all junior high students together for these joyful community events. Even then, the group is small enough that everyone has an opportunity to shine. One recent theme honored students for kindness. Others have revolved around team-building competitions to celebrate skills that students may not even know they have, such as lip syncing or building a snowman.

Kids see that a variety of skills, talents, and virtues matter — and that kids themselves matter to the rest of their community. By welcoming all kinds of performances, the district emphasizes that school is a safe space with teachers who are watching, supporting, and helping students to manage any setbacks, DeLuca says.

The town halls date back to when Superintendent Neil English was the district's junior high principal. They've since become a monthly staple, offering a raucous reprieve from the day-to-day grind of classwork while also providing real-world lessons that "really help with some of those skills of collaboration, teamwork, and resilience," says English.

Since Riverview's seventh- and eighth-graders share a building with the high schoolers, it would be easy for them to feel lost among so many older students. That's why the town halls are just for them — a fact, says English, that makes them feel special.



Jefferson-Morgan: True community filled with possibilities

Superintendent Brandon Robinson has known some of his employees since he was their sixth-grade teacher. In this small district, several former students have chosen to return as teachers, because Jefferson-Morgan is a close-knit community that prides itself on being a place where people want to be.

It's also a place earning statewide attention: Jefferson-Morgan is home to the 2026 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year, Maddie Loring.

Loring "creates a classroom environment with high expectations for students who are encouraged to take intellectual risks," notes the Pennsylvania Department of Education. "She demonstrates genuine warmth and care with each of her students, while simultaneously growing their academic excitement and success."

She's also a district alum. She wanted to teach in Jefferson-Morgan, she says, "because I really felt inspired here by so many educators and by members of our community. And my colleagues are so enthusiastic about what they do. And you genuinely get to connect with each kid."

Students also connect with each other: Kids in Michael Pochron's high school broadcasting class mentor middle schoolers from teacher Taylor Ewart's class. Ewart, too, is a district alum who values knowing the kids whom she's teaching.

"You know which sports they're playing, how their game went yesterday, all that stuff," says Ewart. "I love being able to make those connections with my students. It's not just meaningful for them, but it's meaningful for me, too, and it makes it easier to know them on an academic level."

Just one example: Knowing many of her students play Fortnite, she worked a comprehension activity into her class that's inspired by the game. Her colleague Pochron, meanwhile, uses role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons to teach probability and teamwork, while also creating new opportunities for students to socialize.

The games are played during a part of the school day when students pursue something of their choice — another initiative that's been successful at Jefferson-Morgan and helps teachers bring their personal interests into the classroom.

"Whether as a parent, as a resident, as an employee, or principal, I couldn't imagine being anywhere else," says Wesley Loring, Maddie's husband and the district's middle/high school principal and assistant superintendent. (The couple's children also attend school in the district.) "We're very fortunate for what we've developed here."

East Allegheny: Agility rules

Located 45 miles northeast of Jefferson-Morgan, the East Allegheny School District is in the heart of Western Pennsylvania's Monongahela Valley. Its enrollment is nearly double that of Jefferson-Morgan's, but at 1,400 students, it enrolls far fewer kids than many districts in the broader Pittsburgh region.

Shaun Tomaszewski saw the value of that when East Allegheny decided to shift to block scheduling. In a large district, he says, making a fundamental change to scheduling can be an unwieldy process that takes several years to implement.

A similar move in East Allegheny took a semester. The contrast in experiences makes Tomaszewski think of a 400-year-old history lesson: the British navy's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Smaller, faster British ships deftly maneuvered through the English Channel, defeating the large, unwieldy galleons of the Spanish fleet.

In smaller districts, change is easier, says Tomaszewski — and relationships are reinforced year after year.

Social Studies department chair Dennis Edwards teaches multiple grades each year, so he gets to teach the same students again and again. This means he can maintain a strong classroom culture and doesn't lose time at the start of each year establishing norms and expectations in his classroom. Instead, the learning starts on day one.

East Allegheny junior/senior high school counselor Emilia Mattucci says teachers working with students in several grade levels over the course of each school year has a measurable, positive impact. Familiarity breeds success, as both teachers and students spend less time getting to know each other and more time dealing with the subjects being taught.

It also helps when students come and go. Families in the Mon Valley often move among neighboring school districts. Relationships that students form at East Allegheny mean that students and teachers are remembered if they leave and then return.

"We can pay closer attention to the needs of individual kids from the diverse cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic backgrounds that we support as a district," Tomaszewski says. And each of those kids knows they've found a place where they're welcome.

