

BUILDING BELONGING: HOW DISTRICTS DEVELOP THE BONDS THAT HELP KIDS GROW

Frazier, South Allegheny, and Purchase Line

In generations past, newly minted sixth-graders arrived for their first day of middle school with minimal preparation. They came from small elementary schools to bigger, unfamiliar buildings, where they would change classes and navigate hallways filled with older students. The assumption among adults was that students would simply figure it out.

In the same way, today's parents may remember that being "the new kid" at school was often a matter of sinking or swimming. An administrator or teacher might walk the new arrival around on their first morning, kindly rattling off more information than an overwhelmed brain could absorb.

Then there's high school. Many grownups probably remember their high schools as places that did the best they could to keep teenagers in line, rather than as places that encouraged self-expression or involved teens in tackling community issues.

But not anymore. Today, these experiences play out so differently at innovative school districts in Western Pennsylvania that they're almost unrecognizable. Here, school leaders understand the positive academic and developmental impact that a sense of belonging creates. And they're building systems that elevate school culture in ways that help every student thrive.

In the Frazier School District, for example, the transition to middle school is thoughtfully designed, beginning during the spring while kids are still finishing fifth grade. In the South Allegheny School District, new students are paired with student ambassadors in an onboarding process that supports academic success and prevents discipline issues.

And in the Purchase Line School District, teens play an active and valued leadership role in everything from running a food pantry to serving as mentors for elementary schoolers. They're trusted to help make their district's community better.

Each district has developed its own techniques to let students know they matter — a vital ingredient in maximizing learners' development. They also participate in Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 school districts working to prepare every student for the future. Together, they're modeling the same community spirit that they aim to instill. And they're helping teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in service of students.

South Allegheny: A welcoming environment that draws kids in

An interesting thing happened at South Allegheny High School. A boy from another district who was friends with kids in South Allegheny heard so many good things about the school that one day, he just showed up.

Instead of going to his own school, he arrived at the high school, passed politely through security, and went to a class. The teacher assumed he was a new student who hadn't been properly introduced.

Administrators quickly caught on and asked the young man why he was there. His response? He just thought South Allegheny seemed like a great place to go to school.

That's precisely the feeling the district aims to cultivate. And that odd — and oddly endearing —



experience inspired staff to build an even more comprehensive, student-focused onboarding process than they'd had before.

Because it's common for nearby families to move from community to community, "We often have new students," says Jenna Whitney, the district's director of innovation and digital learning. "Having the kids feel like they're part of South Allegheny is so beneficial for a multitude of reasons."

The district's new onboarding protocols were designed with meaningful input from students themselves, who were asked: What do you wish your school had done for you when you first arrived?

Teens pointed out that sometimes new students get in trouble because they don't fully understand a particular rule, or because they expect the same culture they had at their prior school. And the anxiety of not knowing those rules and expectations can get in the way of learning.

"If you're not comfortable in your space, you're never going to thrive academically," says Jennifer Wachs, the middle school's reading interventionist and media center specialist.

So now, new students are assigned a "student ambassador" for their first few days. They have honest, teen-to-teen conversations and sit together at lunch — no small thing when you've yet to make friends in an unfamiliar cafeteria.

On arrival, new students are given a school t-shirt, a string bag, and other district-branded items, ensuring they can blend in if they wish — and that they'll have something

“We want [students] to be able to adapt, for sure. But we also want them to be able to lead and contribute meaningfully to our school. They’re part of our family.”

to wear on spirit day without their family having to pay for it.

But even as they’re brought into the fold, South Allegheny staff will ask kids what they miss about the school they left behind and react enthusiastically if a student wears gear from their former district. They’re treated as people who — regardless of where they come from — have something valuable to offer.

“We want them to be able to adapt, for sure. But we also want them to be able to lead and contribute meaningfully to our school,” Wachs says. “They’re part of our family.”

Purchase Line: Charting a path to inclusion

How do you get students to feel that they belong? Give them responsibilities. Welcome their voices. Create space for them to contribute.

At Purchase Line, that means giving teens monthly airtime on a local radio station to talk about what’s happening at their school. As they build their communication skills, they also help surrounding neighborhoods understand their school and its learners better.

It also means a high school food pantry that is now largely student-led. The district’s teens stock the pantry with donations they gather, develop gift bags, and look for funding to continue the pantry’s operation. In the process, they realize that they can make a difference in the lives of others.

In ways big and small, students also get the message that the school is their home away from home. A popular project initiated by the high school’s student council allows seniors who drive to school to customize their parking spaces with paint. Students

developed the initiative in collaboration with school administrators. And as the teens mapped out guidelines and won approval, they honed their project management and collaboration skills.

Painting a few square feet of asphalt may not sound like a major experience. But it tells teens in a visible, tangible way that their school welcomes their self-expression.

At Purchase Line, this sense of belonging starts early. Older students pair with elementary schoolers through the “Big Dragon, Little Dragon” program. By seeding friendships before the younger kids transition to junior high, “they can already have a sense of belonging as they come in,” says Jessica Lindsay, principal of Purchase Line Junior/Senior High School.

These younger students develop a sense of curiosity and comfort, rather than apprehension about moving up.

The goal: “Really trying to include everybody in all the different things that are happening at the Junior/Senior High School,” Lindsay says, and helping younger students to know that “this is what you could do when you get up here.”

Frazier School District: Leveling up

As they thought about the sixth-grade transition experience, middle school principal Amanda Law and her team knew that a traditional open house held a few days before school starts can, in some ways, be helpful to students.

“But then they spend all summer wondering: ‘What supplies do we need? Am I going to have a lock on my locker? Am I going to have to change my clothes for gym?’ They wonder all summer about what middle school is going to be like,” Law says.

That got Law and her staff thinking: “How can we calm some of the anxieties for our students transitioning from elementary to middle school prior to summer break, so that they

get the information — they see the school, see the classrooms, meet some of the teachers, and learn about the clubs, the activities, the extracurriculars — before summer begins?”

The result? A fifth-grade “Level Up to Frazier Middle School” transition day — a springtime event that helps students feel less stressed and more included.

Now, before summer break begins, they’ll see the school and its classrooms. They’ll meet teachers. They’ll learn about clubs and extracurriculars, and have time to get comfortable with the idea of pursuing a new interest — and making new friends — at their new school. They’ll also take workshops on topics like understanding class schedules, navigating the hall pass system, and the small-but-pivotal skill of opening a middle school locker.

The event sends the message that the middle school — and the district at large — values its students and is rooting for them to succeed in their next chapter.

At each of these school districts, a mix of deep listening, careful planning, and creative innovation is helping build cultures where kids know they can thrive, and where they’ll feel comfortable growing into the adults they want to become.

