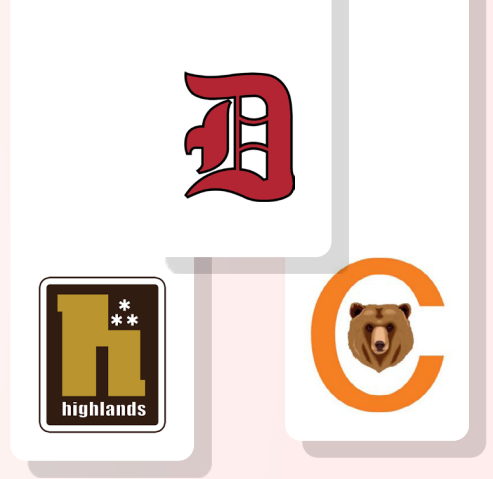


# LITTLE CITIES, BIG DREAMS: HOW DISTRICTS ARE BUILDING REAL-WORLD SKILLS THROUGH PLAY

## Highlands, Duquesne City, and Clairton City



Mister Rogers knew that children’s imaginations are powerful tools for learning. When the capacity for make-believe meets the chance to try on grown-up jobs and responsibilities, remarkable things can happen.

Tamara Allen-Thomas saw this in action years ago at the Penn Hills Charter School for Entrepreneurship, where she used to be the principal. There, students run their own MicroSociety: a model community in which students elect leaders, start businesses, apply for jobs, and even get “paid” in invented currency.

Having seen how deeply engaging an imaginary community can be for elementary school students, Allen-Thomas decided to bring the MicroSociety concept to the Clairton City School District, where she serves as superintendent.

The same goal inspired Sue Mariani, superintendent at the Duquesne City School District, when she and her team worked with the playhouse company Lilliput to design a K-2 spin on the concept behind Junior Achievement’s BizTown — a kid-sized world of realistic storefronts where kids explore the skills and knowledge that various careers require.

And once Monique Mawhinney, superintendent at the Highlands School District, saw the way that Duquesne City was bringing workforce readiness to life for young learners, she knew that kids in her district would thrive if they could take on jobs in a kid-sized community of their own. (The students named it Ramsville in honor of the district’s mascot.)

These districts — Clairton City, Duquesne City, and Highlands — are

all finding innovative ways to give students hands-on experiences that point toward careers they might not otherwise have considered. And they are doing it early enough that even young students can consider a wide range of professional paths.

All three school districts are part of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 school districts working to prepare every student for the future. Together, these districts help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students.

### Duquesne City: Building futures

How do you help kids envision themselves in careers that exist beyond the borders of their community? Sue Mariani believes the process starts early — and that it requires a bit of creativity to help young learners grasp the concept of a career. How do you make something so far off feel relevant to a kindergartner, a first grader, or a second grader?

“You could talk about teaching,” says Mariani. “They understand the teacher piece, because they see teachers every day. But what about those other careers?”

To answer that question, she and her team designed a miniature town where kids could experience jobs instead of just hearing about them.

Duquesne City’s elementary school is housed in a building that includes a Carnegie Library, which the district collaborated with to build this career-focused play space. The school uses it during the school day, and the general public can enjoy it after school. Parents

come in the evenings for workforce development workshops while their kids play — and play at working — in the library’s “Lilliput space.”

It’s a powerful way to uproot generational poverty, a cycle Duquesne City is committed to breaking. “You do that in ways that show kids how you can have a career outside the ZIP code,” Mariani says. “What do those jobs look like? Well, we don’t have an art gallery in Duquesne. We don’t have a fitness center in Duquesne. We don’t have a veterinary hospital in Duquesne.”

So Mariani and her team built them: K-2 versions of a bank, police station, fitness center, diner, art gallery, and veterinary hospital, each giving students a taste of related careers. The goal, she says, is to be “planting seeds early to understand that your hometown is always going to be your hometown, and you can always come and give back. But there is a whole other world out there that you can see yourself in.”

### Highlands: A town in a gym

It’s an auxiliary gymnasium. No, it’s a tiny town full of very young people. Or is it an incubator for students’ futures?

At Highlands Elementary School, Ramsville is all of the above and more.

Funded through grants and designed with insights gleaned from Duquesne City, the school has created a place that helps kids discover grown-up possibilities in an environment where they can have fun and do good work at the same time, says Monique Mawhinney.

Realism is a big part of Ramsville’s appeal. Like a brightly lit version of “Sesame Street,” this Main Street microcosm is complete with a

grocery store (framed for its young audience as a “Snack Shack”), a coffee shop, a beauty salon, a vet clinic, a police station, and a bank. There are even streetlights.

And though the atmosphere is a cheerful one, students “work” at these businesses with the same focus that grownups might. Within minutes of a session starting, the “town” is bustling with the conversations and efforts of its citizens.

Guided by teachers, kids learn professional workflows at their jobs and learn how to do things like write checks and go to the bank. These experiences start skill-building early.

“I want to hear them come in and light up, but also be able to tell me about the skills they’re learning. It’s not just, ‘Oh, we played in the shop today and I got to hold the fake puppy.’ They really can answer real-world questions,” Mawhinney says.

Always interested in the workforce of the future, local businesses are also participating. “They’re coming in and they’re explaining to the kids, ‘This is what we do on a day-to-day basis,’” says Sarah Kumar, the elementary school’s principal. “I didn’t have those conversations in first grade.”

Of course, not every first-grader who spends a few weeks “working” at the vet office will choose to apply to veterinary school later in life. But the district builds on these early efforts with further skill-building and hands-on learning throughout the K-12 journey.

“You’ve got to expose them to the millions of different opportunities out there before they have to pick,” Mawhinney says. And as Ramsville is proving, that exposure can begin as early as kindergarten.

### Clairton City: Creating desire for school and beyond

A MicroSociety is everything a functioning community should be: A world with a governance system chosen and run by its people, where creative small businesses operate, and where entrepreneurial hard work meets clear communication, strong ethics, and a spirit of collaboration.

**“I knew this was something our students truly needed, especially for those who don’t always have a place where they feel they belong.”**

For students, it’s also a place to build practical skills while dreaming big.

“I chose to bring MicroSociety to Clairton City because of what I saw at the charter school: students — even as early as kindergarten — writing resumes, participating in job interviews, and engaging in job fairs. I wanted our students to have those same real-world learning experiences that build confidence, purpose, and practical skills,” says Tamara Allen-Thomas. “I knew this was something our students truly needed, especially for those who don’t always have a place where they feel they belong.”

MicroSociety at Clairton City serves K-5 students. Staff act as facilitators, guiding the process while students take ownership by solving problems, collaborating, and making meaningful decisions. These skills transfer across academic subjects, making learning more applicable and meaningful, while also bringing the district’s Portrait of a Graduate to life.

History classes take on new resonance now that students have had to choose whether their society would be a democracy or a monarchy. Language arts and civics both come into play as students write business proposals not just explaining their ideas, but also detailing why their ideas would benefit the society.

Since implementing this system, Allen-Thomas and her team have

watched students find their voice and become advocates for themselves and their peers. The district has also seen a notable drop in absenteeism driven by students’ genuine desire to be in school. No one, school leaders say, wants to miss “Micro.” They have businesses to run — and they want their voices to be heard when laws are created or changed.

Recently, “they had to revamp the banking system because people were experiencing too many overdrafts,” Allen-Thomas says. So fifth-graders convened a meeting to discuss purchasing limits.

Each of these moments strengthens the bonds between student and school, as kids experience authentic learning about how the world works and what skills can help them succeed.

“They’re helping students become financially literate in elementary school — not waiting until they get to high school or waiting until they get to college,” Allen-Thomas says. And each time a student discovers a creative passion or masters a professional skill they didn’t realize they could develop, that child takes another confident step toward their future.

