

# FROM MASCOTS TO MINDSETS: HOW SCHOOLS ARE BRINGING PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE TO LIFE

## Hampton Township, Deer Lakes, and Baldwin-Whitehall



Today’s teens are emerging from high school into a constantly shifting employment landscape. A decade from now, many will be doing jobs that have yet to be imagined.

But educators know that certain core skills — things like problem-solving, communicating, collaborating, and self-regulating — will remain essential to success in young people’s personal and professional lives.

With that in mind, school districts nationwide have been crafting “Portraits of a Graduate.” These lists — created by teams of educators with meaningful input from families, community members, and students — specify the skills that districts are committed to instilling in students.

But making a list is only the first step. School districts are also exploring the best methods for bringing their lists to life — and for teaching the skills their communities want to see.

In Western Pennsylvania, educators at three school districts — Baldwin-Whitehall, Deer Lakes, and Hampton Township — are developing innovative approaches. Their ultimate goal is to launch capable graduates into the world, and they’re beginning this work as early as kindergarten. Each has found ways to creatively leverage their canine mascots to help their youngest learners grasp essential traits.

These districts are part of Future-Driven Schools, an alliance of 47 school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, they’re creating opportunities for their students and helping teachers, administrators, and board members do what they

do best: innovate and collaborate in service of student learning.

### Hampton Township: Animating excitement

Elementary students in the Hampton Township School District are often curious about what situation Cooper Collaborator will find himself in next. Will this adorable animated puppy get help from his friend Maddy Mindset? Or perhaps encouragement from his pal Paxton Perseverance?

These characters — along with their buddies Emma Empathy, Cleo Communicator, and Theo Thinker — have fictional experiences that help the youngest students at Hampton understand the strengths described in the district’s Portrait of a Talbot. (Fun fact: The talbot is an ancient forebear of the modern bloodhound.)

Plush versions of the pups are used in Hampton’s elementary classrooms. Animated videos of their adventures, crafted with help from AI, have become a hit not just with elementary schoolers but also with older kids, teachers, and the rest of the district’s staff.

But that’s just one approach. The operationalizing of the Portrait of a Talbot is led in bespoke ways by teachers at each grade level, says Michael Loughead, the district’s superintendent. The work is grounded in teachers’ understanding of their students: “What does empathy look like in a second-grade classroom? The answer has to be definable, describable, observable. What would it look like in a lesson? What would

it look like if a student was actually demonstrating these competencies?”

Those answers, says Loughead, need to come from faculty. “If it comes from a Google search or an administrator, it’s usually going to miss the mark. Because the faculty really know what our students are capable of doing, and what language would resonate with them.”

Another approach that is serving Hampton Township and its peer districts well: Practicing the same communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills that they’re trying to teach by visiting one another’s buildings and sharing valuable ideas.

“We’re doing it quite well in Western Pennsylvania,” Loughead says of the Future-Driven Schools districts. “We’ve gone and seen other folks working with their Portraits, and we’ve learned from them as well.”

### Deer Lakes: “Empowered citizenship at its finest”

Student wellness is a core part of the Learner Profile at the Deer Lakes School District, along with empowered citizenship, creativity, communication, and collaboration.

To that end, wellness programs at Deer Lakes have garnered national recognition: In 2024, the district’s Curtisville Primary Center was named one of America’s Healthiest Schools by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. It was the only school in Pennsylvania — and one of just 66 across the nation — to earn the highest score in each category.

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The recognition’s roots go deep. As Deer Lakes designed its Learner Profile with input from teachers, students, parents, community members, and administrators, it became clear: “Wellness is very important to us,” says Superintendent Janell Logue-Belden, because it creates a solid foundation from which children can learn and grow.

The collaborative process of designing their Learner Profile is now paying dividends as the district puts it into practice.

“You have everybody pushing for the same goals. We are all stakeholders – from kids to staff to parents to administrators to teachers – and we’re all putting this together,” she says. “It’s something that belongs to everyone.”

Another priority: Making sure the Learner Profile’s lofty goals are relatable for kids and that they regularly surface in lessons to keep them on students’ minds. In a conversation with students about the importance of free speech and the U.S. Constitution, for example, Logue-Belden tied the subject to the goal of becoming empowered citizens.

And rather than simply pointing out the connection, she asked students: “How does this discussion fall into that?” That prompted the teens to describe empowered citizenship in their own words, giving them space to make their own intellectual connections.

“That’s empowered citizenship at its finest,” she says.

## **Baldwin-Whitehall: The “Journey of a Highlander”**

Like Hampton Township and Deer Lakes, the Baldwin-Whitehall School District’s leadership believes that students benefit most when meaningful traits and skills are threaded through every grade level, says Jill Fleming-Salopek, the district’s director of curriculum implementation and learning pathways.

To emphasize this multi-grade approach, the district opted to use the phrase the “Journey of a Highlander,” rather than “Portrait of a Graduate.” The Highlander in question is the district’s mascot, whose trusted sidekick is Scottie – a cute Scottish terrier who helps impart the message to younger students.

“Using the Scottie dogs at the elementary level, pre-K through grade 5, has really helped align many of our initiatives, and made it fun and simple for our youngest learners,” Fleming-Salopek says.

Drafting their profile was an important journey in itself. The district spent more than a year in search of the perfect mix of strengths and character traits, and they involved a large group of stakeholders: students, educators, administrators, local business owners, and parents, along with district residents who don’t have kids attending the schools.

Through that process, the district settled on five core competencies: the capacity to be an adaptive learner, a responsible collaborator, an effective communicator, and an empathetic citizen, as well as the habits of thinking creatively and thinking critically.

Over the past year, educators in the district have been exploring ways that these competencies can be aligned with initiatives already in place at Baldwin-Whitehall. The goal is for it to “organically be embedded and practiced in everything we do,”

says Andrea Huffman, the district’s director of educational programming and student performance.

The shared vocabulary is valuable. “You are starting to hear teachers just naturally embed the language from our competencies into their daily instruction and their daily practice,” Huffman says. “It just continues to grow.”

Strengths like creative thinking or empathy are valuable in many contexts. As students discover the nuances of each, they can begin applying these strengths throughout their K-12 journey, Fleming-Salopek says.

And the strengths matter even beyond graduation. During a recent program hosted by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Baldwin-Whitehall educators heard business leaders from Siemens and other corporations speak about the strengths they seek in potential employees.

Their message? Math and science skills matter. But above all else, people need communication and problem-solving skills, as well as the capacity to work as a team, to be truly effective employees.

“That was really a validating point for us,” Fleming-Salopek says, “to look at why this work is so important outside of the walls of our schools, and also outside of our community.”

