

RIGOROUS, RELEVANT, REAL: HOW DISTRICTS HELP PITTSBURGH-AREA STUDENTS BUILD REAL SKILLS FOR REAL LIFE

Keystone Oaks, West Allegheny, and Franklin Regional

On a typical day at West Allegheny High School, you might find teens doing something unexpected — conducting in-depth interviews, perhaps, or filming behind-the-scenes footage to produce a promotional video for the school's fall musical.

At first glance, their work may look less like an assignment and more like a job — a hands-on project bringing skills and careers to life.

Meanwhile, in the nearby Keystone Oaks School District, students aren't just learning content. They're developing key workplace skills like organization, communication, and self-reflection, so that they're better equipped to thrive when they enter the real world.

And in the Franklin Regional School District, students are graduating with college credits, professional credentials, and a clearer sense of direction, thanks to the district's college partnerships, internships, and more.

Across Western Pennsylvania, school districts like these are rethinking what learning can look like when it's authentically connected to the world beyond the classroom. West Allegheny, Keystone Oaks, and Franklin Regional 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.

While each district takes a different approach, they're collectively making school more relevant, more

responsive, and more connected to life after graduation.

Keystone Oaks: Smoother starts make all the difference

Keystone Oaks High School is preparing students for success by focusing on career-ready skill-building from the moment they arrive at high school. The school is in the process of redesigning the transition into ninth grade with a focus on foundational skills like communication, organization, and adaptability — all of which today's employers seek in successful candidates.

"We take a look at some of the areas of growth that we see as opportunities for the kids," says Mike Linnert, the school's principal. "What skills do [rising ninth-graders] currently have — and what skills do they need?"

Some students, for example, need to build their capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving. Others need to work on stronger communication skills.

"It could be as simple as this," says Linnert: "Are they prepared to annotate a reading? Are they prepared to organize? Are they prepared to self-reflect?"

Educators across departments and grade levels have been spending this year identifying trends and refining priorities, collaborating with one another, and using student feedback to build a structured roadmap. Implementation for a new, more intentional transition from middle to high school is set to begin next school year.



Teachers, school counselors, and administrators will all play roles in this targeted transition, along with older students — seniors, and perhaps juniors, too — who will serve as peer mentors.

They will help the incoming ninth-graders build relationships and learn to navigate high school. In the process, these teens will be further developing their own communication, problem-solving, and collaboration skills.

The result will be a model that blends academic preparation with skill-building and personal development. The school is leveraging existing structures, including flexible scheduling and dedicated learning time, to integrate this work without disrupting core instruction.

Given how important these skills are to the careers that today's students will one day pursue, Linnert says the goal is to create a foundation for personal development that will extend far beyond ninth grade.

The ultimate goal is to help students succeed not just in school, but in whatever path they choose next.

West Allegheny: The power of real-world experiences

West Allegheny is building an ambitious internship ecosystem at the high school level — one that treats career exploration not as an add-on, but as a central part of the student experience. Already, more than 330 students — roughly one-third of the high school's student body — are participating in internships. And the district plans to expand its offerings even further.

West Allegheny's work builds directly on its early college model, which allows students to begin earning college credits as early as ninth grade. In some cases, teens can leave high school with a large portion of their bachelor's degree already completed.

Beyond academic acceleration, students also thrive amid the district's hands-on experiences.

West Allegheny offers three distinct pathways: course-embedded internships, elective internships during the school day, and extended-day internships that include paid positions and formal hiring processes. Across all three models, the emphasis is on real, meaningful engagement: students design lessons, manage technology systems, run event logistics, produce media content, and even support district operations. In some cases, they're trusted with responsibilities typically reserved for professionals, from troubleshooting district IT issues to producing full-scale communications campaigns.

Pathways are closely tied to student interests. Many internships originate from students themselves, including the team that produced a promo video for the school's fall theater production — gaining in-demand, real-world career skills while amplifying their classmates' theatrical efforts.

Dedicated staff manage partnerships, oversee implementation, and continuously refine the model based on student and community feedback. It's been worth the effort, says Jerri Lynn Lippert, the district's superintendent: "You have to have the resources and you have to have the human capacity and capital if you're going to really follow this work through."

Ultimately, the district's approach reflects a shift from traditional schooling to a more integrated, experience-driven model — one where students graduate not just with credits, but with clarity, skills, and a tangible sense of direction.

Franklin Regional: Relevant learning is impactful learning

Franklin Regional, too, is rethinking school — not as a disconnected set of

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experiences, but as a coherent system intentionally designed to connect learning to life. The district is building a model where classroom instruction, career pathways, and professional experiences are fully aligned to prepare students for a rapidly changing future.

At the core of this work is the district's belief that relevance drives engagement, and engagement drives performance.

"We know from the Rigor/Relevance Framework that when students are engaged in work that matters to them — that is, in real-world experiences connected to their interests and future goals — their motivation increases, and so does their performance, both in and out of the classroom," says Superintendent Gennaro Piraino.

That philosophy operationalized across the district. Beginning in the early grades with a focus on the "five C's" — critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and citizenship — and extending through high school, Franklin Regional's students are immersed in experiences that build academic strength and durable, transferable skills.

Through an expansive college-in-high-school model, for example, students can earn dozens of college credits — and, in some cases, complete associate degrees — while still enrolled in high school. This accelerates learning and removes substantial financial barriers for families.

Meanwhile, the district's internship program has evolved into a

structured, credit-bearing system serving 60 to 80 seniors annually. These intentionally designed placements align to students' career interests and are supported through partnerships with business, industry, and post-secondary institutions.

"One of the factors is finding the right employer," Piraino says. "We do not want students to go into an organization to pour coffee. We want them engaged. What does the work look like? What does that experience look like? How does it fit their personality?"

Looking ahead, the district is scaling this work through the development of Advanced Career Academies in health care, advanced technology, and business. These academies are designed to fully integrate rigorous academics with industry credentials, enabling students to graduate with certifications, college credits, and direct entry points into high-demand careers.

And the district's vision extends beyond its students.

"The goal is to erase ZIP code boundaries so that every student in the county has access to these opportunities," Piraino says.

"Franklin Regional can strive to be among the best in the country at providing these experiences, but our graduating class alone is not large enough to meet the workforce needs of our region," he adds, noting that Westmoreland County is losing approximately 4,000 residents per year. "That outmigration is an economic challenge, and it reinforces the need to scale these opportunities across the county."

This work reflects a broader shift in education, one in which school systems serve as central connectors between students, post-secondary institutions, and the workforce. Together, these districts aren't just preparing students for what comes next — they are defining what the