

BEYOND THE BELL: HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS SUPPORT — AND MEASURE — REAL-WORLD LEARNING

New Brighton, Northgate, and California Area

All the world's a classroom for students in Western Pennsylvania, where a flourishing learning ecosystem offers a kaleidoscope of opportunities. Beyond school walls, kids and teens are learning in after-school programs and award-winning museums, at jobs and internships, and even through conversations and collaboration with elders in their communities.

But the challenge is this: How can school districts effectively capture this learning in order to measure and credential it in meaningful ways? How might districts craft a more complete picture of the skills and knowledge that learners develop throughout their K-12 journeys, both in and out of school?

Tracking, evaluating, and ultimately offering credit for learning beyond the classroom can be complicated. But leaders in three Western Pennsylvania school districts — New Brighton Area, Northgate, and California Area — are tackling the challenge by developing tools and systems that both nurture and document students' holistic learning experiences.

Each district is approaching the problem in a unique way. But as members of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 school districts dedicated to preparing every learner for tomorrow, they're finding opportunities to share ideas and support each other's efforts. Together, they're helping teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students.

California Area: Learning beyond the classroom

The California Area School District is known for innovation. This small,

rural district is home to everything from a 3D printed orchestra to a literacy program where elementary school students read to baby lambs.

The district's approach to documenting learning that happens beyond its walls is likewise inventive: Since no software was available to track student learning outside of school, California Area built its own. It's called The Village Transcript.

Each student has a profile on the platform, which was built by Superintendent Laura Jacob and her team and is moderated by the district. Profiles of each student serve as a place to compile off-campus achievements, work and volunteer experience, and other learning, making them part of students' official school transcripts.

The best part? Community members — including coaches, employers, and afterschool educators — can upload insights about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students develop in the community, offering firsthand descriptions of their efforts and learning.

"It's a resume, portfolio, and transcript, all smashed together," says Jacob. "We're creating a system where any adult connected with that child can contribute and identify skills, dispositions, and portfolio evidence of that child."

The result is a detailed document that paints a picture of student accomplishments more vividly and fully than a report card or standardized test score — or even a one-page resume — ever could.

Imagine a student who has average grades, but who dedicates hours



each week to serving the community as a volunteer firefighter. Over time, the student builds perseverance and skills like problem-solving and collaboration. The Village Transcript takes this into account as the high schooler approaches graduation and begins to apply for jobs, training programs, or college.

The Village Transcript is just one aspect of the specialized, student-centered approach at California Area. The district also allows students to schedule classes the way they might order items off a menu, choosing to pursue a virtual elective or use time during the summer to do things like study physics-in-action at Kennywood Park or explore European history while trekking across Europe.

"It's a little messy, but we make it work," Jacob says. "As leaders, if we want to change the traditional methods of school, we have to change the systems that are in place to make that change happen."

Northgate: From internships to course credit

For several years, teens at Northgate School District have had a unique opportunity. The AGH Suburban campus — a combination business incubator, healthcare hub, and educational resource — is just down the road from their high school. And their district helps them apply for hands-on internships at the businesses located there.

Along with training in resume writing and job interviewing, the school offers flexible block schedules to make space for real-world work experience. Best of all, students earn course credit for their internships at businesses like BotsIQ.

And the learning extends beyond the AGH Suburban campus. High school guidance counselor Zack Burns works with organizations and businesses throughout the region to find placements that actively mentor Northgate's teens. He encourages students to pursue internships in fields that interest them, and helps mentor them through the application and interview process.

To complete the picture, the district also offers in-house student internships, realizing that the many jobs that need to be done within a school building can be fertile ground for learning.

Instead of teaching class in the afternoons, for example, the high school's materials and fabrication teacher mentored three seniors, who began working as general trades interns. This four-person team spent a semester tackling various issues across the district. In the process, the teens learned the basics of carpentry, electrical work, and general maintenance.

"They actually went to fix things like a clogged toilet or a broken light," Burns says. "It was even more hands-on than what we'd done before."

The school also offered a horticulture internship through its collaboration with the Allegheny Health Network's Chill Program. Students work on composting food waste from the school cafeteria to use in the school's greenhouse, which serves as an outdoor classroom.

On the horizon: funding for these internships. This would incentivize more students to take the leap into the working world, while also helping the many teens who have to choose between unpaid internships and paid, part-time work at places like fast-food businesses.

"We're looking at grants to pay some students," says Burns. "If we could do that, we think it would really boost our internships."

New Brighton Area: A new approach to early release

Every year, some seniors earn enough credits to finish their formal education

"Building something like this benefits everyone."

months in advance of graduation. Many seek early release in hopes of getting started at a regular job, rather than spending time idling in study halls.

In the New Brighton Area School District, leaders are retooling the district's early release program to help students use this time well — and to help local businesses find potential employees.

"How can we find ways to make this more valuable to the kids, especially the ones who are already working part-time jobs in the fields where they think they want to build a career?" asks Joe Guarino, the district's superintendent.

To answer that question, the district launched what Guarino describes as a sort of "co-op program" in which the high school partners with businesses to monitor the work students do, track their performances, and assess which additional skills they might need to build in order to thrive in that field.

By supporting teens in working at substantive jobs while still in high school — and by creating a mechanism for clear feedback — the district is helping them learn what it means to be a successful employee.

Turning afterschool jobs into structured learning experiences offers additional benefits. "They need to know what those other workplace skills are that nobody ever teaches you," Guarino says. "Things like, how do you handle it if you wake up sick and can't go to work?"

At the same time, the district aims to keep the program simple and student-friendly. "We don't want kids to get credit for doing nothing, but you can't put so many hurdles in place that kids aren't going

to want to do it. Let's find a way to help them, not hinder that development."

So far, businesses in the district have been receptive to working with students, with many hoping that young people will stay for the long term, Guarino says.

School leaders attended a meeting of the New Brighton Business District Authority to tell them about this emerging program. Local business leaders listened attentively, and several mentioned that they already employ teens who attend New Brighton Area High School.

In the days after that meeting, Guarino's phone began ringing.

"The next thing we know, they were calling us, saying, 'Hey, you know, I sure could use another worker,' or, 'I could use another two workers,'" he says. "Building something like this benefits everyone."

