

THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION: HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE FORGING DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGHOUT THEIR COMMUNITIES

Seneca Valley, New Castle Area, and Crawford Central

When the middle school team at Seneca Valley School District sat down with families to talk about the district's new phone-free policy earlier this year, the conversation didn't happen in a school auditorium. It didn't take place in a sterile meeting room, either. And it definitely wasn't an email.

Instead, Principal Trisha Butschle and her team put the complicated subject front and center when they gathered with parents for a "coffee talk" at a neighborhood café.

At these informal and increasingly popular meet-ups, launched as part of Seneca Valley's participation in a parent-school engagement initiative called Parents as Allies, school leaders and local families forge face-to-face relationships in small groups.

It's a chance for people who all care deeply about the community's kids to see each other as part of a team.

And it's not just Seneca Valley. Two other Western Pennsylvania districts — New Castle Area and Crawford Central — have also prioritized building deeper relationships with the families of their students.

Though their approaches are unique, these districts are brainstorming together and encouraging one another as members of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 districts striving to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, members of Future-Driven Schools help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students and families.

Their recipes for success aren't foolproof, and they aren't finalized. The work of family-school engagement is ongoing. But their innovations and efforts aren't "death by PowerPoint," as one administrator described traditional district-family communications.

On the contrary, these three districts are making it clear that everyone from parents to grandparents to community members are appreciated as stakeholders — and as allies in supporting kids and learning.

Seneca Valley: Connecting off-campus to elevate the school experience

During the middle school's "coffee talk" discussions about the school's new phone-free policy, Seneca Valley parents had the chance to describe their feelings in a supportive environment. They also had a chance to share what their kids have been saying at home — both positive and negative — about phones in schools.

Like anyone sitting with friends in the welcoming space of a coffee house, the parents began to open up. At this simple gathering, "We learned about the benefits and challenges that our families are experiencing" in a way that was far more effective than an exchange of emails could be, says Seneca Valley's Assistant Superintendent for Elementary, Marie Palano.

Another shift that forged deeper connections this year: There has long been an active parent group at the district's Ryan Gloyer Middle School. It was called SVIP, a play on the idea



that Seneca Valley parents (that's the "P") are very important people.

But Principal Trisha Butschle and her team noticed that there are many grandparents and other guardians raising the school's students. To make it clear that those folks are welcome and included, the group is now called Gloyer Allies. It's a small but meaningful change — one that recognizes the many people who play a role in students' journeys.

The district is also working to refine its communications with families. "If you're a parent and you have multiple children, even in the same building, the way in which you're receiving the communication may be very different," Palano says. "We're focusing on how best to streamline that communication. And then, how best to make it a two-way communication, so that parents are not just the recipients, but have the opportunity to be actively involved."

To that end, Principal Bridget Miller and her team at Ehrman Crest Elementary are researching the best way to adopt one comprehensive, cohesive way of communicating with parents.

As a district, "our intention is to take inspiration from [what we're learning] and expand these efforts across all our buildings," Palano says. The district's work to build connections with families, she adds, "has really set the momentum for broader engagement."

Crawford Central: Inviting parents and kids to a high school preview

About an hour north of Seneca Valley, educators in the Crawford Central School District are using a simple but powerful technique to build relationships in their community: An evening open house.

But this open house doesn't happen as a new school year is beginning. Instead, it's held in the spring. The event welcomes soon-to-be ninth-graders, helping them get familiar with high school before their eighth-grade year ends.

Rather than sending home emails or flyers to explain the methods by which eighth-graders register for ninth-grade courses, Meadville Area Senior High School Assistant Principal Stacey Walsh decided to use some of teachers' required evening hours to better explain the process.

Incoming ninth-graders and their families meet in the senior high school's media center, where older students are on hand to show kids and their parents what to expect. "They're going to have an opportunity to go visit each department around different locations in our building to meet with the teachers and talk about things like course expectations and homework," says Walsh. If kids or their families have questions, there will be plenty of friendly faces on hand to offer answers.

Along with helping incoming students feel more confident and acclimated on day one, she says, "my goal is to cut down on the number of course changes that happen in the fall" — thus preserving precious instructional time at the start of the school year.

As they think about scheduling, students and their families can learn about the district's career tech center, dual enrollment options for earning college credit, the path toward college scholarships, and the potential pathways that can position teens for future careers.

Doing all of this from a place of calm in the spring — instead of during the hectic first days of a new

school year — allows students to reflect on what's possible over the summer and to cultivate a sense of curiosity instead of confusion.

New Castle Area: Where school news reaches everyone

As a long-time participant in the Parents as Allies initiative, the New Castle Area School District has been successfully fostering deeper family-school engagement for more than five years.

Now the district has expanded its focus beyond the families of their students. A new initiative came about thanks to a chat that Assistant to the Superintendent Tabitha Marino had with a local octogenarian.

The gentleman, who lives in the district, explained that his peers weren't as informed as they could be about what's going on within the schools. Marino wondered how that was possible, given that the district has a robust web and social media presence.

Then it dawned on her that as ubiquitous as smartphones and the internet may be, some residents lack web access or don't often use digital technology.

She knew exactly what to do: New Castle Senior High has a journalism class. The teacher, Allison Masters, shared that the kids normally publish a digital newsletter — a great experience for students, but not helpful for elderly residents. But what if the journalism students contributed articles to the print edition of the local newspaper?

Marino and Masters worked with Jason Hnat of the New Castle News, who arranged to publish a special

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seasonal section of student-crafted content about the schools. It's been a success so far, and the district is moving forward with more editions.

"We have people who are part of the community who want to support our district, but they have to see what we're doing," Marino says. "We have to reach them through different modes."

The project has several benefits. Along with connecting more deeply with the community, high schoolers like Ahlaina Armstrong are also gaining work experience and adding to their portfolios. "Journalism helps build confidence whether you're talking or writing," Armstrong says, "because it pushes you to communicate in a better way than you have before."

