

LISTENING AND LEADING: HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS INSPIRE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO EXCEL

West Jefferson Hills and Hollidaysburg Area



When members of Hollidaysburg Area Senior High School's inaugural Student Voice Team gathered for the first time, many of them didn't know each other. They hailed from different groups — athletes, honors students, and others. Many had never been asked to be leaders.

The first meeting had awkward moments reminiscent of the classic high school movie "The Breakfast Club," remembers Principal Breanne Venios. But students soon found ways of connecting with one another and embracing a shared mission: creating their school's culture.

As the school year unfolded, "they've really been opening up and sharing," Venios says. They've joined with school leadership in brainstorming rules, policies, and possibilities for the school. They've honed collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills along the way.

And they're not alone.

Their peers in the West Jefferson Hills School District have stepped into new leadership roles, too. And just like the students in Hollidaysburg, their sense of belonging, empathy, and integrity has flourished in the process.

A program called LEAP Freshman Orientation at West Jefferson Hills now draws a growing volunteer team of teenage LEAP Leaders who choose to gather at their high school during the summer. Together, they plan a remarkably thorough — and joyful — orientation program for the next wave of incoming ninth-

graders, committed to giving younger students the smoothest possible start to their high school careers.

Both school districts are creating these and other opportunities for leadership, career exploration, and student voice by collaborating directly with their high school students. And as they pursue these programs, the districts also have the opportunity to collaborate with one another as members of Future-Driven Schools, an alliance of 47 school districts that works to prepare every learner for the future — finding innovative ways to build the strengths and skills that point young people toward success.

When teens are given a chance to lead, district officials say, they practice the skills they'll need in their adult lives. And each time another young person discovers that their voice is valued, the impact contributes to a more positive school culture for everyone.

West Jefferson Hills: Helping kids "find their place and their people"

At its heart, the LEAP (Learn, Empower, Achieve, Persevere) Freshman Orientation at West Jefferson Hills is all about empathy: Realizing just how tough the transition to high school can be.

In the spring of 2021, a ninth-grader at Thomas Jefferson High School came to Erikka Kuhse (then serving as assistant principal) and the building's other principals to talk about how challenging it was for him and others when they started high school in the

fall of 2020 — right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"He said, 'I want to create something to help incoming ninth-graders have a smoother transition to high school. I want them to have a better experience than I did,'" remembers Kuhse, who is now the district's director of curriculum. "We were totally on board with it."

The first event took place in August 2021. Since then, teens have met each summer to plan the following fall's milestone event.

"We let the students figure it out," Kuhse says. School leaders are simply on hand to ask: "What's important from your perspective? What will help incoming students?"

Held about a week prior to the start of school, the LEAP event includes a morning of information sessions planned and run by students. They cover everything new that ninth-graders — and students who are new to the district — might need to know. This focus on peer-to-peer interaction eases the transition and offers resources to students in a fun, engaging way. "It's been really critical for the transition of kiddos from grade eight to grade nine," says Janet Sardon, the district's superintendent.

Among the highlights: Students meet their "mentor group," which is used in place of a typical homeroom. "You're placed into this mentor group with about 16 students, and you stay together as a cohort, paired with a

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mentor teacher, throughout your four years of high school,” Kuhse explains.

Rather than waiting until the first day of school, rising ninth-graders meet their mentor group at the LEAP orientation. They spend the day together, building connections designed to make the first day of school less lonely.

In the afternoon, they roam an activity fair that includes all of the school’s groups, clubs, and activities. Greeted by friendly faces, they stop at tables to learn more and make connections with others who are already participating, which may make joining a little less intimidating.

This is important, Kuhse says, “because we want our students to be connected. We’ve found — and research shows — that the more that students are connected, the more successful they’re going to be. And it helps keep them out of trouble.”

The day ends with a student-planned pep rally, where rising ninth-graders get their schedules. They can walk the halls, testing out what will soon be their daily route through an increasingly familiar building.

It’s a reminder to students that belonging is a priority at West Jefferson Hills.

“It’s an all-inclusive event. Your athletes show up and your artistic students, your academic students, your theater students — they’re all there together in the same space on the same day. There’s something there for everybody,” Kuhse says, “and it gives them another opportunity to maybe find their place and their people.”

Hollidaysburg Area: Listening and leadership

At the start of the school year, Principal Breanne Venios went into information-gathering mode: She sent a pulse-check survey to her staff, asking what they wanted and needed. She began using a mobile desk to move around the building, rather than staying siloed in her office.

Like many school leaders, she saw the benefit of incorporating PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) into her building. Increasingly used at elementary and middle schools to help young students to thrive by building skills like self-regulation, the approach has value for high schoolers, too.

But rather than quickly adapting it and introducing a new system from the top down, Venios and her team at Hollidaysburg Area Senior High School opted to lead a year of listening, learning, and concrete planning so that PBIS would be as successful as possible.

“Breanne has been working diligently to implement PBIS at the Senior High, focusing strongly on fostering a sense of belonging, building a positive school community, and promoting respect among students and staff,” says Tracy Boone, the district’s assistant superintendent.

Venios created a PBIS Leadership Team that staff members were invited to join. She also asked for their suggestions as she recruited teens for the Student Voice Team.

That team’s name, she says, isn’t just a label: In order to foster transparent, cross-generational conversations, Student Voice Team members were asked their opinions on what kinds of expectations high schoolers should honor. “When I asked them to look at the expectations, I said, ‘This is what the adults came up with, but

you are the ones who have to follow these as well,’” Venios explains. When students questioned a particular rule, they discussed it: “I said, ‘Well, here’s why we put it in. Let’s talk about why we have that.’ It helped for them to hear that, and to know we create these rules with care.”

The group spoke about accountability, ethics, and community, in addition to hot-button issues like AI.

“Just having those conversations and being told why things are the way they are — that’s something the students appreciated. Often, students are simply told, ‘This is just what we’re doing,’” Venios says. “So we were transparent, and the students responded the same way. They were great about giving honest feedback. They surpassed my expectations.”

Throughout the year of charting clear plans for PBIS and planning to introduce restorative practices, Venios has also been meeting with every high school senior. She has made time for these “exit interviews” while letting students know that their insights are valued by the school district.

“One of the questions I ask is, ‘What frustrations have you had? What do you like about school?’ And a lot of them said that they’re actually glad we have high expectations,” she says. “For students to say that — it was a lightbulb moment. They do appreciate structure.”

