



CONSORTIUM
for PUBLIC EDUCATION

COLLABORATIVE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Playbook 2021-2022

Stories and lessons of a multi-district cohort focused on improving their schools through strengthening family engagement, increasing student future readiness, and improving school design.

Table of Contents



- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | 4. Improved School Design |
| 2. Strengthened Family Engagement | 5. The Power of the Cohort Approach |
| 3. Increased Student Future Readiness | 6. A Place to Begin |

This playbook is designed to provide a glimpse of the stories behind the work that the six districts participating in the Collaborative for Student Success have undertaken in three focus areas – strengthening family engagement, increasing student future readiness, and improving school design. Toward that end, we present two case stories for each focus area, including images and audio recordings when available. The audio files were created by SLB Radio and are designed with microphone icons. Our hope is that these stories can encourage and inspire change in districts that find them valuable. The final section highlights why the cohort approach is so beneficial and proffers guiding questions to help you begin this work in your own systems. Enjoy!

Introduction



About the Consortium

The Consortium is a nonprofit organization working with schools across southwestern Pennsylvania on initiatives designed to strengthen and broaden school leadership, engage community, and empower students. Our initiatives build cross-sector partnerships and bring resources, improvements, and support to public schools. We focus on providing professional development, fostering partnerships, and supporting systems change.

At any given time, our expanding network touches as many as 65+ school districts across 10 counties, 3,500 educators, 10,000 students, and 50+ community partners. We make it our mission to connect schools with community so that students can access the opportunities, resources, and experiences to imagine, plan, and prepare for their futures.

CSS Focus Areas

- Increase Student Future Readiness
- Strengthen Family Engagement
- Improve School Design

About the Collaborative for Student Success (CSS)

With support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the Consortium organized a cohort of six districts to study and develop ways of ensuring that all students are prepared to share in the unprecedented opportunities our region offers for post-secondary learning and careers. Their work has focused on three critical areas: engaging families, improving school design, and increasing students' career readiness.



Hear about the impact on students and staff from leaders participating in CSS.

Participating districts represent rural, suburban, and urban communities in Allegheny and Westmoreland County and include Burrell, Cornell, Deer Lakes, Greensburg Salem, Jeannette City, and Woodland Hills. All have identified and pursued opportunities that they intend to leverage and share. They're doing so in the knowledge that today's learners are tomorrow's hope and that our region's success depends on theirs.

Strengthened Family Engagement

When families are engaged with their children's schools, students receive the support they need to succeed. Participants in the Collaborative for Student Success looked for innovative ways to overcome apparent obstacles and connect with families.

Case Story: Cornell School District

Cornell School District runs up against all the obstacles districts typically face trying to engage families in their children's schooling. But in recent years, it's run up against an unexpected one—a language barrier. In five years, the district's population of ESL (English as a Second Language) students surged from less than 2% to 11%, and Cornell found itself trying to connect with a group of parents who spoke little English.

To help, the district launched an English language tutoring program in partnership with Literacy Pittsburgh. It sent home information about it with ESL students. About half of the families expressed interest.

Tutoring sessions at Cornell began in September and are now held twice a week with the district's Spanish teacher. Although the program started with numbers in the teens, it's growing weekly now that Cornell is offering minivan transportation and providing childcare during the tutoring sessions with the help of teen volunteers from its Spanish Club, National Honor Society, and other school groups.



There are promising signs that the program is working to help break the language barrier and to engage families in other ways both in the school and the community. Participants enthusiastically report back to the tutor on efforts to practice their skills, like having small talk with a bank teller or seeing her help interpreting district permission slips.



The language classes also have given the newly immigrated parents a safe and welcoming place to share experiences among themselves and keep in touch with others from their own cultures. To build on that, Cornell is considering holding coffee hours designed to connect and support immigrants.

Case Story: Burrell School District

In contrast to well-attended activities like athletic events, drawing parents to meetings about school or academic issues has long been a challenge for Burrell School District. It became even tougher after the pandemic forced school closings.

To rekindle dialogue and spur meaningful conversations with parents, the district reached out with a series of 10 community coffees last spring in venues ranging from churches and fire halls to parks. There also were two virtual sessions. The discussions helped administrators identify topics that interested parents, with social and emotional learning coming out on top. They also found ways to make future gatherings more successful, including increasing marketing and pairing the work for parents with something a little entertaining, while also providing activities to occupy youngsters.



It was a winning combination. When fall came, they used social media and advertised at athletic events to promote a Fireside Chat. They combined the fun of small fire-pit conversations for adults, with some games for kids while their parents talked. Attendance increased nearly fivefold and dialogue with families was deeper and more focused on how the district was meeting expectations, and where it might do better.

Administrators learned parents were interested in discussing some pretty serious issues, including how the district plans to prepare its staff as it moves toward a more personalized approach to learning, something Burrell is pursuing as part of its work in school redesign.

Informed by those perspectives, Burrell is planning more get-togethers over the coming three months. About half of the future meetings will be dedicated to gathering input for a comprehensive plan, which will outline goals to the state.

Consortium Supports

- [Human-Centered Design Training](#)
- [Career Journeys Video Library](#)
- [Snack & Learn Video Library](#)

Partners Doing this Work

- [Literacy Pittsburgh](#)
- [Parents as Allies](#)

Increased Student Future Readiness

Helping students prepare for their post-secondary choices and lives is essentially preparing them for the unknown, for futures that almost certainly will call on them to adapt and maybe even entirely change course. It's why the foremost challenge in education today is increasing students' future readiness, helping them develop resiliency and transferrable skills that will serve them well in any walk of life.

Case Story: Woodland Hills School District

Woodland Hills School District began working with 8th-grade students six years ago to develop career plans. Like other districts, it undertook the process mainly as a matter of compliance after the Pennsylvania Department of Education made plans part of its Career Education & Work standards.

In some districts, the plans gather dust until 11th grade when state standards call for students to revise them, but Woodland Hills decided to improve future readiness by making career plans living documents.

Now, all students revise their plans annually from 8th-grade through junior year using a planning template focused on answering three questions the Consortium has long recommended for post-secondary planning: Who am I? Who do I want to be? and How do I get there?

Improving the template and planning process is a team effort. Social Studies teachers, school counselors, the career counselor, and the school librarian all engage students to help them explore careers, log their experiences, connect them to opportunities and resources, and track their progress. The district recently provided access to Major

Clarity. The platform provides career-related videos, helps students learn about courses relevant to their post-secondary interests, enables them to obtain micro-credentials, and connects to work-based learning experiences.



Case Story: Jeannette City School District

Following a leadership change five years ago, Jeannette City School District took a realistic look at its demographics and concluded most of its graduating seniors were unlikely to attend college immediately after high school, if at all. Administrators have increasingly recognized a need to find alternatives that would still put students on paths that held promise for their futures.

As part of its work on improving students' future readiness, Jeannette began to do more than offer its traditional field trips and college visits. Early efforts included participation in the Consortium's Small-Group Career Mentoring program. Then the district began working through intermediaries to connect with local companies, with the hope that these employers can help provide exposure to different pathways and possibly even jobs that require no degrees.

Outreach is already paying off. The district has worked with multiple companies to provide career learning experiences. With some—including General Carbide and Stellar Precision Components—Jeannette has worked out internship opportunities.

What's more, General Carbide collaborated with the district last spring on a "signing day" at which two graduating seniors were feted as if they were athletes committing to college football teams.

The recognition proved "huge" according to those who were on hand. It not only thrilled the two starting new jobs, but their excitement reverberated among friends and younger students whose own hope for the future increased as a result.



Consortium Supports

- Professional Development on Student Plans
- Project-Based Learning Training
- Future Ready Leaders
- Small-Group Career Mentoring

Partners Doing this Work

- V. Scott Solberg
- SLB Radio Productions
- Forum for Workforce Development

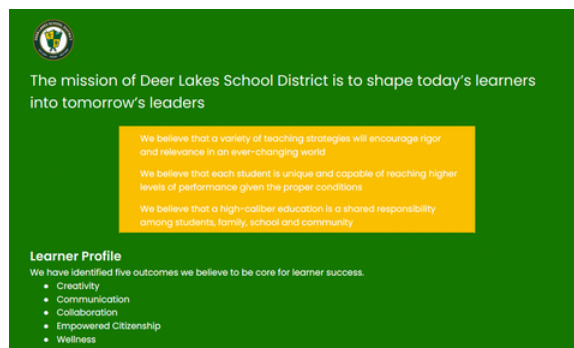
Improved School Design

Calendars, bell schedules, teaching styles, and assessment methods in today's public schools have changed little from the Industrial Era, when K-12 education standardized its practices like 19th-century factories. Today, many districts are seeking ways to change the model, with changes such as moving toward greater personalization, teaching methods that go beyond lectures, and assessment methods that enable students to demonstrate mastery rather than regurgitate facts.

Case Story: Deer Lakes School District

Following the upheaval that the pandemic wreaked on most K-12 schools, Deer Lakes School District's administrators decided to develop a "Portrait of a Learner" as a means of regaining equilibrium and as a North Star for getting back on track.

The overarching goals are to keep growing as a district and codify how best to equip students for when they graduate. To pursue the new vision, the district has received support through the Consortium, the AASA's (American Association of School Administrators) Learning 2025 initiative, and the Learner-Centered Collaborative.



Brainstorming sessions with building administrators, department chairs, teachers, and students, as well as employers and post-secondary schools identified five core competencies—communications, collaboration, creativity, empowered citizenship, and wellness—and broadly defined them. A coalition of district stakeholders is now working to flesh out specific achievements that define those

competencies at different grade levels.

Administrators have found student input and feedback invaluable.

As of early November, the district was about one-third of the way to completing the "Portrait of a Learner," and envisions

rolling it out in phases over the coming months. When finished, the document will drive professional development as well as instruction and student learning.



Hear Dr. Bobbi-Ann Barnes reflect on their Portrait of a Learner work.

Case Story: Greensburg Salem School District

From standardized tests and other indicators, Greensburg Salem School District determined that too many students were falling short of learning objectives that the Pennsylvania Department of Education recommends. The problem they found, was that within the district, the objectives weren't clearly defined for each subject and grade level and, when they were, curriculum and instruction weren't always aligned.

To remedy the problem, Greensburg Salem last year kicked off a three-year plan for designing and implementing well-defined standards for learning and assessment in K-8 with support from the Marzano Research Center.

Work began last spring with 6th-grade teachers. Almost as soon as it did, word began circulating among parents, some of whom misconstrued "standards-based" to mean anything from cookie-cutter education to government interference.

Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Bissell quickly worked the phone to allay their concerns and coached staff to begin talking about "learning objectives" instead of "standards," which had political connotations for some community members. The district followed up with meetings for parents to explain the planned changes and answer questions.

The work is slow-moving, but Greensburg Salem already believes teachers are beginning to see the big picture. There's a better understanding that the goal is to clarify learning objectives and adopt the best teaching practices for helping students achieve them.



Hear Dr. Tina Federico share how she sees this informing their future work.

At this point, the district also seems to have brought parents on board, particularly after clarifying that there is no intent to do away with letter grades. And importantly, teachers are moving toward a guide that that will define what those letter grades represent.

Consortium Supports

- Human-Centered Design Training
- Project-Based Learning Training
- Future Ready Alliance

Partners Doing this Work

- AASA Learning 2025
- Learner-Centered Collaborative
- Marzano Research

The Power of a Cohort Approach

When school districts work within a cohort of peers, it has the classic effect of making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. As members of a learning cohort, educators can share best practices, brainstorm solutions to their challenges, and replicate ways others have solved problems rather than reinventing the wheel. Often, they can help each other tap into networks of community partners, or collectively tap into resources that they might not alone be able to access.

Our Collaborative for Student Success is an example of the kinds of cohorts and networks that the Consortium has facilitated for 35 years. As part of it, six participating districts—Burrell, Cornell, Deer Lakes, Greensburg Salem, Jeannette City, and Woodland Hills—came together regularly over 18 months to focus on ways of Increasing Family Engagement, Improving Students' Future Readiness, and Improving School Design.



Hear participants reflect on the benefits of working in this cohort.

Participants' Reflections

"Working with the other districts has given us the chance to really step back and look at the issues and really be strategic...It's always helpful to get some fresh perspective."

- Dr. Kristopher Hupp,
Cornell School District



Hear members of the cohort reflect on the the value of working with the Consortium.

"I love that we get feedback when we share what our plans are. It brings a renewed kind of energy."

- Dr. Autumn Turk,
Burrell School District

"The value of working together has been huge. It's the sheer level of knowledge in the room when we gather. You've got decades and decades of experience in the room as well as the fact that it's a very solutions-oriented group."

- Eddie Willson,
Woodland Hills School District

A Place to Begin

We all look for ways to take what others have learned and apply it to our own settings, addressing our own unique circumstances, values, and priorities. These guiding questions may help you begin your efforts to strengthen family engagement, increase student future readiness, and improve school design.

Strengthening Family Engagement

- How does the way you are engaging with families through these efforts differ from how you engaged before?
- What do you hope will be different or better?
- What impact do you hope this will have on student outcomes?

Increasing Student Future Readiness

- What impact do you hope that this work will have on student outcomes?
- Do you have any preliminary evidence that it is making a difference?
- How are you leveraging opportunities for family engagement and school design to focus on increasing students' readiness?

Improving School Design

- What impact do you hope that this work will have on student outcomes?
- Do you have any preliminary evidence that it is making a difference?
- How are you communicating the benefits of changing your school design to your families and the broader community?

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Hear members of the cohort share advice for others looking to engage in this work.

Thank You

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