

TUGBOATS & LIGHTHOUSES

How school leaders in western Pennsylvania
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School districts, no matter how many students they serve, are big and sometimes unwieldy ships traversing the seas of learning. Lately, those waters have been especially rough. Already grappling with declining enrollment, stagnant funding, and deadlocked debates on standards and assessment, America's public school systems were then faced with the unimaginable disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

Amidst the trauma and grief of those years, educators, school leaders, students, and families began to envision a brighter future for learning. And with so much turned upside down by the pandemic, they committed themselves to making that vision a reality.

As the **Remaking Tomorrow** report stated: "Out of necessity, the barriers to change have been weakened in ways that make education transformation seem ever more plausible."

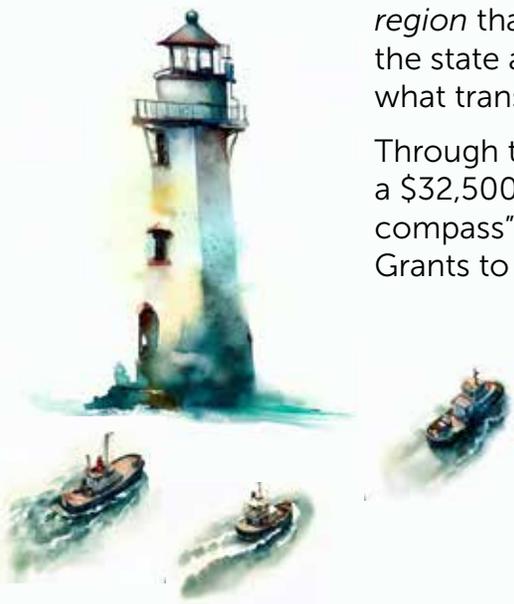
But turning a ship as big as a school district doesn't happen all at once. It takes time to change course. And it helps to have a tugboat or two nudging the ship in the right direction. During the 2022-2023 school year, 34 public school districts in the greater Pittsburgh region led their own "tugboat" efforts to move their schools in new directions.

LEARNING 2025

These districts are part of the **Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance**. Led by local superintendents and **AASA, the School Superintendents Association**, the Alliance convenes school leaders for workshops, networking, and world-class professional development.

One of the goals of Learning 2025 is to "create a *lighthouse region* that shines not just for the rest of our area but also for the state and country, full of specific and tangible examples of what transformational change looks like in practice."

Through their participation in Learning 2025, each district received a \$32,500 Tugboat Grant from **Remake Learning** to "set their compass" for the future of learning. School leaders used Tugboat Grants to catalyze change in their districts. These are their stories.



Student Wellbeing

The highest priority aboard any ship is the safety and wellbeing of its passengers. Students have a hard time learning when they're struggling. That's why many school districts have embraced proactive approaches to empowering students with greater self-awareness, stronger relationship skills, and better decision-making tools.

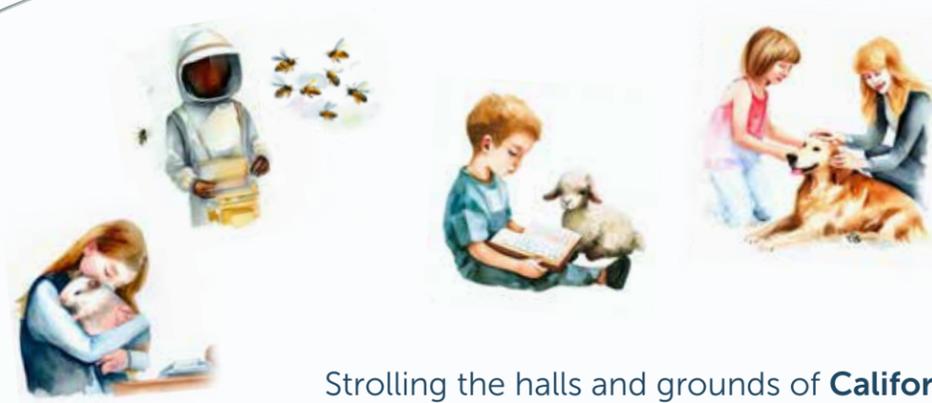
These school districts are piloting tugboats focused on supporting students' social development and emotional wellbeing.

After survey results indicated students felt unseen in school, **Allegheny Valley School District** realized that student wellness was integral to academic success. Now the district is implementing social-emotional learning lessons in grades K-12, training teachers in responsive classroom techniques, and building a wellness center.

Chartiers Valley School District envisions a future where students and staff have more support for their mental health. The district is partnering with Allegheny Health Network to implement The Chill Project, a mindfulness program that helps students, teachers, and parents identify, discuss, and react to stress productively.

Over the course of the pandemic, **Fox Chapel Area School District** learned two important lessons: technology is an essential component of learning and emotional wellbeing is at the core of student learning. Now, the district is partnering with the community to apply those lessons to the school culture and student support systems.

Northgate School District is shifting away from traditional mindsets to find better ways to meet the needs of students. Through a community partnership with Orchard View Stables, students are working with horses to address social, emotional, and behavioral needs while connecting skills from farm to classroom.



Strolling the halls and grounds of **California Area School District**, you'll encounter some remarkable sights: elementary students reading books to baby lambs, friendly dogs checking in on a classroom of middle school students, a stressed high schooler talking it out with a guidance counselor and a guinea pig. And that's not to mention the chickens, jellyfish, and honeybees that also call this district home.

The district's partnership with animals began when high school principal Josh Pollock and his dog Charlie gained therapy animal certification. Principal Pollock began bringing Charlie to school and the impact was immediate.

"I knew there would be an impact on health and wellness, but what I didn't expect was the impact on our learning culture—among students and among teachers," says Superintendent Laura Jacob. "This gave us the confidence to continue to find animal-assisted interventions for learning in schools."

After more than two years of partnering with dogs, bees, chickens, and lambs, California Area School District is seeing dramatic positive changes in their students' social and emotional development. Now, the district is formalizing their animal-assisted interventions to help other districts replicate their success.

Teacher Engagement

The crew is the lifeblood of any vessel. In a school district, the crew includes the teachers, counselors, and paraprofessionals providing direct instruction and support to students. Educators are so much more than dispensers of knowledge. They're guides, mentors, carers, and—most important of all—co-learners experiencing and growing right alongside their students. The trouble is, they aren't always supported to thrive in each of these roles.

These school districts are helping teachers develop new instructional methods and bringing new crew members aboard.

Brownsville Area School District envisions a future where schools value learning and progress more than seat time and test scores. To make this a reality, the district is training teachers in the science of reading approach to early literacy and transforming K-2 report cards into a depiction of students' progress.

New Castle Area School District is putting people at the center of their education program. The district is creating a design cohort of teachers who are using human-centered design to ensure that innovative teaching practices like project-based learning and STEAM are being incorporated into core subject areas.

Purchase Line School District is empowering teachers to design and implement project-based, future-driven learning that puts students on pathways to rewarding careers. A pilot team of trained teachers is tasked with creating a district-wide vision for project-based learning in consultation with students and families.

South Allegheny School District is committed to helping each student explore their interests and build on their abilities, and the district is ready to extend that same commitment to teachers. The district is implementing the Modern Teacher program, a personalized, competency-based approach to professional development.



Like many school districts, **West Allegheny School District** is navigating the national teacher shortage as best as it can. But the going is tough.

When the district asked students of color about their experiences at school, they learned that the lack of educator diversity made students feel marginalized. Students could complete their entire educational career K-12, and never encounter a paraprofessional, teacher, or principal of color within the district.

"We want our workforce to reflect our student population," says Superintendent Jerri Lynn Lippert. "We talk a lot about systems, but we also put a lot of heart into educating students. And we want to enhance the culture we've created of seeing and believing in every child."

With the support of a Tugboat grant, the district is working to address the systemic challenges of teacher shortages and lack of diversity in the educator workforce. The district is collaborating with Robert Morris University to recruit, train, certify, and retain highly effective teachers of color to increase the diversity of district educators.

Learning Environments

The first oceangoing vessels were little more than modified trading ships. They were built to hug coasts, not cross oceans. Imagine if we were still trying to keep global supply chains going with only fleets of coastal traders. Of course, over time shipbuilding has evolved such that we take it for granted. The same can't be said for many school buildings where educators are trying to adapt century-old buildings and decades-old technology to the needs of future-oriented learning.

These school districts are scrubbing the decks and more as they redesign classrooms, libraries, and social spaces into more modular, flexible, and collaborative learning environments.



In a world where creative collaboration has become a vital skill, **Franklin Regional School District** is updating their instructional spaces and methods to better prepare students for future success. The district is redesigning classrooms, libraries, and workshops into flexible spaces that support collaboration and creative problem solving.

Frazier School District believes that the school environment has a strong influence on student learning and wellbeing. The district is redesigning student learning environments to include "chill corners" where students can find relief from stress and outdoor learning spaces where teachers and students can learn through collaborative inquiry.



Just days before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, **Shaler Area School District** completed a multi-year process to reorient the district's instructional approach toward student-centered learning. Upon returning from more than a year of remote learning, district leaders realized the physical environment of the school itself need to be redesigned, too.

"We needed to shift from a traditional school-centered environment to a learner-centered environment," says Superintendent Sean Aiken. "Students do not need to complete all learning within a school building, teachers do not need to provide all the instruction, students can co-design their learning path, and in fact the community is our collaborator."

Now, the classroom of the future is being built by crews of teachers, counselors, families, industry leaders, community members, and futurists. The district is equipping these collaborative crews to redesign and reengineer classrooms into learning environments that are learner-centered, equitable, real-world, and career-oriented.



Career Exploration & Workforce Development

A big ship calls on many ports to help its passengers reach their destination. Some passengers may be bound for the beach, others may be continuing their journey, and many are heading for a career in a commercial port. The same is true for schools where students imagine different kinds of futures for themselves. Instead of making just one or two stops and expecting the passengers to find their own way home, schools today can call on many ports to help their students arrive at a prosperous destination.

These school districts are charting new courses to help students discover, sample, and prepare for future careers.



When you walk through the halls of **Duquesne City School District**, you see plenty of student artwork, as you might in most other schools. But amongst the paintings and drawings, you also see handwritten statements by students as young as second grade identifying their talents, describing their interests, and naming their dream job.

Duquesne came together with **Avonworth, Elizabeth Forward, and South Fayette** school districts to develop a shared approach to career exploration across districts. Together, these schools are envisioning a future where every student can learn about and explore rewarding career opportunities from an early age. Together, these four districts are implementing the World of Work framework.

Originated by the Cajon Valley School District in southern California, World of Work uses the RIASEC assessment to help students find their talents and interests and then connect those talents and interests to career paths they can pursue.

“When we think about what it means to be future-ready, of course we think about work skills and possible jobs,” says Avonworth superintendent Jeff Hadley. “But being future-ready requires much more than that. It requires students to be citizens. It requires the confidence, tools, and virtues to succeed in a changing world. That’s how we’ll prepare our kids for tomorrow — whatever tomorrow might bring.”



Cornell School District found a gap between the skills they were helping students build and the options students had for life after high school. In response, the district partnered with employers to design a mandatory career readiness course and create pathways in computer science, clean energy, healthcare, public policy, and the trades.

The students of today are the workforce of tomorrow. **Jefferson-Morgan School District** partnered with local businesses to connect students to careers through paid internships and nurture the interdependent connections that benefit the entire community.

Keystone Oaks School District is equipping students and teachers to learn their way into the future. In partnership with Robert Morris University, the district transformed its technology program into a series of project-based, student-driven courses that prepare students for STEM careers and help teachers hone their craft.

Student & Family Engagement

Before shoving off on a long voyage, it's helpful to know where the passengers want to go. It's hard to imagine hundreds or thousands of people boarding a ship whose destination is unknown. But for some students and their families, that's what school can feel like. The first step to helping someone reach their destination is to ask where they're headed.

These school districts are focusing on engaging students and families in redesigning curricula, instruction, and assessment.

Recognizing the soaring popularity of Esports among their students, **Baldwin-Whitehall School District** established an Esports program for grades 7-12. In addition to competitive teams, the district developed lessons that tap into student interest in video games as an entry point to skill building.

After surveying parents, **Crawford Central School District** discovered barriers to realizing their vision for two-way communication and engagement between the district and families. To build stronger partnerships with parents, the district is developing strategies to dismantle barriers to school-parent involvement.

Greater Latrobe School District is engaging students in real-world projects and redesigning assessment. The Cat's Customs course is a student-run business that produces personalized goods. Meanwhile, teachers are exploring target-based grading systems that allow students to focus on learning instead of chasing points.

Seneca Valley School District's commitment to students goes beyond the school day. To ensure that more students have access to enriched learning outside of school, they're offering FIRST® LEGO® League after-school robotics clubs across all six of their elementary school buildings.



Change is underway at **Hollidaysburg Area School District**, from library makerspaces and flipped classrooms to expanded AP courses and externships for high schoolers—and it's all bubbling up from the students themselves.

"We all want what's best for kids," says Superintendent Bob Gildea. "So, how do we articulate that in ways that everyone can get behind?"

The answer for Hollidaysburg was to give students a greater voice in how they learn through electives and blended courses. This can mean they're attending career fairs, shadowing surgeons, or working with the Blair County Chamber of Commerce to launch student-run businesses. In elementary school, students and teachers work together one-on-one during Power Hour sessions to hash out individualized learning goals.

"We're seeing more student engagement," says Superintendent Gildea. "More ways for students to take ownership of their learning, and more students in the community getting experience in fields that excite them."



Portrait of a Learner

Stars are useful aids to navigation because, unlike the shifting surface of the sea, they provide ships with a constant point of reference. The most famous navigational star Polaris, or the North Star, has become a byword for having a guiding vision. In education, there's no better North Star than a shared vision for what students will become.

These school districts are using the Portrait of a Learner framework to find their North Star.

When **Butler Area School District** asked community members what belonged in their portrait of a graduate, they prioritized preparing all learners for post-secondary success. In response, the district has untethered its curriculum from the Keystone Exams and put greater emphasis on students' competencies.

After developing their Portrait of a Graduate, **Clairton City School District** realized they needed to improve their technology instruction to align with the vision students, teachers, and families have for the future. Now the district is designing a comprehensive K-12 curriculum in computer science and STEM subjects.

Hampton Township School District developed a Portrait of a Graduate that emphasized learning experiences as much as learning outcomes. The district is putting this into practice by equipping educators with transformative classroom strategies and offering externships to every high school senior.

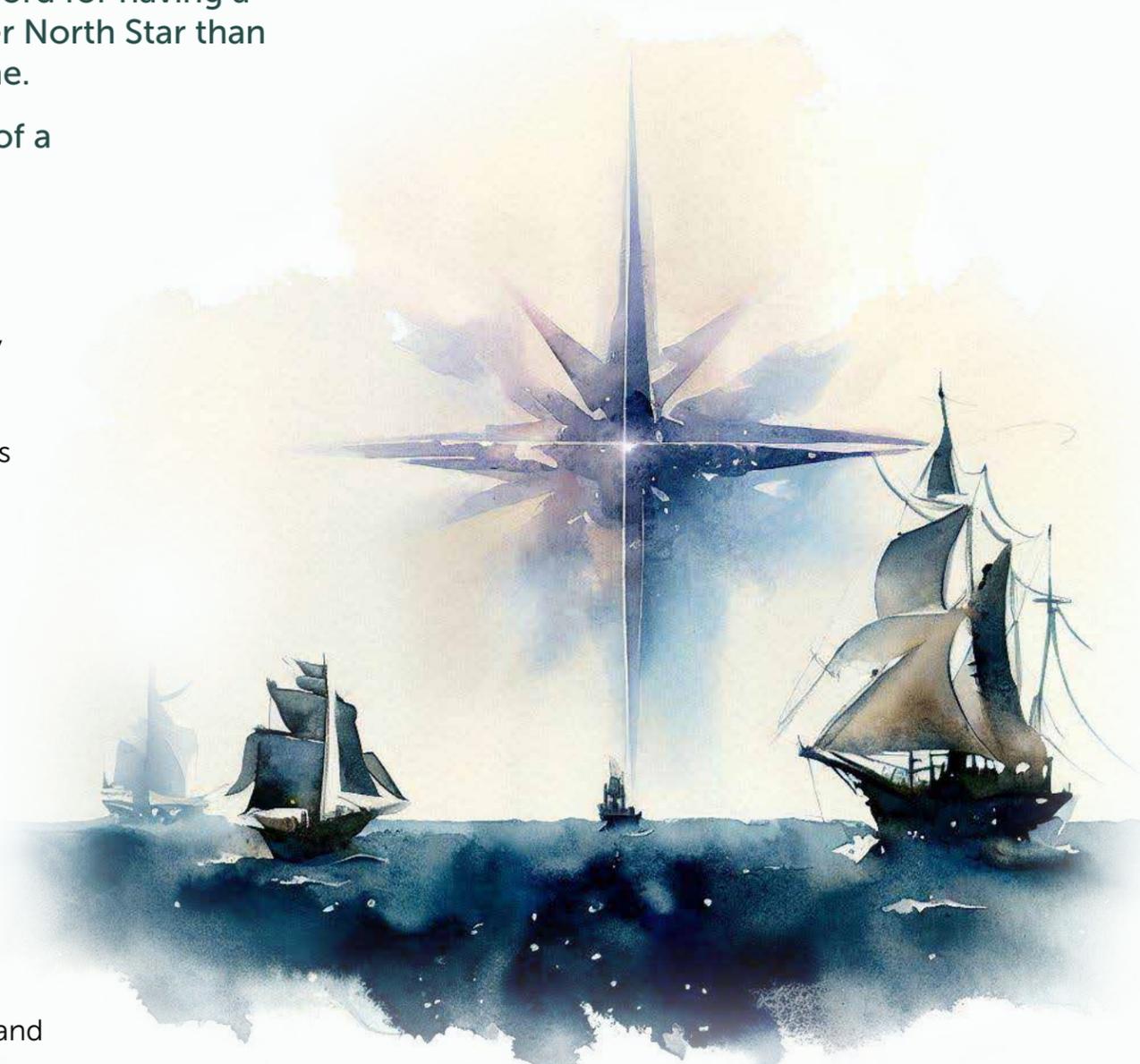
New Brighton Area School District envisions a school system that helps every student thrive from kindergarten to graduation. The district worked with teachers and families to create student portraits at key points in their journey: as incoming kindergarteners, 5th graders, 8th graders, and high school graduates.

No district is immune to the changing tides of time. That's why **Deer Lakes School District** decided to create a Portrait of a Graduate—it's a vision of learning that teachers, students, and the whole school community can strive for.

"We've been reimagining high school," says Superintendent Janell Logue-Belden. "We're not saying throw away traditional high school. We've done a great job as a traditional high school. But we're really asking, 'What can we do now?' As the world is changing, what are the needs?"

Inspired by a neighboring school district, the district engaged students, teachers, and principals to develop a Portrait of a Learner that will lead to curriculum changes, teacher professional development, and updated graduation requirements.

"We're really listening to the community and to students," says Superintendent Logue-Belden. "This isn't my school district. It's their school district."



A group of school leaders in western Pennsylvania are charting a new course for their districts. Together with their teachers, students, families, and communities, they're designing and piloting "tugboat" efforts to steer their schools towards a bold vision for the future of learning. This booklet shares their stories.

The Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance

- Allegheny Valley School District, Superintendent Patrick Graczyk
- Avonworth School District, Superintendent Jeff Hadley
- Baldwin-Whitehall School District, Superintendent Randal Lutz
- Beaver Area School District, Superintendent Mark Holtzman
- Brownsville Area School District, Superintendent Keith Hartbauer
- Butler Area School District, Superintendent Brian White
- California Area School District, Superintendent Laura Jacob
- Carlynton School District, Superintendent John Kreider
- Chartiers Valley School District, Superintendent Johannah Vanatta
- Clairton City School District, Superintendent Tamara Allen-Thomas
- Cornell School District, Superintendent Aaron Thomas
- Crawford Central School District, Superintendent Thomas Washington
- Deer Lakes School District, Superintendent Janell Logue-Belden
- Duquesne City School District, Superintendent Sue Mariani
- Elizabeth Forward School District, Superintendent Keith Konyk
- Fox Chapel Area School District, Superintendent Mary Catherine Reljac
- Franklin Regional School District, Superintendent Gennaro Piraino
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- Shaler Area School District, Superintendent Sean Aiken
- South Allegheny School District, Superintendent David McDonald
- South Fayette Township School District, Superintendent Michelle Miller
- West Allegheny School District, Superintendent Jerri Lynn Lippert

The Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance is co-led with **AASA, the School Superintendents Association**.



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About Remake Learning

Remake Learning is a free, peer network for educators and innovators in the greater Pittsburgh region. Learn more at remakelearning.org.



A **Root + All** project.

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