



# No Ordinary Day

*Travel with us to six innovative districts*



**W**e are defenders of the status quo, resistant to meaningful change. Our public schools rely on one-size-fits-all solutions that ignore the needs of students.

Those who seek to dismantle the institution of public schools paint a dismal picture of public schools as places of dreary conformity and failure. It's spin, not truth.

What is true? Some students show up to school ready to learn, with clean clothes and a full stomach. Some don't. Some come from stable families, take vacations, and visit public libraries. Some don't. Public schools take them all—the hungry and the full, the healthy and the hurt, the strong and the vulnerable.

School leaders—school board members, su-

perintendents, administrators, teachers—are on the leading edge of reform. They break down the barriers to achievement for their students, sometimes against all odds.

*American School Board Journal* chose six school districts that exemplify this spirit of innovation and reform. The editors traveled all over the country to visit these districts and their communities.

This special multimedia project presents district stories not only through words, but also through videos and photos and infographics, all available at [www.nsba.org/asbj](http://www.nsba.org/asbj).

These stories and many others offer proof: There are no ordinary public schools, and there is no ordinary day in public schools.

## Trends

# The science of comic books

**FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS LOOKING FOR A** new science textbook, maybe it's time to take a closer look at comic books?

Probably not. But a new exhibition in Washington, D.C., recently examined how comic books portray science and depict advances in science and technology.

"S.T.E.A.M. Within the Panels: Science Storytelling Through Comic Books, Comic Strips, and Graphic Novels" was on display at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) over the summer.

The "science" in comic books takes many forms, the exhibit revealed. There's

pseudo science, such as the radioactive effects of kryptonite on Superman. There's also real science to be found, as in the works of Matteo Frainella, a neuroscientist who is exploring how comics can affect public perceptions of science.

"Some of the pieces are explicitly connected to science, while others reflect reactions to science," AAAS said of comics. "Others still are, in the tradition of science fiction, springboards to speculation based on scientific ideas. In all, they show how comics project the complicated and often contradictory ways that the public perceives science."



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### Vancouver Public Schools

Enrollment **24,000**

Free or reduced-price lunch **50%**

Number of different  
languages spoken **92**

Graduation rate **80.3%**

Racial demographics:

White **59.8%**

Hispanic **24.7%**

Asian **3.3%**

Black **2.6%**



### Multimedia

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#### Video



*Emergency housing response*

*Driving the van*

*Help for parents*

#### Slideshow



#### Infographic



# Vancouver, Washington

## School-based centers help students and their families

*Kathleen Vail*

**J**ust before 8 a.m., the courtyard outside Washington Elementary School is tranquil. On this February morning, the only sound is the soft rain pattering through the pine trees that tower over the school.

Voices break through the stillness. Around the courtyard perimeter, groups of children appear. They splash through the puddles pooling up on the concrete sidewalk. Behind them follow volunteers—parents or community members—clad in blaze orange and yellow vests and holding umbrellas and safety flags.

Washington Elementary School has one of the highest poverty levels in the Vancouver, Washington, school district—90 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In the Rose Village neighborhood plagued by gang violence and illegal drug use, the walking school bus is a safety necessity. It's also one of the many ways the school takes care of its students.

Less than a month after an historic and uncharacteristic winter storm in the Pacific Northwest closed schools, the snow and ice have melted but the chill remains. Bundled in puffy coats and toting bulky backpacks, the students line up at the school door. For many of them, the first stop is the first brightly lit office on the right.

Elizabeth Owen is waiting to greet them. "Did your new glasses come yet?" she asks one girl. The girl shakes her head. "No, not yet."

The students troop through the office, marking an attendance chart. When they reach 10 straight days, they get a sticker or a pencil—an enticement for coming to school with the walk-

ing school bus. Then they head to the cafeteria for breakfast.

Owen is the coordinator at Washington's Family Community Resource Center (FCRC). She plays a pivotal role at the school and not only knows these children—she also knows their families. She is the point person to marshal resources to get food, clothing, medical care, and even housing assistance to students and families.

"I see my role as a bridge between the whole family and the school," she says. "Not only do we care about your child, but we care about your whole family and we feel like your child will be more successful in their education and in their life if we help the whole family get the resources that they need."

Washington Elementary is one of 18 schools in Vancouver with an FCRC. The centers, staffed with full-time coordinators, are in schools with poverty levels of 60 percent or higher of students receiving free or reduced-price meals.

The centers follow the community schools model, based on the idea that students learn best when they're well-fed, have medical and dental care, wear clean clothes, and have a stable home. In a perfect world, these things are provided by their families. In reality, the afflictions of poverty—homelessness, hunger, drug and alcohol addiction—can prevent them from doing so. Community schools step in to help families find these resources.

"We have so many kids that come from challenging circumstances," says Washington Principal Patrick Conners. "We know if they come into the classroom and they don't have those basic needs met, there's little chance for them to be successful during the school day."



## DEMOGRAPHICS CHANGE

Vancouver School District is across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon. Half the district's 24,000 students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The students are a diverse population, with 92 different languages spoken, including Spanish and Russian. The district has 35 schools in total.

"I like to describe Vancouver as an urban/suburban system. We have a higher concentration of students affected by poverty and mobility, a toxic combination that negatively impacts student achievement," says Superintendent Steven Webb. Webb, a finalist for the 2016 national superintendent of the year, has been the district's leader for nine years.

Vancouver has seen significant demographic changes over the past decade. As the cost of living increased in Portland, families moved north to Vancouver. The percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-priced meals increased from 39 percent to a peak of 57 percent during the height of the recession. The number of English language learners has doubled.

The district began operating FCRCs in 1999, according to Tamara Shoup, director of Vancouver's Family Engagement and Family Community Resource Centers. In 2008, the school board and district revised their strategic plan. One of the primary goals was family engagement.

"And we took a look at what our students' needs were and where some of the challenges were, and decided to really scale up our Family Community Resource Centers throughout the district," Shoup says.

The full-time coordinator is an essential part of the centers. Teachers are the first to notice when a child comes to school sick, hungry, or distracted. Instead of trying to figure out how to help families themselves, teachers can depend on the coordinators to come up with solutions.

"We can't have our teachers dealing with hunger issues, mobility issues, clothing issues," says board President Dale Rice. "If they are dealing with that, they are not dealing with education."

The coordinators work with community and private charitable organizations and businesses. At Washington Elementary, Owen hosts a fresh food pantry from the local food bank twice a month. The food bank brings fresh produce, dairy, and meat for parents who come to the school and "shop" through the selection.

Community organizations, churches, and private businesses donate clothing, coats, shoes, boots, personal care products like deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, and laundry detergent and cleaning supplies—all of which Owen makes sure get to families who are in need. Kids can take home a food bag on the weekends "to help them bridge that gap between Friday and Monday, when they may not have as much food at home," says Owen.

Mobility is a big issue in Vancouver, and affordable, stable housing is increasingly scarce. The centers serve as a housing resource for families, putting them in touch with community and social services.

One of the district's performance indicators is mobility. In schools with the highest percentage of poverty, the district found that wraparound supports for families and students have decreased mobility by 12 percent.

Webb attributes other positive results to the centers, including the narrowing of the achievement gap between white and African American students. Also, graduation rates have risen from 64 percent in 2010 to 80 percent in 2016.

"For every dollar the district invests, we net four dollars in return on that investment," he says.





## RESOURCES ON WHEELS

The bright green and yellow Dodge Ram ProMaster van backs up to the loading dock at Eisenhower Elementary School. Nicole Loran-Graham jumps out and pulls the door open, revealing racks of clothing and bins of supplies and canned and boxed food.

Counselor Jessica Bodell comes out of the building. She and Loran-Graham confer about which supplies to bring inside. Deodorant is on the top of the list.

Eisenhower Elementary School has 570 students. With only a 40 percent poverty rate, it doesn't meet the threshold for a full-time center. But, as Principal Jennifer Bleckschmidt points out, the school has about 250 students who need services.

The district has been strategic about growing the FCRC program, being careful not to expand too quickly without building capacity. "One of the lessons learned as we've scaled our community schools work is to go slow, to go fast," says Webb.

In 2014, the district expanded the FCRC program to schools without a full-time coordinator—by going mobile. The mobile unit, with Loran-Graham at the helm, serves schools like Eisenhower. "We really do have a pocket of students with high need, and so—without the services of the mobile FCRC—we would not have the capacity to be able to meet those students' needs," says Bleckschmidt.

Loran-Graham establishes contacts within the schools—a counselor, a principal, or even a paraeducator—to figure out which families need help. "How can we build capacity within the school, so they can help families when they come and ask for help?" she says.

This contact is critical in schools where poverty may be hidden. "When you're at a school where there is not a high concentration of kids in poverty, you can feel very isolated and alone in that experience," says Shoup. "You may be ashamed to reach out and feel vulnerable."

Loran-Graham also helps the whole system of FCRCs. When a large donation comes in, she holds pop-up stores for center coordinators, counselors, and teachers to pick up supplies that they need for their students.

She serves as the point person for community charities, foundations, and faith-based groups

who want to donate time, supplies, and food. If one school has resources they can't use, she's able to channel the items to other schools.

The van itself is an ambassador: It's hard to miss. In addition to its bright colors, the sides of the van are festooned with the program's logo and phone number. "I like to drive on side streets, through neighborhoods, because the van is a billboard," says Loran-Graham. "I try to drive really slow too, so they can make sure that they see the numbers to call if they need to."

"You cannot look at that van and not see hope and happiness," says Bleckschmidt.

## 'IF NOT US, THEN WHO?'

The Coalition for Community Schools estimates that there are about 5,000 community schools in the U.S. Several large urban districts have adopted community schools as a reform strategy including New York City, Chicago, and Baltimore, among others.

In each place, the community school model of wraparound family services is adapted to the needs of the individual neighborhood.



## Guiding principles of community schools

**Strive towards equity.** Fairness and opportunity are fundamental moral underpinnings of American education and democracy. Community schools mobilize the human, institutional, and financial resources of their communities needed to close the opportunity gap and the achievement gap and ensure that all young people have a fair chance at success.

**Foster strong partnerships.** Partners share their resources and expertise and work together to design community schools and make them work.

**Share accountability for results.** Clear, mutually agreed-upon results drive the work of community schools. Data helps partners measure progress toward results, and agreements enable them to hold each other accountable and move beyond "turf battles."

**Set high expectations for all.** Community schools are organized to support learning. Children, youth, and adults are expected to learn at high standards and be contributing members of their community.

**Build on the community's strengths.** Community schools marshal the assets of the entire community—including the people who live and work there, local organizations, and the school.

**Embrace diversity.** Community schools know their communities. They work to develop respect and a strong, positive identity for people of diverse backgrounds and are committed to the welfare of the whole community.

**Advocate local decision-making.** To unleash the power of local communities, local leaders make decisions about their community schools strategy, while individual schools respond to their unique circumstances.

SOURCE: COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



The community school philosophy is increasingly being embraced. However, some still question whether schools should be in the business of taking care of nonacademic problems and concerns.

Webb's answer: "If not us, then who?"

Decades of research, he continues, have shown a relationship between poverty and student achievement. If schools are held accountable for student achievement, then they must

figure out how to remove barriers to student success systemwide.

"If a child is hungry, it impacts their ability to learn," he says. "If a child does not know where they are going to sleep tonight, it impacts their ability to learn."

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Kathleen Vail ([kvail@nsba.org](mailto:kvail@nsba.org)) is editor-in-chief of American School Board Journal.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VANCOUVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS



# Houston, Texas

## Districtwide literacy focus helps students read on grade level and beyond

Michelle Healy

**M**any moving pieces are at work in Jennifer Rachal's first-grade class. But her students at Montgomery Elementary in Houston have the system down pat. They waste no time getting started with the activities designed to build their skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking—the essential components of literacy.

Pairs of students sit in a corner softly reading to one another, helping their partner with an occasional unfamiliar or mispronounced word. A group of three sit at a table discussing ideas for today's writing prompt—photos of birthday celebrations. There's back-and-forth among the group about favorite ice cream flavors, favorite places to celebrate a

birthday, and all-time favorite birthday gifts.

In another area of the classroom, several students don headphones and listen to reading via e-books and computers, while others read independently. Still others do today's "Word Work" lesson focusing on the sound that different letter combinations make.

In a corner of the room, where she can see all this activity, Rachal, a 17-year-teaching veteran, sits at the center of a kidney-shaped table used for guided reading. She introduces some of the vocabulary—"swashbuckling," "chaos," and "spell-bound," for example—that this rotation of four students will encounter in *Miss Smith's Incredible Storybook*. Then Rachal offers small group phonics instruction, draws connections between the adventures in this story and others the students already know, and pays close attention to each child as he or she reads aloud. Along the way, she

### Houston Independent School District

Enrollment **215,000**

Free or reduced-price lunch **75%**

Number of different languages spoken **100**

Graduation rate **79.3%**

Racial demographics:

Hispanic **62.1%**

Black **24.5%**

White **8.4%**

Asian **3.7%**



### Multimedia

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Video



Infographic

*The balanced literacy approach  
In the guided reading book room  
Middle and high school literacy*



## EARLY IMPROVEMENTS

When Literacy By 3 launched in 2014, only 68 percent of third-grade students met the “satisfactory” passing standard on the reading portion of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) results. Only 56 percent of African American third-grade students met the “satisfac-

tory” passing standard (a 34 percent gap in comparison to white third-grade students in HISD). Just 68 percent of English language learner (ELL) third-grade students met the “satisfactory” passing standard (a 22 percent gap in comparison to white third-grade students).

A year later, improvements were already being seen: 70 percent of third-graders passed the state reading test, a two-point boost. Nearly 30 elementary campuses had double-digit increases, all signs that the district is on its way to meeting its goal of having 100 percent of third-graders reading at or above grade level by 2019.

Compared to past literacy efforts, this one stood out to the school board—and not just because of the initial \$9 million funding request, Adams says. The plan covered “manpower, the materials that are needed, books to support it, and professional

development around our teachers to make this a successful program. That’s why we had the big buy-in.”

That buy-in was repeated at the middle school level last year with the launch of Literacy in the Middle and the launch this fall of Literacy Empowered, the high school component. Screening data show that only 39 percent of ninth-graders read at or on grade level, “very much mirroring what we knew about our middle school students, says Annie Wolfe, secondary curriculum and development officer.

“We’re reaching our elementary students, but we still have a literacy crisis, Lathan says. “We have a literacy crisis in our middle schools, and also most definitely in our high schools.”

Literacy By 3 is a “common framework, an approach” to teaching the interwoven components of literacy, says Lance Menster, elementary curriculum and development officer. What sets this “balanced literacy approach” apart, he says, are the individualized assessments taken of each student during the year to measure reading level and growth, along with the alignment, resources, and support that have been provided.

Among those resources: a massive influx of 2.3 million books over a two-year span for grades preschool through 5. Each elementary classroom received a personalized library of some 300 texts for students’ use at school and at home and developed to address each student’s reading ability with sufficient range for growth throughout the school year.

In addition, each campus was outfitted with a bookroom of text sets, organized by Lexile level, for use in small-group guided reading instruction.

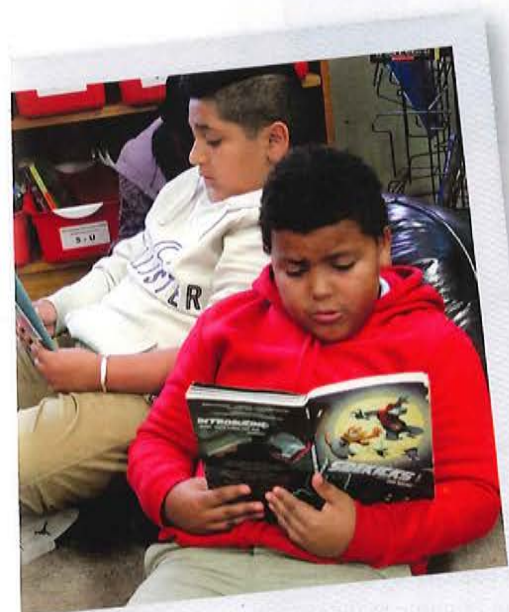
Before adding the libraries, “we had classrooms in HISD that really didn’t have any books other than the basal reader,” says Puryear. “And what we know is that the more books that students have access to, the more they’re going to read.”

## LITERACY DESERTS

Like food deserts, literacy deserts are common in low-income communities across the U.S. Research led by Susan B. Neuman of New York University found that only one age-appropriate book is available for every 300 children in low-income areas compared to an average of 13 books for every child in middle-income households.

In some places, “you literally cannot put your hands on a book because there’s not a public library, there’s not a bookstore,” says Mechiel Rozas, director of secondary literacy for the district. In those communities, schools must be the source where students can be exposed to and have access to a wide range of high-quality, engaging texts and literature, she says.

In Rachal’s classroom, large plastic food storage bags hold the books that each individual student has selected from the classroom library for reading in class or at home. When they finish those books, they “Go Shopping” for new selections. “Choice is one of the most important factors in getting students to read, and getting kids to read for pleasure,” Puryear says.





offers comments, asks questions, and makes note of each student's reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

With slight variations, this routine is repeated in every classroom on 178 campuses in the Houston Independent School District as part of its sweeping Literacy By 3 initiative. The goal: to have all elementary-level students reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade.

### PIVOTAL THIRD GRADE

Third grade is widely viewed as pivotal in reading development. It's the year when learning to read shifts to reading to learn. Studies have linked successful reading ability at third grade to long-term educational outcomes.

An Annie E. Casey Foundation-commissioned study of almost 4,000 students, for example, found that students who didn't read proficiently by third grade were four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of school.

Living in poverty increased the odds: Low-income students were "three times more likely to drop out or fail to graduate on time than their more affluent peers; if they read poorly, too, the rate was six times greater."

For black and Latino students, the combined effect of poverty and poor third-grade reading skills made the dropout rate eight times greater.

Several studies have documented the low literacy level of both juveniles and adults involved with the criminal justice system.

"There's a disconnect for children that can't read" that very often leads to difficulties throughout their life, says Grenita Lathan, chief academic officer for the school district. Houston is the largest district in Texas and the seventh largest in the nation with 215,000 students.

The inability to read on grade level has "a snowball effect," says Cindy Puryear, Houston's director of elementary

literacy. "The farther behind a reader becomes, the less likely (he or she) is to keep trying. Eventually, the task is simply too difficult, not to mention distasteful."

Houston officials say that their district is not immune to the nationwide epidemic of low literacy, which is inextricably intertwined with poverty. Houston's student poverty rate, based on free and reduced-price meal eligibility, is 76 percent.

Noted for its downtown skyscrapers and booming energy, biomedical research, and aerospace industries, Houston is a city made up of communities of wealth and of poverty, Lathan says. "But at the end of the day, we have a school district that is willing to do what's needed for all the children."

Support for the literacy initiative has been a common denominator across the city, says Board of Education President Wanda Adams. It's been able "to incorporate everyone and get us all on the same page."

## Literacy statistics

**48%**

of young children in the U.S. are read to daily.

In high-income families,  
more than  
**2 out of 5**  
children are not read to daily.

Among adults with  
the lowest level of  
literacy proficiency,

**43% live  
in poverty.**

**60%**

of America's prison  
inmates are illiterate.



**85%**

of all juvenile offenders  
have reading problems.

Among those who  
have strong literacy  
skills, only

**4% live  
in poverty.**

SOURCES: READING ACROSS THE NATION: A CHARTBOOK REACH OUT AND READ. SOURCE: LITERACY BEHIND BARS: RESULTS FROM THE 2003 NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ADULT LITERACY PRISON SURVEY, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. SOURCE: LITERACY IN THE LABOR FORCE: RESULTS FROM THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

At the start of the school year, students learn the art of choosing a book that is slightly challenging but not too challenging, the so-called "just-right" book "to avoid frustration or lack of growth," she explains.

The Literacy by 3 framework is used to teaching ELLs, says Faye McNeil, principal of Montgomery, a school that is 68 percent Hispanic. That's slightly higher than the district average of 62 percent. Nearly 30 percent of district students are Limited English Proficient (LEP); 8 percent are learning English as a Second Language (ESL).

"We always start with the students' native language" when teaching reading, McNeil says. "We use the ESL instructional block as an opportunity to bridge Spanish into English." Thus, "many of our young learners are (learning to read) in English and in Spanish."

### TEACHER SUPPORT

Teacher training and support has been and continues to be a crucial component of Literacy By 3, Puryear says. "To go from doing a very teacher-directed, whole group, basal-driven instruction for

reading, to going to a more individualized approach that's based on individual assessment, was a huge shift."

"The First 25 Days," the district's blueprint that helps teachers with everything—from arranging the Literacy By 3 classroom and workstations; to introducing the concept to students a day at a time; to building their confidence, stamina, and independence within the framework—is particularly beneficial, Rachal says: "By the fourth and fifth week, you're really letting them spread their wings."

The long-term result is that Houston students are operating more independently in the classroom, collaborating more with classmates, and most importantly, embracing a world of literacy. "And that's really what it's all about," Puryear says. "That we're creating children who are not just growing for right now, but they are growing to be readers for the rest of their lives."

*Michelle Healy (mhealy@nsba.org) is associate editor of American School Board Journal.*



### Topeka Public Schools

Enrollment **13,800**

Free or reduced-price lunch **77%**

Graduation rate **74.8%**

Racial demographics:

White **39.2%**

Hispanic **30.1%**

Black **19%**



# Topeka, Kansas

## School leaders raise achievement by addressing the trauma of poverty

Michelle Healy

**T**he early May heat wave that settled over Topeka was just another reminder that summer break was fast approaching. But the usual end-of-the-year routine was shattered when word spread that a kindergarten student had been critically injured at a weekend pool party.

Tiffany Anderson, superintendent of Topeka Unified School District 501, and her staff visited with the family at the hospital. When word arrived late Sunday of the student's death, the district readied a mental health team (consisting of a psychologist, counselors, social workers, and key administrative and school staff) to assist students and the school community.

By early Monday, that team was supported by other school staff who would lead instruction in music and art therapy, meditation, journaling, and movement activities to help students begin to build the coping skills needed in the face of such a senseless tragedy.

There had to be "a level of sensitivity, but also a level of understanding about how do you support students" after such an incident, says Anderson.

### ACES TOO HIGH

That same focus on resiliency and coping skills is being infused throughout the district to assist students who experience trauma and adversity as a result of living in poverty.

Exposure to "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) can result in traumatic stress that impacts the mental health and brain development of children and adolescents. These experiences include crime, violence, homelessness, abuse, neglect, and parental death or incarceration.

For some children, chronic stress can spark disruptive and volatile classroom behavior. It can cause poor academic performance, social and emotional developmental delays, disengagement from family and school, and even poor health in adulthood.

Topeka is working to lower discipline problems, raise academic achievement, and build student resiliency by using a variety of trauma-informed strategies and interventions throughout its 28 schools. Those strategies include mental health training for all teachers, secretaries, custodians, and bus drivers; home visits for lengthy student absences; and conflict circles and other restorative justice practices to prevent and de-escalate behavior issues.

In Topeka and other school districts around the country, "our mindset is beginning to change regarding how to teach children with trauma issues," says Anderson, who helped spearhead trauma-informed initiatives as superintendent in Jennings, Missouri, a 3,000-student, high-poverty community outside of St. Louis. She also served as superintendent in Virginia's Montgomery County Public Schools when the 2007 Virginia Tech mass shootings occurred nearby.

Key to being trauma-informed is "making sure that we're building relationships in ways that are beyond just greeting kids when they come in the classroom, but really building relationships on a social-emotional level," Anderson

says. Schools need to “understand deeply what’s going on with our students and our families.”

### MENTAL HEALTH AND EQUITY

In Topeka, where 77 percent of the district’s racially and ethnically diverse student population (39 percent white, 30 percent Hispanic, 19 percent black) is eligible for free or reduced-price meals, the school board began looking at trauma-informed care several years ago, says board member Peg McCarthy.

“We were really aware that we needed to think about ways that we could transform classroom practices that would respond to kids who had been traumatized and allow them to learn better,” she says.

With Topeka’s storied history in education and civil rights as the site of the segregation-ending *Brown v. Board of Education U.S.* Supreme Court case, and its deep roots in mental health research, most notably as the original home of the Menninger Foundation, it is fitting that the public school system is emphasizing mental health as an issue important to equity and achievement.

It was district teachers who first expressed concern about the growing numbers of preschool and kindergarten-age students who were showing mental health needs and disruptive behavior, says McCarthy, a practicing psychologist. Students’ exposure was taking a toll on those teachers, a common result of secondary or indirect trauma, she adds. “I would say it was almost at a crisis level.”

At Pine Ridge Prep, “being trauma-informed is everything,” says Shanna McKenzie, lead principal for early education programs. Families served by the school, located in the Pine Ridge Housing Development in East Topeka, live well below the poverty line with an average household income of about \$8,600 a year.

With that comes the “chronic stress and crises that come up every day” in the

community, she adds. “Unless we address those stressors and those crisis issues, then we’re never going to get to the learning part. So, we really focus on making sure basic needs are met and crises are taken care of so that kids are available to learn.”

The 3- to 5-year-olds at the school display trauma in multiple ways, McKenzie says. “We’ve got everything from kids that show extreme explosive behaviors, running away out of the building, attention seeking, violent, throwing chairs, hitting other kids, yelling, screaming, cussing.

“But then we also have kiddos that we need to almost watch out more for” because they keep everything bottled up, she says. “They will internally shut down or stop talking.”

The school, a joint effort among the school district, the Topeka Housing Authority, and the United Way of Greater Topeka, is a prime example of the district’s use of community partnerships to help deliver trauma-informed services.

In a tiny room overflowing with papers and folders in a corner of Pine Ridge Prep, family services worker Heather Hayden makes check-in calls and schedules home visits to students’ families. Her job is to provide “a bridge between home and school,” she says, and assist families in accessing the social services (food, housing, clothing, medical and dental care) that will keep them and their children healthy and safe.

Recently that included accompanying one parent to a disability hearing and another to an adoption proceeding. “My job is to walk hand in hand with families, making sure their viewpoint is heard,” Hayden says.

Outside of Hayden’s office, the Pine Ridge classroom areas are in full swing as a small



### Multimedia

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#### Video

*Why trauma-informed care*

*Trauma-informed care in the classroom*

*A bulldog named Gus*



#### Infographic



## How ACEs affect lives and society

One of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and later-in-life health and well-being is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)—Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. The initial ACE Study was conducted at Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997. Over 17,000 people receiving physical exams completed confidential surveys containing information about their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors. The information from these surveys was combined with results from their physical exams to form the landmark study.

Among the study's findings:

- Almost two-thirds of adults surveyed reported at least one ACE and the majority of respondents who reported at least one ACE reported more than one.

12.5 percent	4 or more
9.5 percent	3
16 percent	2
26 percent	1
36 percent	0

- People with six or more ACEs died nearly 20 years earlier on average than those without ACEs
- CDC estimates the lifetime costs associated with child maltreatment at more than \$120 billion

\$83.5 billion	Productivity Loss
\$25 billion	Health Care
\$4.6 billion	Special Education
\$4.4 billion	Child Welfare
\$3.9 billion	Criminal Justice

SOURCE: CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION  
[HTTPS://VETOVIOLENCE.CDC.GOV/APPS/PHL/RESOURCE\\_CENTER\\_INFOGRAPHIC.HTML](https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/PHL/RESOURCE_CENTER_INFOGRAPHIC.HTML)

group of students practices writing letters on desks coated in shaving cream while another group listens and answers questions as a story is read aloud. Tucked away in a little nook, a student receives some one-on-one time with a staffer, while another goes off to gather the trucks he will use during a play therapy session.

Behavior interventionists work with individual students who have difficulty self-regulating, helping them learn to calm down and "label their different emotions," says McKenzie. The goal is to be working with them when they're not already angry or upset, she says. "Then, when they're in a crisis moment, we can start pulling out those tools they have."

## COLORING BOOKS AND A BULLDOG

Across town, at French Middle School, Gus, a 133-pound, 2-year-old American Bulldog, is an invaluable aide who connects with and calms students.

Very often, students who have experienced trauma come to school unable to focus on work. "There are other things happening, preventing them from being able to come here and just learn," says Dianne Denmark, a sixth-grade science teacher and trained therapy dog handler.

Denmark has seen firsthand, however, that when these students can spend time bonding with Gus, they're able "to decompress and find their center."

Petting him and relaxing with him is therapeutic, Denmark says. "He has a calm energy that is transmitted to students who interact with him. It helps them slow down."

Gus is regularly "worked into behavior plans" of individual students, "much like a motivator," Denmark says. If a student accomplishes a task, the reward might be spending time with Gus, working on commands, brushing him, even clipping his nails.

Sixth-grader Sarah Peterson sidles up to Gus on the floor, then gently rubs his broad, square head. It's hard to believe that she was once afraid of dogs, but having spent mornings walking Gus, filling his water bowl, and learning to trust him, she now says he makes her feel comfortable. If you're having a bad day, "he makes you feel happy," she adds. "He never hurts us, and he always stays calm."

A short walk from Denmark's science classroom is a dimly lit, cozy room with overstuffed furniture and large exercise balls. There's a mini-trampoline, a soft, weighted manikin for punching—or cuddling—coloring books, stress balls, and other fidget toys. Gentle music and a soothing aromatherapy scent fill the room.

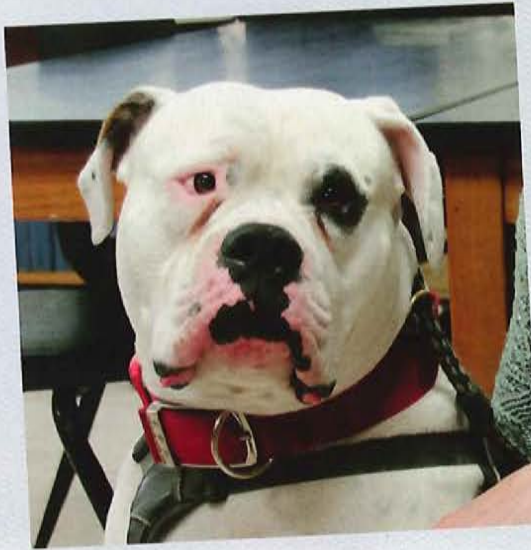
Principal Kelli Hoffman says the school's wellness center was created as a place for students to go to de-escalate and get ready for instruction: "Students can come and listen to music. They can take a short nap. Sometimes they just need a place where it's just peace and quiet."

A majority of schools in the district have trauma-informed wellness centers or trauma spaces in classrooms this year that provide students a safe place to disengage and center themselves, Anderson says. At French, students can request a pass to go to the room; parents sometimes call the school and suggest that their child might benefit from a visit; and teachers, noticing that "a student just isn't ready for instruction but [their response] hasn't quite reached a level of a discipline issue," will sometimes make a referral, Hoffman says.

An adult is always on duty—administrative staffers volunteer for one-hour blocks each week—so students have someone to talk to if they want or need to. "But if they just want to come in and sit and take in the quietness, then that's always an option too," she explains.

After just one year of having the wellness room, French Middle saw a decrease in both out-of-school suspensions and discipline referrals.

Anderson believes it's no coincidence that, along with the introduction of trauma-informed strategies, the district's preliminary scores on state assessments increased overall in 2017 at the elementary, middle,



and high school levels for the first time in 17 years.

Being trauma-informed has allowed the district to "really restructure what our actions are," she says. "Structures create behaviors. Behaviors and structures create systems. So, we're really talking about a systems movement. Creating a system that's trauma-informed and trauma-equipped so that we can ensure every student succeeds at the highest possible level."

Michelle Healy ([mhealy@nsba.org](mailto:mhealy@nsba.org)) is associate editor of American School Board Journal.



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# Anoka-Hennepin, Minnesota

## Nontraditional students earn diplomas at high school on a college campus

Del Stover

**M**ark Mugambi came to the U.S. from Kenya and enrolled in a traditional high school—but left after a week.

The school, he says, was too crowded, too anonymous. “I felt like, no, I

couldn’t do it. There was too much going on, too many people...It was all new to me, so I was kind of afraid.”

Jordan McDonough attended a traditional high school for two years—but it wasn’t a good fit.

“I started noticing I was falling behind, really was not going to school ...not doing my homework or anything.”

Paj Xiong also fell behind academically and watched her friends graduate without her.

“From there, I took a good year off,” says the young mother of twins. “I went off the radar and was just out of school.”

All three of these young adults needed a new approach if they were going to jumpstart

their stalled high school careers and earn a diploma.

They needed an educational setting where they wouldn’t get lost in a big crowd, a setting that would allow them to develop a real relationship with teachers, a place where they could focus on their first steps to career or college.

They found that place at Anoka-Hennepin Technical High School.

This small alternative program of 150 to 200 students serves young adults, ages 18 to 21, who have “just a tiny bit of high school left to do and they are really ready to launch into their careers,” says Principal Nancy Chave.

### LOCATION AND MINDSET

Alternative programs are nothing new



### Anoka-Hennepin School District

Enrollment **38,000**

Free or reduced-price lunch **35.22%**

Graduation rate **83.4%**

Racial demographics:

White **71.4%**

Black **10.8%**

Asian **6%**

Hispanic **5.7%**

in public education. Educators are innovative people, and most school systems look for strategies that meet the unique and diverse needs of their students.

The 38,000-student Anoka-Hennepin School District is no different. As the largest school system in Minnesota, the district serves 13 suburban communities north of Minneapolis. It offers a variety of special programs and campuses for students, including another nearby technical school program.

What makes Technical High School noteworthy is both its location and mindset: Operating in a handful of classrooms in one corner of a community technical college, the high school allows older students the opportunity to complete their graduation requirements—but it also opens up possibilities for what comes after high school.

The hope—and the goal—of the program is that students will be inspired and engaged by the opportunities created by the school's location at the technical college, Chave says. Students walk the same hallways as college students and have access to the college library and other resources, including daycare services. They can enroll in college courses as electives at no cost.

"When students are acclimated to the school and see other students pursuing EMT [emergency medical technician] or welding or automotive or electrician sorts of jobs, they can see themselves in that position," she adds. "The students can actually see themselves as college graduates."

Finding a way to motivate students—to engage them in their learning—is always key when working with students who are academically behind or struggling with a traditional school setting, says school board Chair Tom Heidemann.

"We had to look at what would it take to really get these kids engaged and motivated....A lot of kids we know love the hands-on learning

### Key elements of successful alternative programs

- 1 a maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10;
- 2 a small student base not exceeding 250 students;
- 3 a clearly stated mission and discipline code;
- 4 a caring faculty with continual staff development;
- 5 a school staff having high expectations for student achievement;
- 6 a learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style;
- 7 a flexible school schedule with community involvement and support; and
- 8 a total commitment to have each student be a success.

SOURCE: ANOKA-HENNEPIN SCHOOL DISTRICT, MINNESOTA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

that's practical, [and] it's amazing how you can embed academics into the courses, and you can achieve all your objectives."

### EDUCATION DERAILED

The school's success also benefits from the students targeted for this program. These are more mature students who, despite their past

### Multimedia

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#### Video

*Why Anoka Technical High School Students on why they attend  
Focus on community and business connections*



#### Infographic

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANOKA-HENNEPIN  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

struggles in school, remain motivated to complete their education and improve their prospects for the future, says Superintendent David Law. These students aren't being dragged back to school.

Many of them only need six months to a year of classes to graduate, he says, but while some simply didn't do well in a traditional school setting, other students saw their education derailed by "something that's happened in their lives."

That something may have been a medical issue or a family crisis, he says. The family may have moved repeatedly in search of employment, for example, or a student may have dropped out to seek a job and financially support his or her family. In the case of Mugambi, he interrupted his education in Kenya to spend time with his terminally ill mother before her death.

Another student, Law recalls, moved to the district from out of state. She was two credits shy of graduation but pregnant, and issues of transportation and day care were significant obstacles to returning to school. A traditional high school simply wasn't a good fit for her.

So, she enrolled at the Technical High School, he says. "She had her baby. They have child

care here. She took her courses...and, at the same time, started taking her nursing pathway."

The student later told Law she had dreaded returning to high school, but by the time she completed her coursework in the program, she already was employed in the medical field.

"She was launched," Law says. "She went from feeling like, 'I'm behind my peers and in tough shape' to 'I'm proud of where I'm going.'"

### TEACHER, THE 'NO. 1 THING'

College opportunities are a powerful motivator—but these students still could have been lost in the anonymity of a postsecondary campus. The students

themselves say that what's helped them stay the course is the educational setting the high school provides: smaller classes, credit recovery, individualized schedules, and—perhaps most importantly—teachers who get to know and support them.

While attending traditional high schools, they say, they found many teachers simply didn't have the time or interest to develop a relationship with them—or to provide any real support.

"My original high school didn't give me enough help," says student Cody Adams, who adds that enrolling at Technical High School "was the best decision ever." In the past, he says, teachers "didn't really reach out to me. They just kind of said, 'All right...you're just going to pass all your grades and kind of go from there.'"

McDonough also felt disengaged at his old high school, but his attitude changed upon enrolling in the program.

"The teachers are the No. 1 thing," says the former dropout, who now is looking to pursue a criminal justice career. "When I came here, [the teachers] were really welcoming...and really pushing me."

The faculty understands how its role—and the individual help they provide—are critical to these students, says social studies teacher Michael Doyle.

"I don't want to knock teachers in other places, but we're very respectful to students. We understand their needs, and we treat them like adults. The kids are over 18, and so we hold them accountable but we give them direction, and I think they appreciate that."

### COMPANIES LINING UP

As it happens, Technical High School is the right program, in the right place, at the right time. The economy in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area is booming, and the region is home to many manufacturers looking for motivated, trained employees.

"We have manufacturing jobs—precision manufacturing jobs—that just aren't getting filled right around us," says Jeffrey McGonigal, associate superintendent for secondary schools. Local employers, he adds, "are very excited about the work that we're doing in the high school."



## Common models of alternative schools

- **The Alternative Classroom**, designed as a self-contained classroom within a traditional school, offering varied programs in a different environment;
- **The School-Within-a-School**, housed within a traditional school, but having semiautonomous or specialized educational programs;
- **The Separate Alternative School**, separated from the regular school and having different academic and social adjustment programs;
- **The Continuation School**, developed for students no longer attending traditional schools, such as street academies for job-related training or parenting centers; and
- **The Magnet School**, a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas such as math or science.

SOURCE: NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENT CENTER/NETWORK, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

So much so, adds Heidemann, “that the companies are lining up to hire these kids immediately when they leave the school.”

No one sees Technical High School, however, as a school-to-work program. “I would never tell anyone not to go get a four-year degree,” Doyle says. “But the reality is two-year technical degrees right now are huge. They pay a good wage. You’ve got employers knocking on the door after a year trying to get these [trained students] to come to work.”

It’s a program that’s successful—but it took a lot of work to make it happen. It required a district leadership focused on the needs of its less-successful students.

The school’s success also depends on a faculty and staff determined to make a difference—and to put the hard work needed into the program, Doyle says.

“Being that it’s a smaller staff, we can bounce ideas off one another. We can discuss virtually anything. We can collaborate on student needs and, really, we get on the same page and do what’s best for students. Everybody here really cares about the students.”

The story of Technical High School underscores what Heidemann sees as one of the strengths of the school system: its culture—its mindset—of identify-

ing ways to make students successful.

“That becomes what I would call the innovation factor...where our experts closest to the students—who really know the kids, really know what’s going to engage them—come up with the ideas.”

The school board has a role to play in this process, by encouraging this dedication and innovation—and then by ensuring the support is there for programs and staff, he adds.

“If you come forward with a great idea that’s backed with research, you’re going to get the funding from the Anoka-Hennepin school board, because we’re committed to 100 percent of our kids being career and college ready.”

The most important lesson of this alternative school is, perhaps, rather mundane—but one that almost every school leader would heartily agree with.

It’s important “not to write off groups of students who may not be traditional learners, because they are bringing things to the table that we may have missed,” Chave says. “These students have special gifts and talents that are not being tapped.”

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*Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is senior editor of American School Board Journal.*



### City Schools of Decatur

Enrollment **5,600**

Free or reduced-price lunch **17.5%**

Graduation rate **96.6%**

Racial demographics:

White **72.7%**

Black **23.6%**

Hispanic **2.7%**



# Decatur, Georgia

## Elementary school students learn through expeditions

*Del Stover*

Once upon a time, first-graders at Winona Park Elementary School were presented with a challenge: Help Rapunzel escape from her tower using nothing but commonplace items found in the home.

Students debated several ideas and decided that a parachute might be the solution. So, to test their theory, they built a small parachute using a plastic bag, string, and paper cup—then attached it to a doll and then dropped it from the top of a stepladder.

Their conclusion: Rapunzel could escape her tower any time she wants.

"We think'd of what our design would be, then we made it and see'd how it turned out," one student explained after a school assembly celebrating the first grade's work.

This innovative, engaging classroom project was just part of a multiweek lesson that combined the study of fairy tales with instruction in the scientific method—a journey of discovery that educators in Georgia's City Schools of Decatur call an "expedition."

### ENGAGEMENT TAKES ROOT

Such expeditions are at the core of an instructional model known as expeditionary learning (EL). Embraced by the 4,200-student suburban school district, this approach to learning emphasizes interactive, project-based lessons taught across academic

subjects and classes.

"Students do several expeditions throughout the year, and those expeditions guide what they're doing in all their classes, whether it's in their homeroom or music or art or PE," says Superintendent David Dude. The concepts taught in each expedition are "integrated throughout their entire day."

One of the strengths of expeditionary learning is student engagement, adds Principal Greg Wiseman. As part of a third-grade expedition into rocks and minerals, for example, students conducted fieldwork on a nearby mountain, toured a granite quarry, and met with geologists from the University of Georgia.

"Kids love it," he says. "It's engaging and it's fun ... a big thing is making connections to the real world."

One parent impressed with how this engagement takes root is Jean Jacques Credi, whose



daughter Eve attends Winnona Park.

As an administrator at a nearby school, Credi is familiar with expeditionary learning, but he says he saw its impact when Eve was studying American symbols, including the bald eagle. While at home one evening, she asked to show him a live video feed of an eagle's nest.

"So, we pulled it up on the internet, and we're watching the eagle cam, and we happen to catch the eagle feeding a fish to its babies. [Eve] went and got a bunch of paper, folded it

together, wanted me to staple the binding, and she sat there for almost an hour creating this scientific journal about what she was observing."

Taking the initiative in their learning is exactly what educators hope to encourage in their students. Worksheets and lectures are kept to a minimum, Wiseman says, so students can work in groups to conduct research or engage in hands-on projects.

"There's hardly any lecturing at all," he adds. "When I'm in my classrooms doing observations or just checking in, I want to see the kids doing all the heavy lifting."

Yet, the novelty of this instructional model isn't as important as how it transforms the educational program, Wiseman says.

"EL education looks at more than just student achievement test scores. Their definition of student achievement is mastery of knowl-

edge and skills, student character, and high-quality student work...They're really looking at the whole child."

### EL GETS RESULTS

National research shows that students in expeditionary learning programs perform better academically. After piloting the instructional model at one school some years ago, local educators say they witnessed the results themselves. That's why they expanded the program to all five of the district's K-3 schools.

"We've been doing it long enough that students who originally came up through our system are now in high school and beyond," Dude says. "And we recognize extreme levels of success. Our students are very well prepared as they move up to the upper grade levels and we transition into the International Baccalaureate program starting in fourth grade."

The quality of the K-3 program has helped make the district one of the most successful in the state, he says. "People move here to get their students into our school system."

That seems fitting, given that the city itself is rather exceptional. Only 4.2 square miles in size, this affluent suburb outside Atlanta is notable for its tree-lined residential streets, a trendy food scene, and, thanks to smart urban planning, a small-town feel.

Some of the city's charm was visible on the morning Winnona Park held its assembly to celebrate completion of the first grade's latest expedition. In an idyllic scene, students and parents could be seen walking shady, tree-lined sidewalks toward the school, the children dressed up for the event.

Once gathered in the school's small cafeteria, scores of parents listened and applauded as the children made presentations on their projects. During the performance, students underscored



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#### Video

*Expeditionary Learning basics*

*Parent impressions*

*Difference in the classroom*



#### Slideshow



#### Infographic

PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
CITY SCHOOLS OF DECATUR

the interdisciplinary nature of their studies by singing songs—both in English and Spanish—about the scientific method.

With the scientific method,  
You can find solutions:  
A question and hypothesis,  
Experiments and conclusions.

After the assembly, parents visited classrooms. In one room, a boy sat on the floor—his parents awkwardly joining him as he explained how his class had used scientific and engineering principles to solve the problems faced by such fairy tale characters as the Three Little Pigs, the Three Billy Goats Gruff, and Humpty Dumpty.

This student's enthusiasm—and simply the fact that a 6-year-old knew anything about the scientific method—offered evidence of the potential of expeditionary learning.

It's what's appealing about the school, says parent



Darryl Ford, who took time away from work to attend the assembly.

"It's an incredible way for kids not just to learn things, but they spend a good deal of time focusing on how they learn—and why it's relevant for them. I think that it's actually done a great job of helping our kids not just be more educated but be better global citizens."

### INVESTMENT IMPORTANT

For all the local enthusiasm for this instructional model, expeditionary learning isn't widely used across the country. Developed nearly a quarter century ago by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA, and designed for students of all grades, today only about 50,000 students in 152 schools participate in the program.

But, while successful in Decatur, expeditionary learning is not for everyone. To make it work, a school or district leadership must make a considerable investment, Dude says.

"If you don't have the funding, you're not going to be able to implement this program with fidelity," he says. "The other piece is professional development. We have to be updating our teachers and our administrators and instructional coaches frequently."

A change in culture also is essential, Wiseman adds. "You have to provide the culture of teachers as continual learners. You have to have buy-in from the teachers, from the community, from the superintendent, the school board."

One reason the Decatur schools have stayed the course is that many district leaders, from school board members to administrators, have had children taught using the instructional model—and have witnessed its impact.

"They get it," Wiseman says. "The superintendent's own children are in this school. He's been here for a year and a half, and he gets it. He sees the difference in the quality and the depth and the creativity that we marry into the academics, as well as into the arts and PE and Spanish and music—that it's a really rich learning experience."

### TEACHER CREATIVITY

Other project-oriented curricula exist for K-12

## Students in EL education schools outperform peers

An average of

**10%**

more students score as proficient on state reading/English language arts tests, compared to peers in their district.

After  
**3 YEARS**

of attending a school in the EL Education network, student gains in math achievement are equivalent to an extra 10 months of learning.



An average of

**6%**

more students score proficient in math, compared to peers in their district.

After **3 YEARS**

of attending a school in the EL Education network, student gains in reading achievement are equivalent to an extra 7 months of learning.

SOURCES: EL EDUCATION, MATHEMATICA POLICY RESEARCH

schools, of course, but Decatur educators are enthusiastic about expeditionary learning because it provides a useful and more developed framework to help teachers plan strong classroom lessons, Dude says. Some of that framework is provided by EL Education, a national group that supports a network of schools using expeditionary learning.

Having this support, Dude says, means a lot for teachers who are looking for innovative ways to educate and engage students. The coursework pairing the study of fairy tales with the scientific method is a perfect example.

"Teachers are creative people, and one of the things they'll do is they'll take that framework, and they'll run with it."

The opportunity to make innovative instructional decisions—and to focus on learning rather than on test scores—makes working at Winnona Park a more satisfying professional experience, teachers say.

Teachers say they also appreciate the time set aside each week for planning. Instead of teachers working alone in silos, the interdisciplinary

approach of most lessons means that joint planning and professional collaboration are essential.

"We meet every week, multiple times," says first-grade teacher Maleea March. "We're constantly in each other's rooms." It's not uncommon, she adds, to say, "'Hey, we need to tweak some things. Let's have a meeting.' It never ends, and we keep working on it, and we keep making it better."

That doesn't make this instructional model perfect, of course. As students displayed their fairy tale projects to parents, a glaring—and somewhat awkward—failure was quietly ignored in one classroom: the fate of Humpty Dumpty.

You see, the students in this class had no better luck than the king's men in putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. So, they came up with a practical, if unsentimental, solution.

Students decided to cook up a plate of scrambled eggs.

*Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is senior editor of American School Board Journal.*



### Upper St. Clair School District

Enrollment **4,094**

Free or reduced-price lunch **4.5%**

Graduation rate **97%**

Racial demographics:

White **85.8%**

Asian **11.2%**

Hispanic **1.3%**

Black **1.2%**



### Multimedia

Visit [www.nsba.org/asbj](http://www.nsba.org/asbj) for exclusive multimedia content.

#### Video



*How SHOP@USC got started*  
*Supportive friendships blossom*  
*Creating a culture of innovation*

#### Slideshow



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CONNOR TOOMY AND  
UPPER ST. CLAIR SCHOOL DISTRICT

# Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## A student-run business offers special-needs students training and friendship

Kathleen Vail

**T**he Pittsburgh winter gray sky mirrors the mood of the day. The town's beloved Steelers had just been ousted from the playoffs the night before. Inside their classroom in Upper St. Clair High School, the students aren't paying attention to the weather or the gloomy day. They are busy.

In pairs or in groups of three, they sit at tables. Some fold colorful cards; others cut out tiny paw stickers to place on plastic key chains.

In an adjacent room, another group of students is creating made-to-order T-shirts on the direct-to-garment printer that takes up most of the room.

This is not a typical high school classroom. It's SHOP@USC, part student-run business, part vocational education, part something else entirely. Some students are in special education, others are in general education. They come together to design, create, produce, and sell greeting cards, T-shirts, key chains, signs and banners, and other school spirit items.

"We have a long history of doing inclusion in this district," says Deputy Superintendent Sharon Suritsky. "We're very familiar with how to combine students with and without disabilities, but this program does it in a very different way."

### STUDENT-RUN BUSINESS

Upper St. Clair is a high-performing district with just over 4,000 students in the South Hills suburbs of Pittsburgh. It ranks consistently as one of the top Pennsylvania districts. *U.S. News & World Report* in 2016 named the high school 113th in the nation. The high school has a 98 percent graduation rate, and 96 percent of graduates go on to higher education.

SHOP@USC (Showing How Opportunity Pays at Upper St. Clair) came about as an idea sparked by district middle-schoolers making and selling greeting cards. Suritsky, a former special education teacher, was searching for a way to fund a high-tech makerspace at the high school, as well to offer opportunities to students with severe disabilities.

"We started just really crazy brainstorming about how could we raise money to fund this innovation hub," says Suritsky, "but also at the same time kind of take advantage of all the equipment and really try to do something really innovative for our students with special needs."

Suritsky worked with the district's director of advancement to get some small grants and private donations for seed money for the program. A wide-format printer, a vinyl cutter, a digital printing press, a laminator, and a direct-to-garment printer were purchased.

SHOP@USC class offers vocational training for special education students—those with significant disabilities, students on the autism spectrum, and students with moderate to severe mental retardation.

"In many school districts, a lot of these students typically don't receive their education in a public school," says Suritsky.

About 17 students with disabilities—ages 14 to 21—attend the class. General education students take the class as an elective. Together, students work to create and sell the items.

"Some students may just be able to fold the cards and stuff them with envelopes, while others may be able to use Photoshop and Illustrator," says teacher Michelle Zirngibl, who coordinates the SHOP@USC program. "We find out where the students' strengths are, and we

break apart a task so that everyone can be a part of producing an item.”

At lunch time, students stock the merchandise kiosk and roll it out to the cafeteria, usually in groups of two or three. Working with the kiosk teaches other job skills: keeping track of inventory, handling money, and working with the public.

“The students know this is their business,” says Zirngibl. “They own it. So, any business decision that we make, I always run it past the students.”

### **INCLUSION, NOT ISOLATION**

The keychains, T-shirts, digital printers, and design software are the most visible element of SHOP@USC.

But that’s only part of the program. The other part, subtler but just as tangible, is the relationships that have formed between the students.

Students with severe disabilities are often isolated and have few opportunities to interact with the general education students. The SHOP@USC program has broken through that isolation. The general education students help the special education students feel more a part of the school community. They make sure the special education students go to school dances and football games. They text one another before and after school, and go to movies on the weekend.

“We expected SHOP to be positive for our students in the Life Skills program, as well as for their peers,” says Suritsky. “But, I don’t think any of us quite envisioned just how magical this program is. That part has really gone beyond our expectations.”

The class is growing in popularity. The first year of the program, no formal classes were held—general education students could volunteer during their free periods. The second year, the high school offered a formal class, Partners in SHOP, for the volunteers. The class has grown from one section to three sections in two years.

More than a few of the Partners students have decided to study special education because of their experiences in the SHOP@USC program.

Sophomore Noah Markovitz is one of those students. In addition to the Partners class, he also vol-

unteers for other programs at the high school that allow him to work with special education students. From Noah’s point of view, he’s getting as much or more out of the class and the relationships and friendships he’s formed.

“These kids, they don’t see the world how everyone else does. They’re always in such a happy mood. They’re just being themselves,” he says. I just love it. It makes me feel like I’m appreciated.”

SHOP@USC is also a hit with the parents. Jane Snowden, who is a substitute aide for the district, says her daughter Imogen tells her every day that her favorite class is SHOP@USC. “She’s really proud of her work,” says Snowden. “So, yeah, she gets a lot out of it.”

Principal Louis Angelo says the main draw for students is not the technology or the business aspects, but the relationships—the bond between the students and the adults in the classroom. They are learning how to be positive influences and how to support others. “Sometimes it’s just holding a piece of paper in place, or handing them the appropriate colored pen,” he says. “Those are the things that seem so simple in the action, but the depth of impact is immeasurable.”

### **CULTURE OF INNOVATION**

It would be easy for a school district like Upper St. Clair—a high-achieving district in an affluent community—to rest on its accomplishments and not worry about such a very small population of students.

But, says Superintendent Patrick O’Toole, that’s never been the hallmark of the Upper St. Clair School District or the community.





"This community realizes that all of our students are unique, and it's in our vision statement that we nurture the uniqueness of each child," he says. "And this idea that our staff is industrious and looks for creative and new ways that help children and help families in a unique way is important to our overall mission."

Creating a culture of innovation can be tricky in a district that already is doing many things right. But the encouragement to try new things comes from the school board and is echoed by administrators and teachers.

"Building a culture of innovation and risk takes trust," says board member Barbara Bolas "And one thing that we have always worked for is to be trustworthy in our role as board member, in our personal relationships, and with all of our interactions with our staff members."

Through the district's curriculum development process, curriculum leaders come to the board with

proposals. Programs are tested with the understanding that not all will be successful. "When there's that direct interchange between the board members and the people who are in the classroom," says Bolas, "it gives the staff a sense of confidence to say, 'OK, we can try this.'"

Bolas has been a board member since 1985, and she has served as president of both the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and the National School Boards Association. Allowing people to make mistakes and mentoring them through their mistakes, she says, is an essential part of encouraging innovation.

"You create that sense of collaboration and partnership, that everyone is responsible for a student's success—whether it be at the board table, the staff table, the student his or herself, or the community."

*Kathleen Vail (kvail@nsba.org) is editor-in-chief of American School Board Journal.*