



Northgate School District

Northgate School District is a Pittsburgh, PA, school system serving 1,042 students (with a 60% poverty level) and the families of Avalon and Bellevue Boroughs. According to Superintendent Caroline Johns: “Our students tell us there is a strong sense of community within our district that allows them to feel like they belong. Students are able to develop into well-rounded individuals due to the opportunities the district provides, including a variety of arts and sports programs, leadership opportunities, and a rigorous curriculum that pushes student engagement and challenges them to think creatively.” As an AASA Lighthouse District, Northgate is whole-child focused, provides a welcoming environment with an emphasis upon relationship building, stresses the value of diversity and community allies, and empowers students and staff to display their expertise and provide input about educational programming.

According to district leaders, Northgate’s approach to addressing the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged learners has become a beacon for other school districts as a result of its emphasis upon the following: (1) focus on a continuum of learning; (2) personalized learning emphasizing the individual learner’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs; and (3) a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) that emphasizes the Whole Learner, No Learner Marginalized, and Future-Driven Education via the development of systems to ensure equity and excellence in all students’ education. A major part of this transformation process has been the use of the Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design (created by Turnaround for Children, the Science of Reading [SOR], and research-based best practices used in its MTSS system.

Strategies and processes in place to sustain Northgate’s commitment to personalization, differentiation, and continuous progress include universal screening and regular progress monitoring as part of each school’s organizational culture. Data analysis is a consistent part of regularly held MTSS meetings, including ongoing feedback from teachers, counselors, specialists, and therapists. All of these elements drive the individual education prescription for every student. Organizational structures that reinforce personalization include the redesign of schedules at all grade levels to include a “Focus Period” that allows for personal learning and intervention support. Tier 2 and 3 instruction is delivered during the focus period and is driven by the continual analysis of student data and performance.

A range of effective programs and processes is in place to reinforce the multiple elements of teaching the Whole Learner. These include alignment of students’ physical, nutritional, and social-emotional needs in relationship to their academic progress. The district has implemented a comprehensive mental health program through the Allegheny Health Network’s Chill Project at each of its school buildings. As a result, students requiring mental health support and intervention have greatly increased access during the school day. The district now has mental health therapists embedded five days a week in each of its schools, including such services as a K-12 lesson delivery system centered on cognitive behavioral therapy, brain development, and coping skills. Staff understanding and expertise has increased significantly as a result of this process.

This Lighthouse District's emphasis upon anti-marginalization demonstrates its deep commitment to equity and excellence for all learners. The district identifies reading as a civil right needed to close the achievement gap by ensuring every student's right to read fluently, critically, and analytically. Northgate's continuing commitment to eliminating achievement gaps and promoting equitable conditions for all learners demonstrates a commitment to erasing practices that have historically harmed minority groups. Once again, this approach emphasizes individualizing education with enrichment and intervention programs that put each student on a pathway toward the future that they seek.

Finally, like all AASA Lighthouse Districts, Northgate is future-driven in its continuous improvement commitment and strategic planning implementation. Structural changes that promote this goal include scheduling redesign (e.g., secondary students now engaged in a 4 x 4 block schedule that allows for independent inquiry, project-based learning, and work-based learning opportunities). As part of the district's partnerships with Project Zero and Remake Learning, ongoing professional development emphasizes instructional routines that reinforce students' 21st century skills, including making thinking visible and enhancing thinking dispositions and habits of mind. All grade levels emphasize student creativity and self-expression.

As the superintendent emphasizes: "Through a well-articulated MTSS system, the Northgate School District is preparing students for a future of their choosing, and working to eliminate the legacy of poverty within the community it serves. A well-articulated process, supported by data and technology, has proven effective in closing the achievement gap and moving students toward the goals that allow them to thrive in school and beyond."