

A Case Study of

# The Northgate School District

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



**LEARNING** Student-Centered  
**2025** Equity-Focused  
Future-Driven  
Education



# An Introduction to the Learning 2025 Case Studies Series

*AASA Learning 2025: Student-Centered, Equity-Focused, Future-Driven Education* is a movement that calls for a holistic redesign of the public school system by 2025. This initiative is grounded in the foundational work of the AASA Learning 2025 National Commission, comprised of thought leaders in education, business, community, and philanthropy. The work of [AASA Learning 2025](#) is guided by the commission's report, *An American Imperative: A New Vision of Public Schools*.

As part of this initiative, AASA Learning 2025 demonstration systems are creating student-centered, equity-focused, and future-driven educational systems that serve ALL learners. This initiative is based on recurrent core redesign components, including: (1) **Culture**: Systems redesign must occur within an intentional and relationships-based culture that is Whole Learner Focused; dedicated to ensuring that No Learner Is Marginalized; and Future Driven, anticipating forthcoming changes in post-secondary and career landscapes to inform all decisions today. (2) **Social, Emotional, & Cognitive Growth**: Educational systems must address the strengths and needs of the Whole Learner, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development as a holistic component of educational transformation; and (3) **Resources**: Every learner must succeed and have equitable access to the educational resources and support services necessary to ensure their success.

To demonstrate the power and effectiveness of participating AASA Learning 2025 school districts, the AASA Leadership Network is sharing with the educational community case studies showcasing exemplary school systems that are a part of the Learning 2025 network. This specific case study focuses on the Northgate School District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The vision for this district is: "Students first and foremost."

A major focus of the district is an emphasis upon the social and emotional growth and development of all learners—an essential part of providing an effective 21st century education. According to its district website: "We believe that learning opportunities designed for our students must be cross-curricular, culturally responsive, and project based. In that spirit, our curriculum must be comprehensive and balanced and represent our students' diverse backgrounds."



## A Profile of the Northgate School District

The Northgate School District is located in Western Pennsylvania and borders the north side of Pittsburgh. There are three buildings in the district. Two are elementary buildings serving grades k-6. The third building serves grades 7-12. There are also four Pre-k classrooms in the district. One is operated by the district and the other three are operated by outside entities. The school district operates one of the Pre-K programs it offers with the remaining three operated by outside organizations.

There are currently 1025 students in the district. The district's racial breakdown is as follows: Asian 2%, Black 14.3%, White 70.6%, 2 or more races 10.3%, Hispanic 2.6% and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0.2%. Out of this entire population, approximately 60% of students are categorized as economically disadvantaged.

## Using Evidence to Demonstrate Growth in Identified Learning 2025 Redesign Components

A key component of AASA Learning 2025 is a commitment to collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data to monitor student progress and evaluate the impact of the district's transformation efforts. Accordingly, strategic planning in the district provides the opportunity to engage multiple stakeholders to create an updated vision for the district. The strategic plan serves as a guide for the work to be done in subsequent years, including emphasis upon the leadership of the superintendent.

Measurable metrics include the following:

1. The superintendent will work with administrators to develop an overall strategy for the strategic planning process
2. The superintendent will work with the Board of Directors to identify stakeholders to serve on the strategic planning committee
3. The superintendent will identify and procure any needed resources to complete the strategic planning process
4. Along with the administration, the superintendent will facilitate the strategic planning process
5. Once the plan is completed, the superintendent will work with the Board of Directors to identify their roles and responsibilities as a governing body during the implementation of the strategic plan

**“ The district uses a comprehensive student information system to track individual results throughout a student’s career and develop strategies to ensure student success.”**

Addressing social equity issues is a priority in the district, with an expressed commitment to ensuring an equitable educational experience for all students, regardless of race or background. This priority is one of the major goals for the superintendent during the current academic year. Measurable performance indicators include:

1. Continue to become educated about the social equity issues that typically occur in schools and our society
2. Assist Committee Chairs to address the logistical and communication implications for the Social Equity Committee
3. Participate in the Social Equity Committee and provide regular input to assist with developing actionable goals and strategies
4. Oversee the implementation of recommendations/goals from the Social Equity Committee.





Social-emotional supports are a priority in the district—resulting from the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with the Allegheny Health Network (e.g., the “Chill Project”), the following metrics have been identified for the superintendent in this critically important focus area:

1. Full implementation of the Chill Project at all three buildings
2. Active involvement in identifying processes to support implementation and identification of issues as they arise
3. Identify and monitor metrics to determine the level of student access to and success of the program Participate in the Western Pennsylvania Demonstration District cohort which includes participating in the AASA Learning 2025 Social Emotional Learning cohort
4. Present the program at the AASA National Conference Learning 2025: Student-Centered, Equity-Focused Education.

The district uses a comprehensive student information system to track individual results throughout a student’s career and develop strategies to ensure student success. Specific assessment and progress monitoring programs include K-2 Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS); 3-8 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment; and 10-12 Keystone Exams in biology, literature, and Algebra I as required by the Commonwealth for federal accountability purposes.

A baseline growth indicator involves monitoring student participation in services provided throughout the various socio-emotional programs and offerings within the district’s SEL eco-system. The school system collects participation data as an indicator of growth related to student access to the three tiers of the MTSS system. For example, the district analyzes how each student participated in Tier 1 support, provided as lessons presented by a behavior educator. Movement through the three tiers is also recorded and analyzed, including provision by a partner provider of anonymous data related to Tier 3 intervention and therapy programs.





# Addressing AASA Learning 2025 Redesign Components

Northgate School District has identified multiple AASA Learning 2025 focus and priority areas for systemic change and educational transformation. It has elected to place a major emphasis upon creating and sustaining a Whole Learner-focused culture and system, emphasizing the need to integrate the social, emotional, cognitive, mental health, and trauma-based needs of all learners.

As suggested by the Learning 2025 national report, Northgate is committed to ensuring that no learner is marginalized and that all children, families, and staff are embraced and valued equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic circumstance, or disability. The district's commitment is to be future-driven, paying close attention to the evolving implications and fundamental shifts of 21st century career pathways and the role of evolving technologies in our workplaces, homes, and society.

The district is striving to adopt, reinforce, and sustain a social, emotional, and cognitive growth model, with teachers encouraged to help students learn based on a growth model continuum. Creating and sustaining a Whole Learner culture involves a commitment to anti-marginalization and a deep commitment to encouraging students to become co-authors and co-learners in their own learning process. This model necessitates precision in the personalization of teaching and learning, routinely engaging students and families in data-driven conversations, and using multiple forms of assessment (e.g., tests, learner portfolios, demonstrations, rubric-driven progress monitoring).

Finally, the district is emphasizing the following "accelerators" to enhance the educational experience and achievement of its students:

1. Creating and sustaining a diverse educator pipeline, proactively assembling educators and other staff who are representative of the learners, families, and communities they serve
2. Reinforcing the critical importance of students' experience during their early learning years, including the value of Pre-K education and the necessity of building in students a sense of efficacy and engagement as they respond to the district's curriculum
3. Maximizing the use of technology to enhance learning, ensuring that all students have access to and develop proficiency in the use of technology as a critical component of academic success and career preparation
4. Engaging community groups, stakeholders, and parents to ensure their alignment with district goals, including a sustained commitment to equity, a Whole Learning approach, and involvement in addressing key problems of practice



## Implementing an Effective Social-Emotional Ecosystem

The district's commitment to the Whole Learner involves emphasis upon a holistic approach, including ongoing attention to students' social, emotional, academic, and physical growth and development. This process entails establishing and maintaining a social-emotional ecosystem, ensuring that every learner maximizes their potential and receives the support and resources to experience equity and excellence in their Pre-K-12 learning environment.

Representative programs within this ecosystem include the Chill Project, a partnership with the Allegheny Health Network. Teams of mental health professionals are stationed within schools and have been integrated into the school faculty. The individuals are both clinical therapists and behavior educators who serve at all three tiers of the district's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Their positioning within the school allows them to deliver classroom instruction on emotional wellness to all students. They also offer drop-in services for students needing a place to decompress or someone to talk with. The program also offers scheduled ongoing therapy sessions.

Another unique program within the Northgate school district's social-emotional ecosystem is its approach to equine therapy. Through a partnership with Orchardview Stables, selected students have the opportunity to participate in equine-facilitated activities under the direction of a licensed counselor. Students are identified based on their social-emotional needs, including students' inability to regulate emotionally, depression, withdrawal, academic underachievement, and/or a known history of or current trauma. Students begin with learning horsemanship from the ground up, and they are initially paired with a horse in order to develop an ongoing partnership and bond. In this relationship-oriented program, students have extended opportunities for co-regulation and connection through the integration of patterned, repetitive, rhythmic, and relational activities that incorporate movement and various forms of sensory input.

Northgate's "Moonshot" Grant further engages the district in partnership with Allegheny Health Network and the Chill Program. Students can participate in designing new interventions with therapists and technology developers. A new Horticulture Therapy school-based site is also a component of this grant. The district is in the process of building a high tunnel greenhouse as the classroom site for the Allegheny Health Network and Chill Program. Within this horticulture therapy program, students receive therapeutic services in conjunction with the resources that a garden and a focus on horticulture can offer.





## A Systemic Commitment to Anti-Marginalization

As suggested previously, the Northgate School District is committed to ensuring that a well-articulated and comprehensive approach to supports and interventions ensures that all students succeed. Through a MTSS system of supports, the school system identifies and addresses the needs of every learner through a sustained focus on data analysis and progress monitoring. In effect, every student receives a “prescription” to ensure personalization and a Whole Learner approach. A team comprised of teachers, administrators, counselors, therapists, and school psychologists confer to determine if the student is thriving in the current tier or if a change needs to be made and monitored.

Key priorities for ensuring antimarginalization include the district’s commitment to sustaining a diverse educator pipeline. It is a partner in the League of Innovative Schools, participating with other districts in the area to provide a supportive network for Teachers of Color (TOC). This network is designed to attract, support, and retain TOCs in participating school systems. Although in its initial stages of development, this emerging educator pipeline will ensure equitable access for educators who are equipped to address the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Northgate’s commitment to ensuring that all children have high quality learning experiences—including Pre-K and primary grades—reflects a deep commitment to preparing learners for their K-12 educational journey and life. A range of support and intervention programs reinforces this goal. For example, the Pennsylvania Dyslexia Pilot program is now operational within the school system, resulting in the transformation of its primary reading program to align with the science of reading. Beginning with its Pre-K program, students receive direct, explicit, and systematic instruction in the structures of the English language and the fundamentals of analytical, synthesis, and evaluation-based approaches to decoding and understanding text. Through the system’s MTSS process, students receive the proper time and intensity of reading intervention they require—including Tier 3 support using the Orton Gillingham model.

## Additional Information for Educational Leaders

As a resource for supporting educational leaders’ work with the transformation of their respective district, the AASA Leadership Network presents the following guide questions for use with staff members. This case study—like the others in this series—can be useful as a professional development resource. It can be used with executive leadership teams, school-based cohorts, and other stakeholder groups.

## Suggested Guide Questions

1. What do you consider to be the major programs and practices evident in the Northgate School district?
2. A major focus of this district is the social-emotional well-being and development of its learners. What specific programs and practices reinforce this commitment?
3. Which of the specific programs presented in this case study seem especially promising for potential implementation in your current district? What is unique or promising about each of them?
4. In your opinion, how is Northgate attempting to address the needs of the Whole Learner? If you were visiting the district, what performance behaviors and indicators would you look for to assess the impact of their Whole Learner initiatives?
5. Anti-marginalization is a key component of the AASA Learning 2025 initiative. How is Northgate addressing this critical issue?
6. This case study emphasizes the power and significance of a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Support. Which of the strategies and processes associated with each of the three tiers do you consider to be the most valuable or promising for your district?
7. In addition to the evidence cited in the case study, are there other assessments and performance indicators you might recommend to the educational leaders in Northgate?
8. A major component of this district's transformation effort involves cross-institutional partnerships. Which of the partnerships cited in the case study are especially significant? Why?
9. As you reflect on the AASA Learning 2025 focus areas and strategies presented in this case study, to what extent is your current district address these key issues and priorities?
10. What would you observe for if you were to visit the Northgate School District? What would you look for in classrooms and program areas?







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