

SHOP@USC

Upper St. Clair School District, Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania



IT BEGAN WITH MIDDLE-SCHOOLERS making and selling greeting cards. That kernel of an idea started Upper St. Clair School District Deputy Superintendent Sharon Suritsky thinking. A former special education teacher, she was searching for a way to fund a high-tech makerspace at the district's high school, as well as a way to help students with severe disabilities.

"We started just really crazy brainstorming about how could we raise money to fund this innovation hub," she

says, "but also at the same time take advantage of all the equipment and really try to do something really innovative for our students with special needs."

For this suburban district 10 miles south of Pittsburgh, the result is SHOP@USC (Showing How Opportunity Pays at Upper St. Clair). It's a student-run business that features a real-world approach to teaching high school students with disabilities. In the program, students at Upper St. Clair High School design, create, and produce greeting cards, T-shirts, key chains, signs and banners, and other school spirit items.

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

"We have a long history of doing inclusion in this district," says Suritsky. "You know, we're very familiar with how to combine students with and without disabilities, but this was a really unique attempt at doing it in a very different way."

Community connections were pivotal to paying for the program. Private grants and in-kind gifts from the community were used to procure the equipment, which included a wide-format printer, a vinyl cutter, a digital printing press, a laminator, and a direct-to-garment printer. Some equipment went to the high school's Fab Lab; the rest is used for SHOP.

Some parents returned their children to the high school from out-of-district placements, demonstrating trust

in the program and saving the district transportation and tuition costs.

"Our students with significant disabilities had great potential to contribute to our school and our community in a very unique way," says Superintendent Patrick O'Toole. "And taking risks and being creative has always been a hallmark of our staff, and it's also in our mission that we have a staff that's committed to new programs and new ideas."

Upper St. Clair is a high-performing district that ranks consistently as one of the top Pennsylvania districts if not the U.S. *Newsweek* in 2016 named the high school 113th in the nation. But the leaders and the staff are not resting on their laurels, and they credit a district culture that allows for creativity and innovation.

Building this culture takes trust, says school board member and past NSBA president Barbara Bolas. "One thing that we have always worked for is to be trustworthy in our role as board members, and in our personal relationships and with all of our interactions with our staff members," she says. "If a staff member makes mistakes or fails, it's all right."

The most tangible results of the program may be the shirts and cards, but at its heart are the relationships that develop between the students. Many of the friendships formed during the class carry over into the school day and even after school.

"I don't think any of us quite envisioned just how kind of magical this program is," says Suritsky.



Grand Prize Winner
under 5,000
enrollment

CONTACT

Deputy Superintendent
Sharon Suritsky
ssuritsky@uscscd.k12.pa.us
www.uscscd.k12.pa.us

You, I, We Inspire

Piscataway Township Schools, Piscataway, New Jersey

MEMBERS OF THE PISCATAWAY

Township School Board wanted to find out more about education issues that were affecting their district. There was no time in their board meetings, so they started a monthly book club.

"We studied texts that were relative to our mission," says board President William Irwin. "We set an example that there is always more to learn, that intellectual curiosity was good."

Among the books read were: *Mindset* by Carol S. Dweck, *The Pedagogy of Confidence* by Yvette Jackson, and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey.

These books and their ideas were pertinent to Piscataway's schools and community. About 36 percent of families are disadvantaged. Demographically, the district is 17 percent white, 30 percent black, 33 percent Asian, and 18 percent Hispanic. More than 40 languages are spoken among the students and their families—with many Asian and Hispanic students requiring English learner services.

In the 2013-14 school year, the district found that minorities were not represented in Advanced Placement and honors classes and were not doing well on standardized tests. These students also represented a disproportionate share of disciplinary actions.

The board was interested in the idea that intelligence can be altered, that it's OK to make mistakes, says Superintendent Teresa Rafferty. "In all of those books, they key to developing and motivating kids to inspire and believe in them. They always come back to a particular teacher knowing

kids by name, knowing their home background. Social and emotional has to be a part of academics. We have to convince kids they can overcome the baggage of the experiences in their young lives."

This book club sparked discussions among board members that were the basis for "You, I, We Inspire." Schools were encouraged to start character education programs that would help build a culture of acceptance and inclusion. Teachers were given more team-building time by cutting faculty meetings. "We've asked our teachers to lean on each other," says Rafferty. "They can't be the best unless we provide an environment where they can take risks."

The Piscataway Education Foundation got involved by creating "Inspire" grants for teachers who demonstrated new or innovative instruction.

"The board made it clear we wanted the culture of inspiration and left it up to each school to best pursue the goal," Rafferty says. "They were free to

try new things, and not everything will work. They have our support in both successes and failures, and failures pave the way to success."

Martin Luther King Intermediate School Principal Alex Gray brought in high-schoolers who had attended the intermediate school to be role models for his students. The older students speak at quarterly academic ceremonies.

"It's an inspiration to see current high school students on their way to college who sat in their seats," says Gray.



Grand Prize Winner
5,000 to 20,000
enrollment

CONTACT

Public Information Officer
Judy Palermo

jpalermo@pway.org
www.piscatawayschools.org



Mobile Family-Community Resource Center

Vancouver Public Schools, Vancouver, Washington

VANCOUVER'S FAMILY-COMMUNITY

Resource Centers (FCRCs) came out of a 2008 school board strategic planning process. These centers, located in 18 high-poverty schools, are staffed by full-time coordinators. These coordinators connect students and their families with much-needed housing resources, utility assistance, transportation, in-school dental care, in-school mental and behavioral health care, in-school fresh food pantries and weekend food backpacks, and clothing, shoes, hygiene, and cleaning items.

When the district and the community revisited the strategic plan in 2014, the idea came up to expand the FCRCs for the other 18 schools in the district, which still had pockets of poverty and students who needed services.

The Mobile FCRC came out these discussions, says Tamara Shoup, director of family engagement and Family-Community Resource Centers. The district purchased a Dodge Ram ProMaster and hired a full-time coordinator, Nicole Loran-Graham.



The van is equipped with racks for clothing and bins for supplies and food. Its brightly colored exterior features the program's logo and the phone number. Loran-Graham is in contact with the principals, counselors, and staff of the schools she serves. She provides the same services as the FCRC coordinators at the high-poverty schools.

Loren-Graham also serves as a central point for the coordinators, holding pop-up stores for donated clothing and supplies and hauling donated produce to monthly fresh fruits and vegetable pantries at the FCRC schools. She has also become a point person for community charities, foundations, and faith-based groups who want to donate time, supplies, and food.

The goal of the school-based and mobile FCRCs is to eliminate barriers for students so they can concentrate on school. Homelessness, hunger, lack of medical and mental health services—these can affect children's ability to learn.

"Teachers call principals and tell them a student showed up wearing only one shoe," says Shoup. "They find out the family is living in their car. You can't solve that problem by yourself as a classroom teacher. They connect with mobile and do triage."

Giving schools a point person for children and families to connect to needed services is an important part of the program. "We can't have our teachers dealing with hunger issues,



Grand Prize Winner
over 20,000
enrollment

CONTACT

Director of Family Engagement and
Family-Community Resource Centers
Tamara Shoup

tamara.shoup@vansd.org
<http://vansd.org>



mobility issues, clothing issues,” says school board President Dale Rice. “If they are dealing with that, they are not dealing with educating.”

Mobility and a shortage of affordable housing is an issue in Vancouver that affects children and their schools. The district tracks mobility as a performance indicator, says Superintendent Stephen Webb. In the schools with the highest percentage of free and reduced price lunches, the district found that with the wraparound support for families and students, mobility decreased by 12 percent.

“We know if students start and finish in our schools, they are more likely to be on-time graduates,” says Webb.

“This effort is about creating stability for students, recognizing a whole systems response to the things children have to cope with when families are affected by unemployment, criminal behavior, and other problems.”

Helping students without helping their families does nothing to stabilize and build community in school neighborhoods. “Culture trumps strategy every time,” says Webb. “When there is that kind of constant churn, it’s difficult for a classroom to get the cultural context of a safe and supportive learning environment. Before the FCRCs, the principals and teachers were crisis managers. That gets in the way of focused instruction that helps eliminate achievement gaps.”

Graduation rates have risen from 64 percent in 2010 to 80 percent in 2016, and the achievement gap is narrowing as well. Embracing the Community Schools philosophy has brought results for Vancouver.

“People say, why are schools in this business? I would say, if not us, then who? We are held accountable regardless of the context students are raised in, standards-based approach, and that is not shifting,” says Webb. “If decades of research demonstrated the correlational link between poverty and achievement, why wouldn’t we tend to the environmental context? If we can close the opportunity gaps, we can close achievement gaps.”