

Rising up: Stories from our schools

Last year, we initiated “Rising up,” a section of the report that goes beyond the numbers to highlight areas where some schools have experienced success, with the view that we all can learn from their practices. These schools are not “exceptional”—rather, they show that we have what we need in Pittsburgh to raise achievement for all.

This year, teachers, students, administrators, community members, and a parent shared their stories with us during a time of unprecedented disruption and change. Across all of the interviews we conducted, resiliency, hope, and the importance of honest communication resounded. We thank everyone who participated.

Read on to find out how:

- South Brook 6-8 built a culture that supports student achievement (below)
- Students, staff, and community members are creating a new model for Perry High School (page 12)
- Teachers at Fulton PreK-5 educate the youngest students, and the district re-envisioned pre-k through third grade (page 14)

Visit ourschoolspittsburgh.org to read:

- How Colfax K-8 maintains reading achievement for all groups of K-5 students
- Longer versions of the print stories, including video clips of interviews and links to relevant research
- “Rising up” stories from 2019 about Allegheny PreK-5, Arsenal 6-8, Beechwood PreK-5, City Charter High School, Dilworth PreK-5, and Schiller 6-8, and insights from a Brashear High School graduate

South Brook 6-8

“Showing up for who you are:” Building a culture that supports achievement at Pittsburgh South Brook 6-8

By Faith Schantz

When Jennifer McNamara took over as principal of Pittsburgh South Brook 6-8 in 2012, she came in with a firm belief that the school needed “a culture in which we expect people to show up for who they are.”

South Brook is in Brookline, next to Pittsburgh West Liberty PreK-5, nestled between a residential

neighborhood and a park. Serving Bon Air, Carrick, and Overbrook as well as Brookline, the school has the highest “capture rate”—the percentage of students assigned to the school who attend—of the Pittsburgh district’s 6-8 neighborhood schools. About 56% of its students are White and 25% are Black, with smaller groups of Multi-ethnic, Asian, and Hispanic students, roughly similar to the demographics of the city. A growing number come from immigrant families.

“Culture” is a slippery term because culture both shapes and is shaped by what happens in a community. For example, a school’s culture determines and is determined by whether students—and teachers—feel safe, respected, and seen as individuals, and whether the environment allows them to thrive. Rather than viewing these aspects of schooling as ripples around the edges

of the “real work” of learning, researchers and advocates increasingly stress that they are central to education. McNamara agrees. Culture is about human relationships. And relationships, she says, are the number one thing that motivates students and teachers to work together and learn.

A policy of honesty

When she talks about what 6-8 students want from their relationships with adults, McNamara names a trait that has been marginalized in this era of polarized views on race and a politicized health crisis: Honesty. “I find them to be completely honest and authentic,” she says, “which really makes showing up as your authentic self with them so important.” For both students and staff, this means expressing one’s own thoughts and ideas, honoring and embracing differences, respectfully managing conflict, and being open-minded about solutions.

These norms aren’t just intended to create a more pleasant environment. McNamara ties a “positive, inclusive school culture” directly to growth in students’ learning. “Some kids will excel regardless of culture, but a lot of the kids need to feel like they’re a part of the school, they need to feel that they’re included, to reach their fullest potential academically,” she says. As one measure of achievement, on the state’s rating of academic growth, the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS), the school has exceeded the standard for growth in both English Language Arts and Math year after year.

How does a school build and maintain a culture that supports student learning? McNamara says, “The culture starts with the adults.”

One area where she has seen growth is in teachers’ effective collaboration and ability to productively challenge one another. Like McNamara, 8th grade instructional team leader Jeremiah Dugan, who teaches US History, talks about the key role of honesty. Some years ago, he says, the 8th grade team decided “there can be no parking lot discussions, which I think plagues a lot of organizations.” As a result, the team has been able to take on issues

that could be personally as well as professionally challenging, such as analyzing their grading to see if they were treating students differently according to their race. For teachers to be willing to put themselves on the line in these ways, they must be able to trust there will be no “political repercussions,” Dugan says—like finding yourself with an extra “duty period” the following year.

“Here’s your litmus test,” says Joel Grimes, who teaches 8th grade Communications at the school. “If you’re working in an uncomfortable situation as a teacher, you will not bring up your weaknesses because you feel like they will be filed away somewhere and used against you.” But if you feel supported—as he does at South Brook—“you actually ask your principal for constructive ideas... And if you can have that conversation, that’s a school to stay in for a very long time.” Apparently his colleagues agree. In the 2018-19 school year, the most recent administration of the district’s Teaching and Learning Conditions survey, 100% of South Brook teachers agreed with the statement, “My school is a good place to work and learn.”

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When honesty in the principal’s office leads to solutions and support, teachers can extend those same opportunities to their students. Dugan believes in open discussion with students as well as with colleagues. “As teachers, we have to be willing to pull back the curtain,” he says. For example, at the beginning of the year his students complain about having assigned seats. “I have to be really

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upfront with them and say, listen, it's a struggle for me to learn your names." But "It's those type of little discussions that humanize you as a teacher," he says. Grimes points out that students, like teachers, need to trust in a positive outcome before they will admit to a problem or concern. If they think they'll be loaded down with extra work, they'll stay under the radar, he says. Instead, the teacher should "create a situation where that student feels rewarded" for asking for help.

Learning to speak up

Two former South Brook students say they learned to advocate for themselves in their time at the school. Sarmila Biswa and Rory Salazar, both at Pittsburgh Carrick High School this year, played a variety of sports at South Brook and Rory served on Student Council. Both describe benefits of speaking up on their own behalf that went beyond solving the problem at hand.

Sarmila, whose goal is to be a pediatrician, says she was shy and didn't say much in 6th grade. By 8th grade, "I knew how to talk up during class and be like, 'I don't get this,'" she says. In her math class last year, speaking up when you were stumped was part of the culture, not only to get help from the teacher, but also from classmates. She says the spirit of everyone "trying to help you get better" contributed to her sense of belonging at the school.

Rory, who wants to be a veterinarian, describes her 6th grade self similarly, as "a silent kid in the background who was just there." She credits Dugan, who was her teacher and soccer coach, with helping her stand up for herself. Compared to her Catholic elementary school, South Brook exposed her to a wider range of people with their own opinions and ideas. The experience sharpened her sense of self, which in turn had a positive effect on her as a learner. "Over the years, making friends and...seeing all kinds of different people and then the way they react to things, I feel like I'm a lot more confident about being who I am," she says. In 6th grade, "I struggled a lot in math class and ELA, but now I feel like everything's easier for me."

Building bridges to content

As Rory suggests, the culture of a school makes itself felt in the classroom, in students' social interactions, and in whether and how they learn. If the classroom environment isn't receptive to students' individuality, they aren't likely to show up for who they are.

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For Grimes—who has been reflecting on all of this during the process of applying for National Board certification—creating a classroom environment where everyone can thrive involved re-conceptualizing his role. Over time, he realized that his job wasn't to present content and hope his students would be inspired by it. A teacher can be a master of content, "but really what you're honing as a teacher is building that bridge to whatever your content is. And if your students don't feel a sense of safety and support and that you're interested in them, no matter how interested you are in your content, you're just not going to get them across that bridge."

Along with establishing the classroom as a safe, supportive place, building those bridges involves acknowledging who students are as learners and giving them multiple ways to express what they've learned. Last year, South Brook teachers

focused intensively on teaching in ways that meet students' individual needs, known as "differentiated instruction." Based on the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson, McNamara says teachers discussed how differentiation can come through environment, product, process, and/or content. How were teachers purposefully getting to know their students? What were students' strengths and areas of need? How did they learn—could standing make a difference for some? How could teachers provide them with choice, without becoming overwhelmed?

Teachers brought their experiences back to the team. Some let students pick from one of several homework assignments. Others involved them in looking at their own testing data to guide them toward areas where they needed to focus. For his part, Grimes decided to give students choices in how they wanted to show their learning after studying *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank.

The curriculum specified that students write an essay. In fact, students were supposed to write an essay at the end of every unit, but Grimes' experience with assigning essays had been mixed. Even after sitting down with some and showing them a model, "I would be really lucky if I could push to 75 percent" of students turning in anything at all. So he and the other 8th grade Communications teacher came up with a range of options. Students could write the essay, he told them. They also could create a PowerPoint presentation. They could make a poster, shoot a video, or write a skit. They could come up with their own ideas for a product. And then he watched "the excitement level" rise. In the end, every student turned in completed work. "An 8th grader doesn't feel like they necessarily have much power in their life," he says. Letting them choose how to express their learning "was a great way to empower them."

Embracing multiple perspectives

In the classroom, students' sense of their own power and agency—whether they believe they have a say in what happens to them—are influenced by how their identities are viewed by the wider culture.

At South Brook, the staff has made deliberate efforts to show students that their ideas are valued, and that everyone has the right to be heard.

McNamara has worked with teachers to help them recognize the biases they may bring to the classroom. The school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), which she calls "very strong," has worked with teachers on awareness. The counselor, Dr. Nena Hisle, who wrote her dissertation on racial micro-aggressions among teachers, has led trainings for the staff. And McNamara uses the results of the annual Tripod™ survey, which asks students to rate various aspects of teaching, to bring students' perceptions into conversations with teachers about their practice.

She also encourages teachers to critique the content they present to students—to analyze authors' perspectives, see what might be missing, and ask, "How do we get that perspective in here so that all of the students within the classroom are able to engage?" Sometimes that means asking students to challenge the content, she says.

Grimes believes all curricula can do a better job. One assigned book that students did relate to was *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, by Randa Abdel-Fattah, which tells the story of a girl who decides to wear her hijab to school every day. For the South Brook girls who wear hijabs, and are "figuring out how to exist in a school where they're the minority," he says, it was an interesting experience to have other students pose questions about it to them.

With his focus on open discussion, Dugan says some students have shared rough personal stories about racism, while others have talked about their parents' experiences as police officers. Whatever the topic, to bring out everyone's views, he will ask for disagreement or "openly disagree with the majority opinion" if he feels an undercurrent of discomfort. Blocking "group think" not only invites more students to participate, but it also pushes all students to think beyond their first idea. Just as his principal's embrace of professional risk-taking has produced more creativity in teachers, in his view, considering multiple perspectives develops

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students' ability to think critically and creatively, instead of "accepting the world on its face."

"Respecting" conflict, not just managing it

Of course, students may express themselves and listen to one another without changing their minds. Students—and staff—can also have different experiences that lead them to different conclusions. For example, McNamara says that "most of the kids here are comfortable and are able to interact and appreciate and accept each other for who they are...It's the adults that struggle." But Sarmila says, "Everybody got treated equally, but kids like to... make fun of each other for being who they are." Rory recalls that "a few kids came out as bi, trans, or gay. And it wasn't a big deal at all." Sarmila witnessed some name-calling, however. Still, Sarmila feels school staff did enough to address problems among students. Rory, while praising teachers for caring about students and being steady sources of support, thinks the school could do more.

McNamara's goal is not to resolve contradictions and eliminate differences, but rather to embrace them as natural occurrences in a community that promotes the open exchange of views. For her, one aspect of building a positive school culture is "respecting it's not always going to be an easy and happy place to be because there's going to be conflict."

Rory sought the counselor's help when, as a 6th grader, she had a friend who hit and kicked her, and then "played it off like it was jokes." The counselor met with both girls to help them find a path forward, and showed Rory that "not everybody's like that. And there's better people out there," she says. Now, Rory says about her former friend, "We don't talk, but we don't have an issue with each other anymore."

Whether for addressing behavior problems or academic issues, McNamara, Dugan, and Grimes all see a pay-off when the adults in a school open themselves up to knowing students. Dugan, who is the activities director as well as a coach, says the school offers "a lot of little niches" for students in the

form of activities, clubs, and sports—"places that a kid can go to feel wanted, to feel like they belong." Those niches also offer teachers a chance to get to know students in different ways. According to Grimes, who runs the school newspaper and serves as one of three faculty sponsors of the GSA, after-school activities and out-of-town trips help to "build a culture where the academics start to follow."

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Preparing students for an uncertain future

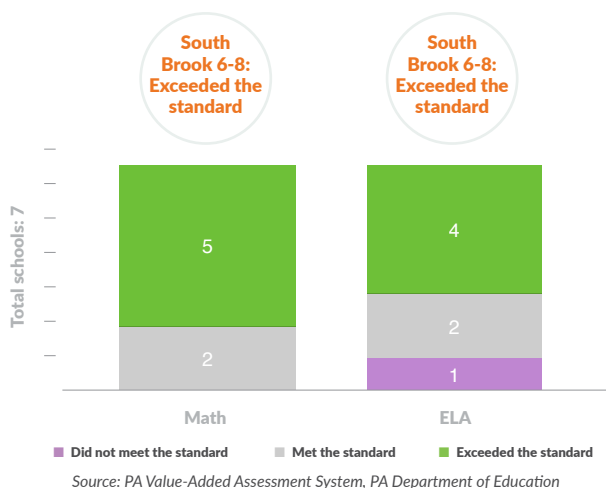
When schools across the city closed in March, Rory missed her teachers, and regretted having to give up events she'd looked forward to all year. Sarmila felt the absence of the discussions in her math class, both the exposure to other students' thinking and their feedback on her thoughts. Dugan, who had shared his cell phone number with many families over the years, found himself trying to answer questions about what was happening and providing tech support. Grimes saw some of his students participate *more* than they had in the past. Students also revealed things about their home lives by text that they'd never shared before, he says, giving teachers a window on hardships far greater than access to laptops and broadband.

This past summer, both teachers considered how to bring the pandemic and the protests that erupted

over police violence against Black Americans into their classrooms, virtual or otherwise, in the fall. Along with building bridges to content, they were thinking about students' ongoing need for honesty and open dialogue in a time of widespread uncertainty and fear. Grimes' strategy was to say, "Let's see what both sides are saying. When you think about it, what are your questions?" Then, without pretending to have all the answers, "acknowledge the question and go from there." Speaking of both the pandemic and the protests, Dugan says that once students meet face-to-face, "We're going to have those discussions. We're going to try to listen to each other."

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Growth in math and ELA in PPS 6-8 schools in 2019



It's an approach that has been validated for him by former students, who've said that learning to navigate a space with others who are different from them at South Brook was the best preparation for their lives after middle school. Today, in a world of misinformation, denial of facts, and attempts to silence divergent views, the question of how to prepare students for their futures has become more fraught. South Brook is still betting that a culture of honesty, open discussion, and respect will get them through. [🔗](#)

Building a culture that supports achievement at South Brook:

- Adults are encouraged to bring their "authentic selves" to school.
- The principal promotes honesty and open dialogue at all levels.
- Teachers and staff seek out multiple perspectives, and show students their views are valued.
- Teachers offer students multiple ways to show their learning.
- Conflict is respected as a natural occurrence in an open community.
- Teachers and staff make efforts to know students as individuals, including by providing many "little niches" where they can belong.

See South Brook's data on page 97.