

A Case Study of

Deer Lakes School District

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania



Learning 2025

**LEARNER-CENTERED
FUTURE-DRIVEN
EDUCATION**



AASA LEARNING 2025 District Case Study: Deer Lakes School District, Pennsylvania

Located in northeastern Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Deer Lakes School District serves 1,800 students in four schools, including a K-2 primary center, a 3-5 intermediate center, a 6-8 middle school, and a high school. Deer Lakes' vision is "to be a high-performing school district that continually improves academic achievement and inspires the learners of today to succeed as the leaders of tomorrow in a diverse and ever-changing society."

Specific AASA Learning 2025 redesign components evident in Deer Lakes School District include emphasizing the Whole Learner, being future driven, reinforcing the importance of social-emotional learning, using technology as a "force multiplier," and sustaining community alignment.

Deer Lakes' emphasis upon the Whole Learner includes a K-12 focus on reinforcing an environment that places the student at the center of the learning process. Specifically, the district defines core academic outcomes, provides meaningful and learner-centered educational experiences, and creates enabling conditions to bring the district vision for learners to life. Using its *Portrait of a Learner* as a guiding framework, the district has articulated a common vision, guiding principles for decision making and problem solving at each structural level, and a sustained commitment to student agency and self-direction.

Deer Lakes School District's emphasis upon social and emotional learning acknowledges the importance of students' physical and mental health as a key component of learning. At the elementary and middle school levels, for example, students are learning social, emotional, and coping skills through the Second Step SEL curriculum, a program designed to reduce impulsive, high-risk, and aggressive behaviors—increasing learners' social competence. The staff integrates Second Step lessons and themes into their respective classrooms.

The Deer Lakes primary and intermediate staff has also been trained to implement the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) program at their respective campuses. Similarly, the district's middle school has also incorporated PBIS at part of its work with a total wellness approach to educating students. A major middle school wellness focus includes a strong outreach and engagement approach to family involvement. As a result, the district's middle school was recognized as a *Don Eichhorn School to Watch*.

This district's high school has also focused on redesigning programming to reinforce total wellness of students. In addition to PBIS implementation, this site (and the district's middle school) offers a *Stand Together* program to promote social change through peer-to-peer interaction to decrease mental health stigma and encourage students to seek support from adults. Also, a Mental Toughness elective course has been added to help students cope with the pressures of high school, including a variety of healthy and high-yield strategies to optimize mental health.

Additionally, Deer Lakes emphasizes community alignment as part of its work with AASA Learning 2025. It leverages positive relationships with stakeholders to increase community understanding of district issues and priorities. The district strives to empower parents and community members to have their voices heard about decisions that affect their lives, neighborhoods, and communities.

Finally, the Deer Lakes School District strives to use technology as a “Force Multiplier” to meet the needs of the Whole Learner. It has been selected as one of the first Google-Certified School Districts in Pennsylvania, offering one-to-one technology access and use. This school system is also a Common Sense Media district and a member of the Future Ready collaborative. It currently has plans to increase future focus on Artificial Intelligence to ensure that staff and students can use new technologies effectively.

A Demographic Portrait of the Deer Lakes School District



Janell Logue-Belden, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools

Deer Lakes School District is in northeastern Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, which is about 25 miles northeast of downtown Pittsburgh and covers an area of approximately 41 square miles in the townships of East Deer, Frazer, and West Deer. This region is characterized by suburban and semi-rural development, both residential and commercial.

The vast majority of the Deer Lakes community is connected through a network of residential roads that have served as a tremendous asset in allowing the school district to maintain its sense of community.

With more than 14,000 residents, Deer Lakes offers a wide variety of recreational facilities and county parks. It has also received a superior rating as being a safe place in which to live.

Deer Lakes School District has an annual enrollment of about 1,800 students housed in four schools including a primary center for students in grades kindergarten through second grade; an intermediate center for students in grades three through five; a middle school for students in sixth, seventh and eighth grades; and a high school for students in grades nine through twelve.

In the district, 22 percent of students are in Special Education and 35.4 percent receive free or reduced meals. The graduation rate is 95 % percent. Per-pupil spending is \$15,188.65. The vision of the Deer Lakes School District is to be *a high-performing school district that continually improves academic achievement and inspires the learners of today to succeed as the leaders of tomorrow in a diverse and ever-changing society.*

The District's shared values include the following:

- A variety of teaching strategies will encourage rigor and relevance in an ever-changing world.
- Each student is unique and capable of reaching higher levels of performance given the proper conditions.
- All students have the ability to learn and deserve the opportunity to receive a high-quality education.
- A high-caliber education is a shared responsibility among students, families, schools and community.

“A major emphasis within the AASA Learning 2025 framework is a deep commitment to addressing the cognitive/academic, physical, emotional, and social needs of every learner.”

Priority Goals Aligned with AASA's Learning 2025 Network of Demonstration Systems

The Deer Lakes School System currently identifies the following priority goals as part of its involvement in AASA Learning 2025:

1. By the end of the 2022-23 school year, create a district-wide Portrait of a Learner to define the outcomes, experiences, and conditions to inform decision-making and prioritization.
2. By the end of the 2023-24 school year, create a district-wide Positive Behavioral Support Program (PBIS) K-12.
3. By the end of the 2024-25 school year, add college in high school courses and other post-secondary opportunities for students to prepare them for success after high school.
4. Continue to offer the Deer Lakes Partial Hospital Program to meet the needs of our students with mental health issues.

Emphasis upon Key Learning 2025 Redesign Components:

Serving the Whole Learner

A major emphasis within the AASA Learning 2025 framework is a deep commitment to addressing the cognitive/academic, physical, emotional, and social needs of every learner. The Deer Lakes School District chose a Whole Learner focus to ensure that all students have the ability to envision and realize their full potential. Staff members believe that students need an environment that creates opportunities for academic, social and emotional development, and physical well-being.

With learners at the center, the district defines desired outcomes, offers meaningful learning experiences, and creates the enabling conditions to bring this vision for learners to life. Its current learning framework is designed to align with the world we live in and develop learners who will become engaged and productive citizens. Some of the district's programs to support the Whole Learner include Best Buddies, Stand Together, HOPE Squad, K-12 PBIS, and Portrait of a Learner.

Future-Driven Learning

"Deer Lakes School District has chosen future-driven learning as a key organizational priority in an effort to look ahead, recognize educational opportunities, set goals, and understand that students can successfully plan the future with their decisions."

The AASA Learning 2025 program demonstrates a deep commitment to future-driven learning, ensuring that every student is prepared to meet the challenges of a technology-driven and constantly changing world. Deer Lakes School District has chosen future-driven learning as a key organizational priority in an effort to look ahead, set goals and understand that students can successfully plan the future with their decisions. At Deer Lakes, the district acknowledges that the status quo will not prepare students for the challenges they will face after graduation. Therefore, staff must become change agents to prepare students to be flexible for an ever-changing world.

Through the support of the Grable Foundation and the Little Tugboat Grants, the district was able to partner with the Learner-Centered Collaborative to develop a comprehensive Portrait of a Learner. A guiding coalition team that included administrators, grade-level leaders, department chairs, and students worked together to define the outcomes, experiences, and conditions to develop the district's framework for the future. The team felt strongly that Wellness needed to be included in this Portrait due to the work district-wide on total wellness.

Five outcomes were identified as the core for learner success:

- **Creativity**
- **Communication**
- **Collaboration**
- **Empowered Citizenship**

- **Wellness**

In addition, the team also developed a Learner Profile defining what learning should look like to achieve the success indicators for each grade band, i.e., K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The district asserts that for all students to reach their potential, schools must be intentionally designed to hold all students to high expectations. Through the development and use of a Portrait of a Graduate, schools can embrace an expanded definition of student success—one that ensures that students are fully equipped with core academic knowledge and skills as well as a range of other competencies that everyone needs to be successful in education, work, and life.

With learners at the center, the district designs and monitors desired outcomes, offers meaningful learning experiences, and creates the enabling conditions to bring its vision for learners to life. Its Learner Profile framework is designed to align with the contemporary world and develop learners who will become engaged and productive citizens.

The district's Portrait of a Graduate will serve as a north star to drive the transformation of traditional school models. Developing a Portrait of a Graduate (POG) pushes educators to articulate the full range of outcomes they want for their graduates, and work backward from there to build a school model in which each element maps directly to the identified outcomes.

The first impact is unity of vision. District leaders noted that having the POG has created the power of a common vision. They confirmed that there is now clarity around what they wanted for students. They were also clear that while content mastery remains important, standardized tests are no longer the single metric for student success. Readiness is broader than test scores.

The second impact is that the POG is a guiding set of principles principle in decision-making and initiatives. Administrators and staff are accountable for showing how decisions and initiatives are aligned with POG goals.

The third impact is that of promoting student agency and self-direction. The attributes of the POG continue to put students at the center of the educational model and reinforce the need for self-regulation and autonomy. The POG also pushes educators toward more personalization of student learning and self-assessment.

Social and Emotional Learning in the Deer Lakes School District

Continuous improvement requires that AASA Learning 2025 district identify and address key growth areas. Deer Lakes School District, for example, values the importance of students being physically and mentally healthy and how that affects educational learning. It asserts that the world today is diverse with people of all different backgrounds and unique capabilities. A sustained programmatic approach Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) development is essential. Through this process, educators can help students become more self-aware, productive, and socially aware citizens outside of the classroom.

At the elementary and Deer Lakes middle school students are learning social, emotional, and coping skills through the Second Step SEL curriculum, a program designed to reduce impulsive, high-risk, and aggressive behaviors and increase children's social competence. The entire staff supports the lessons and the themes within their classrooms. Second Step helps students build social and emotional skills-like nurturing positive relationships, managing emotions, and setting goals so that they can thrive in school and life.

Curtisville Primary has also worked to develop, implement and earn the *Alliance for Healthier Generation Recognition*. It was one of 13 school districts recognized nationwide in 2022-2023 for their healthy work building-wide and was recognized again in 2023-2024. The school was recognized for:

- Increasing Family and Community Engagement, Improving Nutrition and Food Access;
- Implementing Local School Wellness Policies;
- Enriching Health Education;
- Bolstering Physical Education and Activity;
- Strengthening Social-Emotions Health and Learning;
- Cultivating Staff Well-Being;
- Promoting Tobacco Free Schools; and
- Supporting School Health Services.

Additionally, students and staff begin their days with physical activity and also take mindfulness brain breaks throughout the day as part of their wellness plan.

In addition, Curtisville Primary and East Union Intermediate staff members have been trained in the Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) program. Both schools have met the criteria for implementing School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports with fidelity for over two years.

The schools were recognized at the PBIS Implementers Forum for their efforts in social and emotional growth. This process is a systematic way of teaching, modeling, and acknowledging students for meeting school behavioral expectations. All students are able to achieve success and learn the necessary social and emotional skills that will allow them to be successful in and out of school. *Kind, Courageous, and Healthy* expectations are taught and positive behavior is celebrated both individually and school-wide.

The middle school has also incorporated PBIS as part of its total approach to promoting wellness. Staff members are currently working through the initial implementation phase and are seeing positive results. In addition, they have created a calming room for students to visit when they need a break from the stresses in their day. They have also added personalized recess options for students to participate in outdoor/indoor recess activities free of electronic devices or visit a Quiet Room space for needed stress-free downtime.

As part of its commitment to total wellness, the middle school is focused on building positive relationships with families. The staff partners with Parents as Allies to create a team of parents, teachers, and administrators to learn about the ongoing research from the Brookings Institution that explores the impact and role of family-school engagement around the world.

Along with the mini-grant from Parents as Allies, the work from this team has helped the district to re-imagine the back-to-school open house. With the new model, students and parents now visit teachers for the traditional presentation. They then move as a group to social time by visiting food trucks and sitting together to form connections and build relationships beyond academics and playing games.

"Parents as Allies engages parents and family members in providing input and feedback related to key school and program-related decision making."

The middle school was also recognized as a *Don Eichhorn School to Watch*. The mission of the *Schools to Watch* program is to "assist Pennsylvania middle grades schools build capacity." The program recognizes schools that achieve academic excellence based on the rigorous criteria established by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform. A key area of focus for this recognition is schools that provide access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Team Upstanders, an anti-bullying initiative launched by actor and producer Trevor Donovan, has been established at the Deer Lakes Middle School as another way to support total wellness. *Team Upstanders'* mission is to assist students and school communities to create cultures of belonging, kindness, acceptance, and tolerance. Its vision is to promote the creation of positive and inclusive school environments. Also, the role of an "Upstander" is to support fellow classmates, share their positive influence, and access support for those who need it by reaching out to a teacher or staff member.

The high school has also been focused on a variety of redesigned programming focusing on total wellness. Programming to support SEL learning includes the Partial Program, PBIS, Stand Together, Hope Squad, Best Buddies, Rachel's Challenge, and Second Steps. The staff has been trained in PBIS, and staff and students are welcoming the positive changes in student behavior as a result of the program.

For example, *Stand Together*, a social change, peer-to-peer model to stop stigma by promoting positive change in schools, was added at the high school and middle schools. School advisors lead the program and have been trained along with the students in

ways to promote programs and activities to decrease mental health stigma and encourage students to seek help and help others. The goals of *Stand Together* are to increase education and awareness, promote inclusion between adolescents and their peers with behavioral health challenges, and encourage adolescents to reach out to a trusted adult.

Additionally, a Mental Toughness Course was added as an elective course option as another resource to support students' total wellness. To help students cope with the pressures of high school, this course reinforces students' ability to discover a variety of healthy and learner-centered techniques to strive for optimal mental health. Units/lessons include a focus on stress management, time management, physical activity/exercise, communications skills, S.M.A.R.T goals, sleep, hygiene, relaxation techniques, nutrition information, and fitness apps to help learners explore their interests.

The high school staff recognizes the increase in the mental health needs of the school community and has searched for ways to help support students in a more influential manner. The Renew Room, for example, was introduced as a quiet and calm space with sensory items focused on the reduction of stress and emotional regulation. Individuals seeking help from the Renew Room have access to one-to-one counseling, support groups, school-based outpatient services, and social/emotional based curriculum consultations.

The Renew Room also provides opportunities for skill building, allowing students to learn about their emotions, and how to regulate them as well as coping strategies to handle stress and anxiety in a healthy manner. The goal of the Renew Room is to decrease the number of behavioral health referrals and incidents such as disruptive behavior, feelings of hopelessness, and absenteeism. Along with this, the district now has a therapy dog named Cooper who provides a calming effect in the building at the high school.

AASA Learning 2025 Accelerator: Community Alignment

Deer Lakes chose Community Alignment to leverage positive relationships with stakeholders. The research strongly confirms that this accelerator will increase parent and family understanding of issues in the district. It also empowers parents and taxpayers to have their voices heard concerning decisions that affect their lives, neighborhoods, and communities.

Programming related to Community Alignment includes Parents as Allies (engaging parents and family members in providing input and feedback related to key school and program-related decision making and problem solving). The result is a greatly expanded level of parent engagement and involvement in the District.

An Expanded Approach to Professional Learning as Part of the Deer Lakes AASA Learning 2025 Initiative

Deer Lake's participation in AASA Learning 2025 has enabled its administration to attend national conferences, travel to and learn about schools from across the country, and exchange ideas and experiences with other educators.

Educators' continued participation in conferences, cohorts, and engagement with stakeholders shapes pathways to achieve identified goals. The district is committed to including more staff in the professional development opportunities available through the AASA Learning 2025 network.

Evidence of Growth in Identified AASA Learning 2025 Redesign Components

To demonstrate Social/Emotional growth and development of all learners, the district analyzes data from the PAYS survey, which collects information about students' perspectives of their school environment, attitudes, and behaviors concerning mental health, violence and other risk behaviors. Administrators and school psychologists analyze the data to prepare programming to address prevention and intervention.

As a result of its Future-Driven priority, Deer Lakes School District will continue to market and publish the Portrait of a Graduate information on social media and use it as a common language in every classroom. Staff will also measure the success with surveys and observable behaviors during classroom visits.

Eliminating Marginalization

It is the goal of Deer Lakes School District to ensure that every student has the ability to envision and realize his or her full potential. A key organizational commitment is that students need an environment that creates opportunities for academic, social and emotional development. This priority is powerfully aligned with preparing all students for future success and sustained well-being.

Ongoing attention to student performance data and related social-emotional learning profiles ensures a sustained focus on areas of underachievement among both individual learners and disaggregated subgroups. Deer Lakes School District is deeply committed to eliminating marginalization—and ensuring that every learner is successful. Its focus in this area reinforces the power of addressing the needs and strengths of the Whole Learner.

Using Technology as a “Force Multiplier” for Meeting the Needs of the Whole Learner

Effective use of technology is an essential component of contemporary education. The AASA Learning 2025 framework reinforces the idea of technology as a “Force Multiplier,” expanding student personalization, academic achievement, and supporting key components of supporting the Whole Learner.

Deer Lakes School District prides itself on being a technology-focused school district. As part of its one-to-one technology initiative, each Deer Lakes student at all grade levels has his or her own personal learning device. Additionally, the district's Information Technology Department has also installed Boxlight MimeoBoards — an interactive, touch whiteboard — in all district classrooms to improve student outcomes.

Evidence of the impact of this learning accelerator is the district's being one of the first Google Certified school districts in Pennsylvania. Deer Lakes is also a Common Sense Media school district and a member of the AASA Future Ready collaborative.

The Unity of the Deer Lakes School District Vision

Deer Lakes School District's continuing work as an AASA Learning 2025 participant is well represented by the unity of its vision as a controlling set of values in all educational programming and delivery systems:

*"Our Portrait of a Learner created the power of a **common vision**. There is now clarity around what leaders want for students. They are clear that, while content mastery remains important, standardized tests are no longer the single metric for student success, and that **readiness is broader than test scores...**"*