

A Case Study of

# South Fayette Township School District

McDonald, Pennsylvania



LEARNING  
2025

Student-Centered  
Equity-Focused  
Future-Driven  
Education



# An Introduction to the AASA 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 key physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development as a holistic component of educational transformation.
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, AASA is sharing with members of the educational community case studies showcasing exemplary school systems that are a part of this network. In this case study, you will learn about an exceptional Lighthouse District in South Fayette Township, Pennsylvania. In 2022, this district developed a strategic plan that emphasizes the need to be “future-focused, student-centered, and innovation-driven.” With the support and vision of the Grable Foundation, South Fayette Township School District is a leader in the region in which it is located.

## An Introduction to the South Fayette School District

Serving 3,400 students, South Fayette Township School District is currently considered one of the fastest growing school systems in the state of Pennsylvania. South Fayette is located in a residential suburb located 12 miles southwest of Pittsburgh in Allegheny County in southwestern Pennsylvania. The township encompasses an area of 20.95 square miles and has a population of more than 15,000 residents (as per 2010 census). The school district is located on one central campus comprised of all K-12 educational programs.

Campus facilities consist of an elementary school (Grades K-2), intermediate elementary school (grades 3-5), middle school (Grades 6-8), high school (Grades 9-12), athletic stadium, central offices, and a bus garage. During the past decade, the district has experienced a 40% growth in student population, well above the average for growth in the region. To accommodate this growth, the district recently opened a new intermediate elementary school during the 2013-2014 school year that accommodates students from grades 3-5. In 2017, the district also completed an expansion and renovation of the South Fayette High School.

A recently conducted demographic study indicates that due to the ongoing student population growth, additional expansion will be necessary in the near future. Currently, the staff includes 431 professional and support service personnel. The educational policies of the district are set by a nine-member Board of School Directors elected to serve four-year terms.

## Priority Goals Aligned with the Learning 2025 Network of Demonstration Districts



Dr. Michelle Miller,  
Superintendent of Schools

South Fayette School District has elected to emphasize the AASA Learning 2025 priority goals of being future-driven (Culture C3) and social-emotional learning (Growth G1). As a key focus of this initiative, the district has made extensive efforts to integrate these priority goals into its long-term strategic planning process.

In 2022, the district created its three-year strategic plan. During ongoing meetings with vested partners, two areas were identified as greatest needs:

1. Addressing the mental health needs of students in the post-Covid era
2. Ensuring that this learning organization continue to be a leading school district in the region regarding innovative and future-focused instruction, opportunities, and experiences for the students it serves.

## A Systemic Focus on Social-Emotional Learning

South Fayette School District has implemented an extensive and systemic approach to reinforcing social-emotional learning (SEL) for students, staff, and families. Strategies include longitudinal analysis of PASS Survey data, ensuring that all learners are receiving appropriate support, coaching, and intervention to address identified social, emotional, and relationship needs within their learning environment. A key component of this process includes an emphasis upon data to action, including school counselors actively monitoring PASS data and student progress. This approach includes an innovative “Chill Room” in which students benefit from on-the-spot counseling and support services, especially when they or their counselor request SEL-related opportunities.





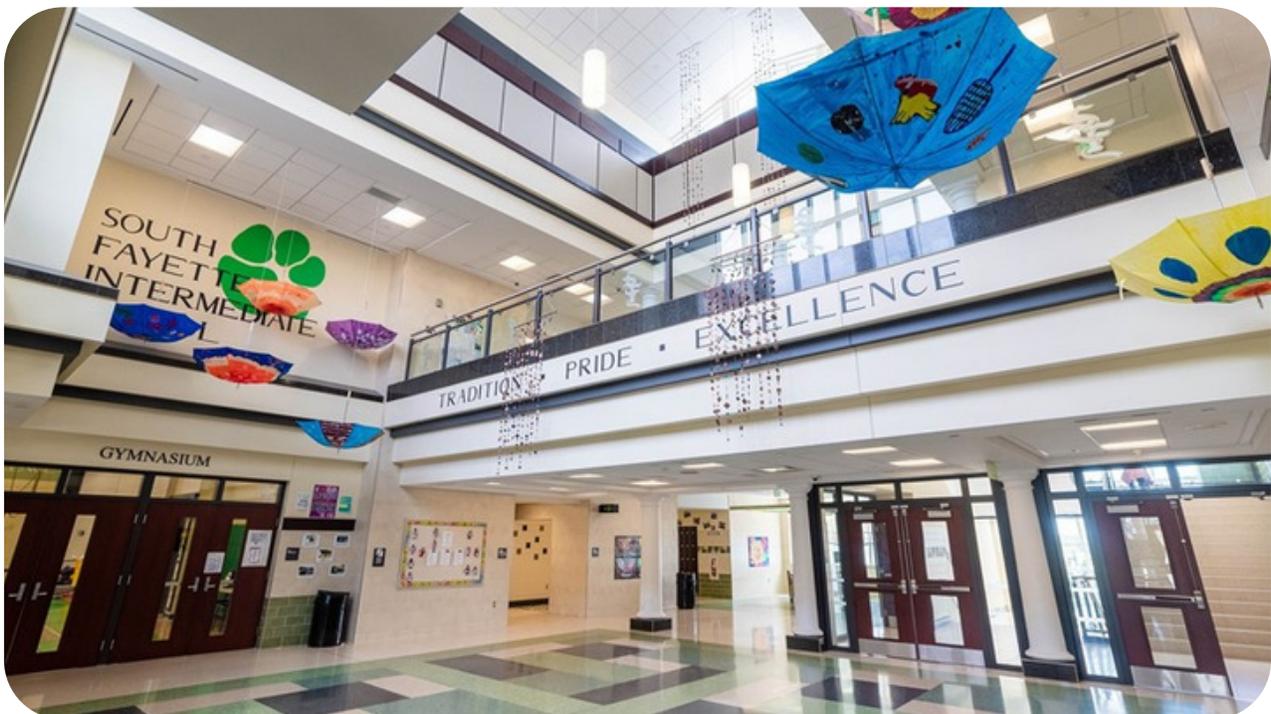
The district's Chill Room process has resulted in its implementation of two Chill Projects at the middle and high school levels, projected for the 2023-24 academic year. This process will expand the range of services and options available to students at the secondary level, providing sustained and easily accessed counseling services.

Although primarily focusing on such issues as self-regulation, student efficacy, relationship and interaction skills, and related SEL priorities, the new Chill Rooms are also designed to expand students' access to on-the-spot counseling services related to areas such as career counseling, academic support, and future planning. The use of Chill Rooms complements the district's continuing implementation of its K-12 PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) Program.

## The Power of Being Future-Driven

South Fayette's commitment to being a future-driven learning organization is evident in a range of programs and practices. Essentially, these organizational structures ensure a long-term and sustainable commitment to preparing all learners for academic success and career pathways aligned with 21st century needs and priorities.

Currently, the school system has completed a "Portrait of a Lion Learner" and "Portrait of a Lion Educator" to reinforce its systemic commitment to future-driven teaching and learning. To implement these portraits through actionable processes evident throughout the district, South Fayette uses Lion Learner descriptors for classroom and school walk-throughs along with timely and appropriate feedback given on the completion of each walk-through. The district has also redesigned its graduation requirements to reflect this future-ready priority, including creating personal pathways for high school students that include capstone project experiences, PBIS, and a range of internship experiences.



To complement this future-driven commitment, South Fayette has instituted a range of curricular and program changes throughout its K-12 learning organization. At the elementary level, for example, it has implemented a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) that now includes time during the day to address all learners' needs in grades K-5. At the secondary level, a variety of future-driven programs have been implemented, including Esports, a dance program, and a Freight Farm for hydroponic crop growth.

Future-driven structural changes have included the creation and implementation of data science lessons in grades K-12, use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) coaches in each building to support UDL implementation, and the development of a three-year cyber-security program that focuses on underserved students. Additionally, the district is developing a series of World of Work units to be shared with the region in summer 2024 (in partnership with three other AASA Learning 2025 districts).

## Addressing the Needs of the Whole Learner and to Ensure That No Student Is Marginalized

In the South Fayette School District's Strategic Plan, there are three integrated and embedded tenets focused on diversity, equity and belonging. These tenets are embedded in everything the district does, including a deep commitment to ensuring the sustainability of these principles within district curricula, programs, and operations.

The district's commitment to the Whole Learner and anti-marginalization is evident in a range of programs and processes. For example, the school system developed and implemented cultural and global competencies for faculty, staff, and students to ensure respect for and acknowledgment of diverse perspectives. Similarly, equity, inclusion, and belonging are principles embedded in observable instructional strategies and key components of the curriculum design and development process. Also, South Fayette uses a DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) screener each quarter for curriculum monitoring. Educators use this screener to review readings and assignments and to determine if they are appropriate for all students.

Staffing and professional development have significantly contributed to the district's Whole Learner and Anti-Marginalization approach. The district strives to create a diverse pool of employees, volunteers, and guests to support a sense of belonging for ALL members of the learning organization. Specifically, the district has implemented a range of processes and programs to reinforce these priority areas:

### The Shout Out Program

This is now the fourth year of the district's student SHOUT (Social Handprints Overcoming Unjust Treatment) Program, a coalition of students whose purpose is to champion equality





for all people. The members seek to help students build new chapters throughout the region. In their debut novel, the students of SHOUT offer insights into how the group was formed, what led them to join, how interested people can begin chapters in their communities and school districts, and the importance of using handprints (i.e., intentional acts that offset the harm from a footprint) to overcome footprints (i.e., intentional or unintentional acts that cause harm to someone or something).

## Integration of Whole Learner and Anti-Marginalization Priorities into Human Resource

To better support and attract diverse candidates, the district is redesigning its employment application process. This process is complemented by an ongoing commitment to sustained professional learning that integrates key principles as essential concepts and strategies. Currently, South Fayette is also partnering with a local school district and college to create a diverse teacher paid apprenticeship program for post-baccalaureate graduates seeking a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT). Some funding has already been received and coursework is currently being created.

## The Use of AASA Learning 2025 Accelerators

AASA Learning 2025 Accelerators represent research-proven principles, strategies, and processes that have proven successful in promoting high levels of achievement for all learners. South Fayette School District currently emphasizes three fundamental accelerators:

1. Providing access for all children to high quality early experiences that prepare them for success in their K-12 educational journey and life
2. Using technology as a Force Multiplier for meeting the needs of the Whole Learner
3. Unlocking resources in the community, including engaging families, communities, and business leaders working with educators to ensure a robust, multi-tiered system of support for all learners

South Fayette's commitment to providing equitable access for all learners includes the following key program priorities (including some previously cited):

1. Completion of the Portrait of a Lion Learner and Portrait of a Lion Educator
2. Use of Lion Learner descriptors for instructional walk-throughs
3. Creation of personal pathways for high school students that include capstone experiences, PBLs, and/or internship experiences
4. Redesign of graduation credit requirements
5. Addition of programs (e.g., e-sports and dance program)
6. Implementation of MTSS with time during day to address all learner's needs in grades K-5
7. Implementation of a Freight Farm for hydroponic crop growth
8. Creation and implementation of data science lessons in grades k-12
9. Utilization of UDL coaches in each building to support UDL implementation
10. Creation of a three-year cyber-security program for students that particularly focuses on underserved students (e.g., minority and/or low SES students)
11. Creation of World of Work units to be shared with the region in summer 2024 (in partnership with three other Learning 2025 districts)

South Fayette School District also demonstrates a deep commitment to ensuring student understanding of and access to the most recent forms of technology. Efforts to use technology as a Force Multiplier for meeting the needs of the Whole Learner include the following:

1. Over the past two years, the district has partnered with a cyber-course provider to offer a cyber option for students
2. All students have a device and utilize the device for learning in and out of the classroom
3. All students have Computation Science instruction in grades 1-8 (including Python)
4. Students use a variety of technologies in STEAM and Engineering classes, including robotics, coding, and Artificial Intelligence.

## Unlocking the Power of Community Resources

Like all AASA Lighthouse Districts, South Fayette is deeply committed to maximizing the power of community resources, including engaging families, communities, and business leaders. The district has a range of cross-institutional partnerships involving these important community resources. Initiatives include the following:

- **Diversity, Equity, and Belonging (DEIB) Advisory Group:** A group comprised of faculty and community members committed to helping their communities become culturally-responsive, safe spaces for all students, faculty, and staff.
- **Cybersecurity Program:** This robust, three-year program was created for all students, with an intentional focus on underserved students, and designed in partnership with local parents and community members who are experts in the field of cybersecurity.
- **Coffee with the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent:** These meetings were instituted to create opportunities for open discussions between parents and district leadership.
- **Parents as Allies:** Parent meetings focused on RIASEC and understanding each student's strengths, interests, and preferences for their future.
- **Project-Based Learning:** CEOs or leaders of businesses (Hennecke and All Clad) pose their challenges to students who are tasked with creating and presenting solutions to their real-world problems.





## Some Final Thoughts from District Leaders

- This district's middle school has been identified as a 2006 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the United States Department of Education.
- Its elementary school was awarded the 2010 National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the United States Department of Education.
- South Fayette's middle school was named one of the Pennsylvania Don Eichhorn Schools, e.g., "Schools to Watch" during the 2015-2016 school year and has since been re-designated twice.
- In 2014, the South Fayette Township School District was inducted into the prestigious League of Innovative Schools, a non-profit national organization that selectively invites school districts around the country to apply for possible induction.
- The induction criteria for the League include significant evidence of innovation and high-quality teaching and learning through the creative use of technology.
- The District provided evidence of the ability to inspire students through an engaging curriculum that focuses on inquiry-based learning and computational thinking throughout the entire K-12 academic program.

## South Fayette Township School District Contact Information

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