

A Case Study of

# The River Valley School District

Blairsville, Pennsylvania



Prepared by



# 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 AASA Learning 2025 school districts, we are sharing with the educational community case studies showcasing exemplary school systems that are a part of our network. This case study focuses on the River Valley School District (RVSD), a rural school district located approximately 45 miles east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As this case study will confirm, this school district clearly reflects the vision and design principles of AASA Learning 2025, including the incorporation of key redesign principles that characterize a future-driven organizational culture.

RVSD recognizes that to prepare students for an increasingly complex and uncertain world, education must be future-driven and committed to creating and sustaining authentic learning environments, challenging the status quo, and requiring all stakeholders to take risks and embrace change.

This case study will provide the reader with information to inspire, create, and adapt learning environments to meet the needs of today's students. River Valley School District (RVSD) champions future-ready learners by commanding excellence through high-quality, authentic learning environments in an inclusive and safe atmosphere. To realize this vision, the district endorses a distinctive K-12 career framework emphasizing STEAM that provides an equitable education to all students.



## A Profile of the River Valley School District

The River Valley School District (RVSD) is a rural school district located approximately 45 miles east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The district encompasses 142 square miles in southern Indiana County and a portion of northern Westmoreland County, making it the second-largest school district in Indiana County. The district has a population of 12,750 residents. The district serves 1,511 students across seven municipalities, including Black Lick Township, Blairsville, Burrell Township, Conemaugh Township, Loyalhanna Township, Saltsburg, and a portion of Young Township.

The 36-acre campus in Burrell Township houses Blairsville Elementary School (K--5), River Valley Middle School (6--8), River Valley High School (9--12), and the district's administrative offices. The Conemaugh Township campus is home to Saltsburg Elementary School (K--5) and the River Valley Academies at Saltsburg, which houses the River Valley Early Childhood Learning Academy, the River Valley Cyber Academy, and the River Valley STEAM Academy.

The district presents the following data concerning its student population: (1) Pre-K to 12 enrollment is currently 1,511 students, 48.3 % of whom are economically disadvantaged; (2) graduation cohort rate is 90.98%, (3) 19.6% of its population is identified as "Students with Disabilities"; and (4) per-pupil spending is \$15,293.57.

RVSD has an obligation to ensure that all students have equitable access to a high-quality education that prepares them for the challenges of the global economy and allows them to reach their full potential in all career paths.

The district's educational values emphasize the following:

1. Increase equitable opportunities yield diverse educational experiences;
2. Foster diversity, leadership, and innovation; and
3. Promote stakeholder relationships and build trust through respectful communication, empathy, and integrity.

Superintendent Philip Martell stated, "We meet the individual needs of the district's students by aligning our mission, vision, goals, and priorities and effectively analyzing data to monitor the use of evidence-based strategies."

## 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. The district is committed to ensuring high-impact, engaging, learner-centered course offerings are strategically and equitably implemented to support and sustain equity and excellence for all learners.

### Goal 1

By the end of the 2023--24 school year, with the support of industry and post-secondary education partners, the district will expand career offerings to a total of eight programs representing six of the 16 US Department of Education Career Clusters.

### Goal 2

By the 2023--24 school year, with the support of various stakeholders, the district will increase middle school course offerings aligned to workforce development careers within the 16 nationally recognized clusters.

### Goal 3

By the 2023--24 school year and given the use of the MTSS framework, 85 percent of elementary and middle school students will meet proficiency on a district-specific reading benchmark by expanding the use of evidence-based strategies with fidelity.

# Addressing AASA Learning 2025 Redesign Components

RVSD recognizes that to prepare students for an increasingly complex and uncertain world, education must be future-driven and committed to creating and sustaining authentic learning environments, challenging the status quo, and requiring all stakeholders to take risks and embrace change. The district's progressive approach provides stakeholders with positive outcomes beyond increased academic achievement, equity through individualized and experiential learning, and STEAM access for all.

## Creating a Future-Driven School District

River Valley School District endorses a distinctive K-12 career framework emphasizing STEAM that provides an equitable education to all students. Furthermore, RVSD embraces innovation that substantially improves its embedded community.

RVSD began to embody this by utilizing district demographics, regional employment needs, and a student-first mentality to repurpose a vacant school into the River Valley Academies at Saltsburg. The mission has since been maintained by collaborating with post-secondary institutions and outside agencies to offer first-of-its-kind programs to reinforce its longitudinal instructional model of evidence-based practices.

As further evidence, the district fully embraces future readiness at the River Valley Academies at Saltsburg (RVAS). RVAS consists of a STEAM academy, an early childhood learning academy, and a cyber academy.

The River Valley STEAM Academy offers a robust program of studies by leveraging data from the High Priority Occupations and the Pennsylvania In-Demand Occupations lists to determine where the district can best prepare its students and community. This programming targets skilled employee shortages in local industries, including electrical occupations, cybersecurity, and sports medicine and rehabilitative therapy. RVSD has also constructed a state-of-the-art esports lab to implement programming to address the emerging esports field.



Additionally, in the next stage of a multi-phased approach, the programs of welding, teacher education and preparation, agriculture, and powerline will be added to the academy, transforming local and regional industries with innovative and sustainable solutions.

The district took action and launched a future-ready, future-driven approach after learning the Pennsylvania Department of Education did not have an approved program of study that addresses the ever-evolving cybersecurity threats in our country. By securing funding and engaging faculty and staff from distinguished universities and regional partners, including CybXSecurity, the district created cybersecurity courses addressing the far-ranging field of cybersecurity, including computer and information systems, computer forensics, and counterterrorism.

The courses identify the targeted domains of instruction for students, including an accelerator series for advanced students, incorporating NIST and NICE standards, industry certifications and micro-badging, competencies under each domain, and assessments while meeting PA Core Academic Standards. A highlight of the cybersecurity program is the district's partnership with CompTIA, making River Valley the first public school in the United States to offer CompTIA Apprenticeships for Tech.

River Valley School District is dedicated to educating students to help them thrive in their futures by providing opportunities to gain valuable skills in a geographic area where options are limited. Following its mission and vision, the district presents students with opportunities to diversify and personalize their education to prepare for careers in the global economy, making RVSD a beacon and model for other school systems.

## Addressing the Needs of the Whole Learner

River Valley School District is dedicated to engaging students in transformational learning experiences, strives for educational sustainability, and is committed to changing and expanding the perspectives of the learner. The district challenges traditional instructional methods by embracing learners as a whole to emphasize that transformational learning has the potential to enrich everyday school experiences.

With a whole-learning focus, the district has implemented components of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework designed to identify struggling learners and provide early intervention and targeted support. The framework components focus on the whole learner by providing academic interventions and support to address learner behavior, social and emotional needs, and issues such as absenteeism. Components are in place at the Saltsburg Elementary School, Blairsville Elementary, and River Valley Middle School is an emerging site utilizing elements of the MTSS Framework.

RVSD emphasizes the critical relationship between behavior and learning. As a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students to succeed, the district is adopting the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program (PBIS). PBIS is an evidence-based, three-tiered framework to improve and integrate all data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes to create an environment where all learners succeed. Blairsville Elementary School is implementing the PBIS framework, and a three-year plan is in place to expand into Saltsburg Elementary School and the River Valley Middle School.

**“ RVSD recognizes that being future-ready means providing a more equitable educational system that leaves no learner marginalized.”**

Active partnerships with local universities integrate evidence-based research and best practices as well as additional staff and resources to meet the needs of the learners. The district partners with higher education to provide unique one-on-one and small-group counseling and mental health assistance. One such collaboration is with the Indiana University of Pennsylvania to house doctoral students within the school setting to offer services to secondary students during the school day as part of a graduate assistantship. In addition, this partnership provides counseling services through a graduate-level practicum course.

Furthering the district's commitment to a future where no learner is marginalized and addressing that all district stakeholders should be included and valued equally. RVSD ensures that all students learn in a physically and emotionally safe environment. The district has developed a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to provide this assurance. This committee provides resources to create responsive, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. This committee, co-led by the Director of Rising Brothers and Sisters at Point Park University, Dr. Mitchel Nickols, is composed of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and families and meets regularly to create an inclusive environment for all.

Additionally, Dr. Nickols and the committee provide professional development, assemblies, training to coaches, and mentoring to students and staff, elevating awareness within the school community and developing a genuinely inclusive climate for all learners.

## **Learning Accelerator One**

### Promoting a Diverse Educator Pipeline

According to the AASA Learning 2025 report *An American Imperative: A New Vision of Public Schools*, schools and those responsible for delivering instruction and learning operate as “learning accelerators” when systems are designed and educators are trained to maintain the highest level of learning possible for an individual student on an ongoing basis. A key component of accelerated learning involves the creation of a successful educator pipeline, ensuring continuity and excellence in the selection, initial training, and ongoing professional education of staff members.

River Valley School District recognizes that educators come from various backgrounds. This is especially true when it comes to the professional educators in the STEAM Academy. Several STEAM instructors have experiences in the private sector that provides a unique perspective to students and aids them to prepare for real-world work scenarios. For example, Cybersecurity instructor Missy Milanak is piloting a workforce residency program to continue education and training (including training other teachers) in a specialized field through a partnership with CybXSecurity.

Addressing the critical need for future educators, RVSD has partnered with Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) to offer a Developing Future Educators course to high school students. It is taught within the district and provides free college credit to students interested in pursuing a career in education.

## Learning Accelerator Two

### Preparing All Students for Success in Their K-12 Educational Journey and Life

A key component of the AASA Learning 2025 initiative is a commitment to equity and the preparation of all learners for success in a rapidly changing world. According to An American Imperative, “We achieve this only when educators stand firmly against the marginalization of any child and steadfastly in favor of building a new system capable of meeting ALL children’s Whole Learner needs equitably.”

With the implementation of an early childhood learning academy, students ages 3–5 are enrolled in the program from across local communities. The Pre-K program provides a nurturing, child-centered learning environment that sparks a love of learning at an early age. The academy’s curriculum provides students with hands-on experiential learning experiences that increase students’ comprehension, critical thinking, and creativity to build the foundation for lifelong learning. It also provides high school students with expanded opportunities for clinical application within the teacher preparation program.



RVSD recognizes that being future-ready means providing a more equitable educational system that leaves no learner marginalized. The district found that a subgroup of students valued and excelled by steering their education and learning at their own pace and expanded its cyber school program to support those students by creating the River Valley Cyber Academy (RVCA).

RVCA has been instrumental in providing students with unique educational preferences and opportunities connected with instruction to facilitate a cohesive learning experience. What’s more, district administrators advocated for a cyber lab to provide on-site support, general education, and special education resources for cyber students, thus leading to RVCA joining the other two academies housed at the River Valley Academies at Saltsburg.

Consequently, students no longer need to attend a non-district cyber-charter school as a sustainable and competitive model, as one is readily available in their home district. Students now have access to dedicated educators for additional assistance and support, which fosters a community of learners.

Simultaneously, RVSD approaches learners holistically to engage their heads, hearts, and hands. Keeping its commitment to future-readiness and focusing on the whole learner, the district positions students to begin career exploration and self-actualization starting their kindergarten year.

RVSD fully implements The World of Work curriculum district-wide in conjunction with the Beable platform. This curriculum focuses on students’ self-actualization and career development. Students use the RIASEC Model (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) to discover the career opportunities that best fit their personality traits and interests. They see their skills as valuable and have a place in the community.

Beable extends what teachers do in the classroom, driving literacy acceleration, content mastery, career development, and social-emotional cognitive growth opportunities. In this inclusive approach, students see themselves as part of a community, learning alongside one another with personalized content tailored to their levels and interests.

The district appreciates the values and recognizes that frameworks, at all grade levels, add relevance for students and allows them to understand what opportunities they will have after graduation, which in turn helps them make informed decisions about their futures. RVSD's career-focused approach allows students to understand what opportunities are available upon graduation and guides them in making informed decisions about their futures.

## **Learning Accelerator Three**

### Technology as a Force Multiplier for Meeting the Needs of the Whole Learner

A key component of the AASA Learning 2025 framework for transformation is the “multiplier effect” of technology. Schools and districts must use technology in combination with intentional and future-driven teaching and learning—ensuring that schools and educators can function as true accelerators of learning for ALL children. A “learning everywhere” environment must emerge, supporting and sustaining high-impact, engaging, and learner-centered teaching and learning optimized for the greatest benefit and power they can offer.

River Valley School District has successfully established the foundation for blended, hybrid, and flipped learning experiences. To increase flexibility with instructional methodology, the district has implemented the Canvas learning management system. The Canvas platform has allowed the district to create custom Pre-K to 12 online learning experiences. District educators have adopted various blended, hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous learning modules to improve the flexibility and customization of their courses. In addition, the district has shifted to web-based platforms such as PowerSchool, a student information system, and upgraded and refined its use of edInsight. The latter is a web-based graphical software that allows district educators to assess a need for response to intervention, identify and tier at-risk students, assign interventions, monitor progress, and report on intervention effectiveness.

The district emphasizes that learning experiences should never be led or directed by a specific technology; instead, technology must adapt to new concepts and meet the needs of the district and its students. The district is devoted to designing activities to develop higher-order thinking skills and finding ways to engage students and enrich their learning experiences.

The Cybersecurity program at River Valley STEAM Academy is the first of its kind in Pennsylvania. This three-year program prepares students for careers in high-demand occupations in the information technology and computer science fields. The Cybersecurity curriculum aligns with seven academic and industry standards, including Computer Science, National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education (NICE), Career & Education, English Language Arts, Math, and Science and Technology. Students earn valuable industry certifications while completing coursework, making them marketable to employers. In addition to offering CompTIA credentialing, the gold standard in the IT industry, River Valley was recognized by the Biden-Harris Administration as the first secondary school in the United States to join CompTIA Apprenticeships for Tech.



**“River Valley School District is engaging all key stakeholder groups in redesigning its educational system, reengineering instruction, and encouraging students to be co-authors of their own learning process.”**

This program will bring students from concepts to design, configuration, and implementation. Seniors will complete a capstone project focused on IT management and governance and a course in ethical hacking to teach them how to think like a hacker so that they can identify vulnerabilities in their own programs. For the 22–23 school year, River Valley STEAM Academy offers an IT Fundamentals course to incoming Cybersecurity students. Middle school students are exposed to IT concepts beginning in 6th grade. Elementary students build their foundation in STEAM with critical thinking and problem solving, coding, and even robotics.

RVSD is emerging from a technology-rich classroom to a learning-infused environment seamlessly driven by technology. Technology levels the playing field and allows all students access to an engaging and rigorous education. The district provides students the tools and backbone for learning through technological devices, assessments and benchmarks as well as adaptive software to ensure flexible grouping and learning. It also promotes students' ability to learn at any time from anywhere. Learners experience an education that is no longer bound by walls, time, or lack of accessibility to rigorous, engaging coursework and programs.

River Valley School District recently completed renovations on its third media center, located in the Blairsville Elementary School. All RVSD students in grades K–12 now have access to these three state-of-the-art spaces filled with technology to provide unique learning opportunities for the 21st century. Secondary students have access to video and audio production spaces to create a variety of digital content for their courses, giving them the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with current technology. The media centers also feature several z-Space virtual learning stations that deliver a stunning interactive experience using AR/VR technology. Students can virtually explore a wide range of subjects, from medicine to engineering.

River Valley School District also finds it imperative to utilize college and career readiness data. It integrates web-based software through Naviance and Nepris. Naviance is a comprehensive K–12 college and career readiness solution that aligns students' strengths and interests to post-secondary goals, improving student outcomes and connecting learning to life. Nepris is a web-based solution that connects River Valley educators and learners with a network of industry professionals, virtually bringing real-world relevance and career exposure to all students. In addition, Nepris provides learners with skill-based volunteer opportunities and extends educational outreach experiences.

## **Learning Accelerator Four**

### Engaging Families, Communities, and Business Leaders

AASA Learning 2025 strongly emphasizes the importance of engaging stakeholder voices and input regarding the transformation of education today. River Valley School District partners with businesses, higher education,

and community leaders to provide support and opportunities for all students. RVSD partners with Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Saint Francis University, Pennsylvania Western University, University of Pittsburgh, Westmoreland Community College, Seton Hill University, and Pennsylvania College of Technology.

The district has formed industry partnerships with industry leaders including REA Energy Cooperative Inc., Associated Builders and Contractors of Western Pennsylvania, and the Operating Engineers Local 66. These partnerships bring together educators and professionals to incorporate industry-specific technology into the traditional education model.

Finally, this school district models a commitment to the AASA Learning 2025 principle of building a new system of leading, teaching, and learning. It is demonstrating a deep commitment to delivering learner-centered and equity-focused education to ALL of its students, promoting a paradigm shift in how the positions of administrators, teachers, and students function. River Valley School District is engaging all key stakeholder groups in redesigning its educational system, reengineering instruction, and encouraging students to be co-authors of their own learning process.

River Valley School District is committed to community-based programming efforts overseen by the Coordinator of School-to-Community Programming and Services. RVSD promotes the relationship between schools, the home, and the community as a valuable link for providing aligned support for its students. These efforts include developing Early Childhood programming for students ages 3 through 5, and student services for all students. This programming provides the foundation for future learning and accessibility by all.

## Additional Case Study Resources for Educational Leaders

As a resource to support educational leaders' work with the transformation of their respective districts, AASA presents the following guide questions for use with staff members as they explore how River Valley School District is working to achieve key goals of the AASA Learning 2025 initiative. These questions can be useful as part of a professional development workshop or for discussion with leadership teams at the district and school levels.

In addition to the following questions, AASA recommends that as part of this process you review and consider using the following River Valley School District Videos:

- **Watch:** [Let the Day Begin](#)
- **Watch:** [River Valley STEAM Academy](#)

## Suggested Guide Questions

1. What do you consider to be the unique challenges confronted by educational leaders and staff serving smaller rural districts?
2. To what extent are the identified educational values and long-range goals presented for this district aligned with your vision for educational transformation?
3. What does it mean for a school district to be “future driven?”
4. In your opinion, to what extent is the River Valley School District (RVSD) demonstrating a commitment to this principle?
5. How is RVSD operationally defining and addressing the components of an effective STEAM program for all its learners?
6. In addition to the identified evidence currently being used by RVSD, are there other assessments and performance indicators you might recommend for the district?
7. What does it mean to address the “Whole Learner?” What specific strategies is RVSD using to achieve this priority focus?
8. This case study presents three major “learning accelerators” currently operational in RVSD. How are you currently addressing these three priority areas? Are there ideas and processes presented in the case study that you might consider for your district?
9. The issue of equitable access to high-quality early experiences is a key priority in RVSD. Which of the processes and strategies presented here are aligned with your current district’s work in this area? Are there ideas you might adopt?
10. To what extent is technology a “force multiplier” in your current district? Are there ideas presented in the case study that you might consider or adopt?
11. How are you currently addressing the final element in this case study, e.g., unlocking resources in your community to support your transformation efforts?

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