



## Harrisonburg, Virginia

# Infrastructure-Building to Support the Needs of Diverse Student Learners

## Intro

Harrisonburg City Public Schools (HCPS) in Harrisonburg, Virginia focuses on student social and emotional well-being alongside academic growth without the benefit of a large grant or an infusion of external funding. Instead, they have redirected limited resources to targeted social and emotional learning programs and professional development, strengthened district policies, practices, and procedures, and connected to community organizations to help provide for the overall health of their students. In addition, school, community, and city leaders have been working together to make a growing number of immigrant and refugee families feel welcome, to provide them with services to help them adjust, and to support the increasing diversity of the city environs.

## Background

A mid-size town, surrounded by farms in the Shenandoah Valley, the city of Harrisonburg prides itself on being friendly. Home to James Madison University (JMU) and the private Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), the city has a diverse population of immigrant and refugee families, many of whom work in the local poultry industry. HCPS's student population is also rapidly expanding and currently has a student enrollment of over 6,300, including students in preschool and young adults in alternative and evening high school settings. The district has 6 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 1 high school, and an alternative evening high school program. 35 percent of students are English Language Learners, speaking over 57 home languages<sup>1</sup>. Over 70 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-priced school meals<sup>2</sup>, an indication of poverty and economic hardship. As with many areas in the US, homelessness and substance abuse are two issues facing the community.

## Story

HCPS recognizes the importance of ensuring equity and supporting social-emotional learning for all students by naming these as district-wide priorities. With an increasingly diverse student population, these values are even more focused. Without the assistance of large grant programs, the district turned to policy change and partnerships in order to provide students with the supports needed to be successful in school and in life. Accomplishing this task required a common vision by leaders and stakeholders, infrastructure changes at

the central office, and partnerships with community organizations, including the local universities.

District leaders and elected school board members uphold a shared vision for HCPS, one that is documented in the district's strategic plan. A district leadership team convened to develop core beliefs and goals in order to advance a coordinated plan around student learning and academic success. Included in the strategic plan are the goals of ensuring that all students can and should learn at high levels through the removal of barriers to student success ("Equity" goal), and developing a safe, supportive and inclusive environment in which students can develop pro-social skills ("Social-Emotional Learning" goal). Not only do educators and school leaders maintain the principles of equity and social-emotional learning, they are formalized into district plans and policies, thus institutionalizing the belief that equity and student wellbeing are preconditions to student learning.

## HCPS Division Goals

**Equity** – We believe that all students can and should learn to high levels. Access to programming, along with equitable practices, is essential to providing the highest quality education for all HCPS students.

**Literacy** – We believe literacy is a continual process of constructing meaning through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Literacy skills develop best through meaningful tasks that engage students to learn for deep understanding while simultaneously fostering confidence in reading and communicating.

**Social/Emotional** – We believe a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for every member of the HCPS community is critical to student learning.

The district operationalizes these goals through a staffing model that maximizes existing personnel resources. At the district level, a recently created position of Director of Student Services coordinates comprehensive student supports and services across all nine schools as well as district collaboration with city agencies, community organizations, and local universities. The position supervises and supports

all of the social workers, psychologists, and school counselors, among others, and meets with them regularly to discuss challenges and successes. Job descriptions for school social workers and school psychologists have been revised to include counseling services, case management, and parent consultations, with a corresponding increase in pay scale. Allocation of student support staff is reviewed regularly and determined on student enrollment and need. In addition, the district employs parent liaisons who conduct home visits and help families navigate the education, social services and health systems. The district also contracts with the local Community Services Board for additional counselors and coordinates internships in student and family counseling for doctoral students in school counseling and psychology at JMU.

Creative and adaptive solutions have been developed to meet the needs of all students, such as alternative school settings, flexible scheduling, and extended school day programs. By connecting to external organizations and partners, the district has been able to leverage community partnerships to provide extracurricular activities and support services that enhance student learning. JMU is a strong partner in ensuring that all students - regardless of race, ethnicity, language, or income status – have access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) learning. Through the Advancement by Individual Determination (AVID) program, middle school students, who are mostly prospective first-generation college students, are encouraged to enroll in upper-level courses and are paired with a college student for tutoring.

The district is also a critical partner in efforts to improve social conditions for students and their families. Local universities have a presence in the high school supporting refugee students; JMU partners with EMU and faith-based organizations and churches to provide a refugee resettlement peer leadership program for students and their friends. NewBridges Immigrant Resource Center has hosted meetings at each school to provide legal information and resources for families and the district is represented on coalitions dedicated to advancing the use of restorative and trauma-informed practices in both school and community settings. The district also helps address basic health needs by operating a café-mobile that provides meals during summer break, and vision exams, vaccinations and other health services throughout the school year.

## Keys to Success

- Creative leveraging of available resources
- Understanding of and appreciation for the diversity of the community
- Coordinated efforts through Central Office staff

- Strong partnerships in the community
- Dedicated and supportive school board, school leadership, and staff
- Formalizing and documenting changes in policy and practice
- A strong leadership team that understands that emotionally and physically healthy youth learn better and works with the community, city council, and teachers to pursue this

## Conclusion

School and city leaders recognized Harrisonburg’s changing population, which is not unlike the shifts in demographics occurring elsewhere throughout the country. Increasingly, HCPS has been the first place to turn for families new to the city, including refugee and immigrant families. The district has accepted the role of welcoming newcomers with a focus on supporting student learning and well-being, and meeting of the needs of families. The result has been a successful, coordinated continuum of academic, social-emotional, and family supports for all students, regardless of origin or nationality. The Harrisonburg school community demonstrated use of the components within the Partner Build Grow action guide. These include a committed core team made up of key decision-makers and champions, an understanding of community strengths and opportunities, and the role of local-level policy and practice change in institutionalizing a new approach.

## About this Project

This study illustrates the principles in [Partner Build Grow](#), an online tool that helps schools, community groups, health care providers, and others develop plans to sustain and strengthen school-based social and emotional development initiatives and mental health supports to help children flourish. A four-pronged strategy—Building an Action Team, Mapping Assets, Connecting to the Policy Environment, and Communications—the Action Guide includes tools, templates, examples, and resources.

Partner Build Grow was developed by the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. CHHCS promotes child wellness and school success by working with schools and communities to bridge health and education so that kids are happy, healthy, and motivated to learn. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CHHCS works to advance school-community partnerships. For an in-depth look at these and other communities and to learn more about the approach, visit [Partner Build Grow](#) at [www.actionguide.healthinschools.org](http://www.actionguide.healthinschools.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Harrisonburg City Public Schools: Enrollment Statistics. Accessed: <https://harrisonburg.k12.va.us/District/1133-Enrollment-Statistics.html>

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Department of Education: Program Statistics and Reports. VDOE National School Lunch Program Free and Reduced Price Eligibility Reports By School Division. Accessed: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/nutrition/statistics/index.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Harrisonburg City Public Schools: Division Goals 2017-2018. Accessed: [https://www.harrisonburg.k12.va.us/files/user/1/file/division\\_goals\\_2017.pdf](https://www.harrisonburg.k12.va.us/files/user/1/file/division_goals_2017.pdf)