



How Schools Open the Doors to Better Health

The newest school in Algoma, Wisconsin, doesn't look much like a school. Inside, there are no desks — just chairs and tables. Outside, the building still resembles the old credit union it used to be.

Though modest in appearance, Pathfinder Academy illustrates the school district's leadership role in addressing health issues and rallying people around the mission of Live Algoma. The untraditional academy grew out of community conversations, prompted by Live Algoma, on the emotional well-being of children and teens.

To help students struggling in school, the Algoma School District responded by turning the old bank into a space where students who were not thriving in traditional classroom settings could learn at their own pace, and in their own way. Pathfinder drew 16-year-old Elizabeth, whose life had been marred by family setbacks. In eighth grade, she dropped out. "I didn't want to face people," she explains, because she was embarrassed.

Then she found Pathfinder. Elizabeth enrolled in the first class and, in only a year, has been able to catch up with her course work. Now a junior in high school, she thinks about college. "This is the greatest gift I've ever received," she says.

The 800-student Algoma School District has been an active leader in building a Culture of Health, with its superintendent, Nick Cochart, setting the tone from the moment he was hired as high school principal in 2011.

At the time, boosters were raising money for a new football stadium at the high school. Cochart questioned the logic, noting, "That's a lot of money to spend for five nights in the fall."

The comment was all the more unexpected since Cochart played Big Ten football for the University of Wisconsin and was on the Badgers' Rose Bowl-winning team in 2000. The former defensive lineman took some hits for his opinion, but held firm, arguing that such an investment would be better spent on a project that benefited more people.

After being named school superintendent in 2014, Cochart put his vision for the site into action, spearheading the building of a community wellness center and a new addition for the high school's technical training department, dubbed Wolf Tech. Private donors and local businesses chipped in more than half of the \$3.5 million cost, a testament of the breadth of community support for both ventures.

Today, the Algoma Community Wellness Center, located directly across from the football field for the Algoma Wolves, has become an indoor town square. It provides a space for residents to connect with one another, achieve personal health goals, and discuss community-wide issues. With the success of both the Wellness Center and Wolf Tech, citizens saw what their community could achieve and voted overwhelmingly to support a referendum to expand the elementary school.

Students of all ages are encouraged to lead projects that better their community. The district, too, has come up with its own ideas. For example, to help families whose well-water is tainted because of runoff, the district installed a water kiosk behind the high school. Seventy families use the free service, alleviating "a huge burden," says Claire Thompson with the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension.

Cochart is a firm believer in self-reliance. Live Algoma encourages "this culture in our community of taking care of one another and really improving as we go," he says. "We don't have everything fixed, but we're working hard at it."

Give Young People a Voice, and Good Things Happen

In a small town, it takes all hands on deck to move forward, and Algoma counts on its younger generation to identify and drive solutions to build a Culture of Health.

That's why in a windowless conference room at WS Packaging Group, a local printing plant, employees watch as a group of high schoolers shows employees how to administer hands-only CPR. The demonstration reflects an intentional effort to actively engage and encourage Algoma's youth to work toward improving their community.

Courtney Guilette, 17, a senior at Algoma High School, demonstrates CPR on a dummy, keeping pace with her pumping to the disco beat of "Stayin' Alive." Young volunteers have trained 2,357 people over the past two years, with a goal of hitting 3,000 by the end of 2017.

"It's an empowering feeling to think that I've helped someone today," Guilette says.

Algoma is consciously trying to activate the imaginations and involvement of children and teens to reverse a finding in a recent survey, commissioned by Bellin Health, that discovered a "dream deficit" among its youth, or an inability to look beyond what they currently knew.

"With a large population of seniors living and residing in Algoma, we felt that our youth voice just wasn't always heard," says Teal VanLanen of Live Algoma.

Addressing that, Mayor Wayne Schmidt recently appointed high school students to serve on committees for Community Development and Parks and Recreation. "I want people to have new ideas. Well, where do you get new ideas from? You get new ideas from your youth," Schmidt says.

Schools, too, are encouraging students to lead projects on a range of issues, from cleaning up Algoma's beach to saving "ugly fruit" from supermarkets to serve as healthy snacks in school cafeterias. VanLanen has guided high school students through Harvard University's online Improvement Science training and the Plan, Do, Study, Act framework of learning. The core theme is "failing forward," encouraging youth to learn from failure and grow as a result.

"Most of the time when we use the word 'fail,' especially in education, it has a negative feel, and we're trying to flip that in Algoma," VanLanen says. "Failing is not a bad thing. It's what you do with your failure that's important and what matters."

Sixteen-year-old Abigail Robinson will get a chance to test the concept. For a class last year, she surveyed 200 elementary students on how they felt about school. Some of the answers reflected stress at home and difficulty handling emotions.

Robinson proposed a mentoring program at a Live Algoma meeting on children's issues that was mostly attended by educators and social service professionals. Everyone loved the idea — and turned to Robinson to launch it. "I was a little taken aback, but I'm ready for it," she says.

Robinson will start small and use the Plan, Do, Study, Act framework to put her idea into action. "This needs to be done," she says.

Making Health Improvement Everyone's Business

Jamie Spitzer can still remember the call he got in 2011 from the new high school principal, Nick Cochart, asking an unprecedented question: How could the school do a better job of helping him as an employer?

"It had never happened before," says Spitzer, founder of Precision Machine Inc., a local manufacturer of precision parts for industries like aerospace and printing.

Spitzer gave him an earful, saying students were not adequately prepared to work in technology-driven manufacturing. Welding and carpentry alone were not sufficient skills for graduates to step into hi-tech factory jobs.

The school responded, adding computer-controlled machinery, recruiting skilled factory workers to work alongside students and creating a qualified pipeline of young employees.

The collaboration at the high school reflects the focus in Algoma on education and employment to improve the well-being of young people. Businesses in this community that once waited for their workforce are now working with Algoma educators to cultivate it. With jobs that pay a living wage, graduates can plant local roots, build careers, and enjoy a healthy income and job security.

At the same time, it builds on a tradition in Algoma of employers acting as active partners to meet the needs of the community. For four decades, businesses have worked with the nonprofit East Shore Industries to place adults with disabilities in local employment, often adapting jobs to their abilities. Algoma takes great pride in East Shore, says Teal VanLanen, the community activator for Live Algoma. Of the people served, she says, “We just want them to be an important part of our community and to feel a sense of belonging.”

Through the Live Algoma initiative, employers large and small can take this collaborative spirit one step further by creating new ways for them to share and test ideas.

At Precision, Spitzer has changed the food in the lunchroom to more nutritional selections; bought all of his workers wristband devices for tracking their daily steps; and adopted a new Live Algoma health insurance plan, offered by Bellin Health, that rewards members for healthy lifestyle gains.

“I’ve seen people come in here in tears, happy about the difference between how they used to be and how they are now,” Spitzer says. “We’ve created an environment where we can make a change.”

At WS Packaging, employees take on-site classes in nutrition from the community nurse activator, Jody Anderson.

At the Piggly Wiggly supermarket, a clerk devises healthy recipes each week for customers, using on-sale ingredients.

“Businesses have really gotten onboard,” Anderson says. They view the work being done by Live Algoma “as a true investment.” Many employers donated funds to build the Community Wellness Center, and now cover the membership fees of workers.

At Wolf Tech, the engagement of business comes into sharp focus. Like many small towns, Algoma hopes to stem a “brain drain” of graduates leaving for bigger cities nearby by better preparing them for jobs at home.

To ramp up the school's technology, Precision donated two pieces of equipment, while WS Packaging installed a printing line just like the one at its neighboring plant. The high school's technical training program is now so cutting edge that students operate it like a business. Wolf Tech, which is located in a new wing of the school as big as an airplane hangar, fills orders for products from local customers, receiving donations in return that are invested in new machinery.

Wolf Tech is a springboard for students, says Matthew Abel, the high school's technical teacher who runs the program. Companies "don't have to look for qualified employees; they know they're here."

The printing industry has struggled to find capable press operators, adds Mark Zastrow, a printer for WS Packaging who also works with students. Now, "we have this great asset right next to us."