



PA House of Representatives Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120
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Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing

“Back to School”

August 6, 2024, at 10 a.m.

The Centennial School
2196 Avenue C
Bethlehem, PA 18017

10:00 a.m.	Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance
10:10 a.m.	Opening Remarks from Joseph J. Helble <i>President, Lehigh University</i>
	Educator Insights Panel
10:15 a.m.	Dr. Robin Hojnoski <i>Dean, College of Education, Lehigh University</i>
10:20 a.m.	Dr. Julie Fogt <i>Director, The Centennial School</i>
10:25 a.m.	Heather Caricari <i>Lead Teacher, The Centennial School</i>
10:30 a.m.	Dr. Sara Heintzelman <i>Technology Integration Specialist, The Centennial School</i>
10:35 a.m.	Questions for the Educator Insights Panel
	Parental Perspectives Panel
11:05 a.m.	Judy Holden <i>Parent of a Student at The Centennial School</i>
11:10 a.m.	Kristi Sadow <i>Parent of a Student at The Centennial School</i>
11:15 a.m.	Melissa Howard Heptner <i>Parent of a Student at The Centennial School</i>
11:20 a.m.	Jim Shields <i>Parent of a Student at The Centennial School</i>
11:25 a.m.	Questions for the Parental Perspectives Panel
11:55 a.m.	Closing Comments



Testifier Biographies

PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing *"Back to School"*



Joseph J. Helble **President, Lehigh University**

Joseph Helble is a 1982 summa cum laude chemical engineering graduate of Lehigh University and a 1987 Chemical Engineering Ph.D. graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Joseph, previously provost of Dartmouth College, assumed the role of Lehigh University President on August 16, 2021. He is the second alumnus in Lehigh history to be appointed president; Henry Sturgis Drinker, Lehigh's 5th president, graduated from the university in 1871 and served as president from 1905 to 1920.

Prior to becoming Dartmouth's provost in 2018, Joseph served for 13 years as dean of the Thayer School of Engineering. As dean, he oversaw a record increase in the school's research funding, a near doubling of enrollment, an increase in its number of tenure-track faculty and the introduction of new majors and programs.

Joseph and his colleagues in the Thayer School notably created the PhD Innovation Program (PhD-I), the first program in the nation to prepare engineering doctoral candidates for entrepreneurial success.

After graduating with highest honors from Lehigh in 1982, Joseph earned his PhD in chemical engineering, with a minor in Spanish, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1987. From there he worked for several years in the private sector as a research scientist at Physical Sciences, Inc., during which time he also spent several months on leave as a science policy fellow with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Later, as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Revelle Fellow, he spent a year in Washington, D.C., working on environmental and technology policy.

Joseph has authored more than 100 publications and holds three U.S. patents. In 2017, he was elected a Fellow of the AAAS. He is a co-recipient of the National Academy of Engineering's 2014 Bernard M. Gordon Prize for Innovation in Engineering and Technology Education for the design and implementation of Dartmouth's Engineering Entrepreneurship Program, which includes the PhD Innovation Program. He also received a National Science Foundation CAREER Award in 1998.

Dr. Robin Hojnoski
Dean, College of Education, Lehigh University

Dr. Robin Hojnoski, currently serves as a Dean for the College of Education at Lehigh University. Previously, she served as an Associate Professor for the School of Psychology for Lehigh University, and as an Assistant Professor at the University of Memphis.



Robin's research area of interests focuses on the application of school psychology principles and practices to early education. She is particularly interested in early identification and prevention and intervention for learning and social behavior. Most recently, she has worked on the development and field testing of tasks for measuring number knowledge and skills in preschoolers.

Robin earned her doctoral degree in school psychology from University of Massachusetts in 2002. Prior to that, she earned a Master of Arts in Child Study from Tufts University, and a Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature from Smith College.



Dr. Julie Fogt
Director, The Centennial School

Dr. Julie Fogt has been a dedicated member of the Centennial School, a private institution staffed by Lehigh University faculty and graduate students, which provides special education services for students who face learning and emotional behavioral challenges, and currently serves as the school's director.

Julie began her career with The Centennial School as a school psychologist after earning her education specialist master's degree at James Madison University and completing a year-long internship at Iowa State University. During her tenure at Centennial, she pursued and obtained her doctorate degree in educational leadership from Lehigh University, while serving in various roles, including elementary school coordinator, director of the partial hospitalization program, and associate director.

Heather Caricari **Lead Teacher, The Centennial School**

Heather Caricari currently serves as a lead teacher at The Centennial School.

Prior to working at Centennial, Heather attended Kutztown University and earned her Bachelor's of Science degree and dual certifications in Special Education and Elementary Education.

Heather graduated from Lehigh University with her Master's degree in Special Education in 2009.



Dr. Sara Heintzelman **Technology Integration Specialist, The Centennial School**

Dr. Heintzelman's professional and research interests align with the fields of special education and instructional technology. She is engaged in practitioner-friendly research to help teachers understand how to effectively integrate technology into the classroom.

Sara is the Secretary of the Innovations in Special Education Technology (ISET) division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), and Chair of the Professional Development Committee for the Pennsylvania Association of Educational Communications and Technology (PAECT). She also serves as the Technology Integration Specialist at Centennial School of Lehigh University.



Good morning. My name is Robin Hojnoski and I am the acting dean of the College of Education at Lehigh University.

I'd like to thank the members of the Republican Policy Committee for gathering here today at the Centennial School. I know you will enjoy your visit.

We, as a College, are so fortunate to have a strong relationship with the Centennial School. This school represents what is possible when evidence-based practices are integrated with a caring community of educators. It is an exemplar of how we can support some of our most vulnerable students and how we can train the next generation of educators.

Leveraging best practices in academic assessment and instruction along with positive behavior support, the Centennial School provides an opportunity for success for students with emotional behavioral and neurodevelopmental disorders. As such, it is a reflection of what we can and what we should achieve in education, more broadly.

For the COE, it is also a reminder of why we chose this career path – to improve outcomes for students. Graduate students in special education, teacher education, school psychology and counseling have an incredible opportunity at Centennial to be an active member of the school as part of their training. Here they engage in hands-on learning about best practices in education and how to make a difference in students' lives; this is a strong and necessary complement to their classroom training. This experience provides them with the skills and knowledge to become leaders in educational practices and to take their skills and knowledge to other spaces and places.

Having just stepped into the role of acting dean as of July 1, I look forward to growing our unique relationship with the Centennial school. And with that, I am pleased to introduce you to Dr. Julie Fogt, Director of the school.

House Republican Policy Committee Hearing

Testimony for the Record
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For the Hearing
Back to School
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Julie B. Fogt
Centennial School Director

Good morning, Chairman Kail and distinguished deputy policy committee chair members of the House Republican Policy Committee. Thank you for visiting Centennial School and inviting me to participate in today's hearing. Thank you Representative Mackenzie for choosing to host this hearing at Centennial School. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss Centennial School's innovative approach to creating a nurturing and positive learning environment for students with disabilities, and at the same time, expanding the educator pipeline.

My name is Dr. Julie Fogt, and I have the distinct privilege of serving as Director of Centennial School of Lehigh University. I have served in this role for the past 7 years, although I have worked at the school for 28 years in various capacities including school psychologist, elementary supervisor, and partial hospitalization director. I also teach undergraduate and graduate students at Lehigh University as an adjunct professor. This morning I am joined by my esteemed colleagues, Heather Caricari and Dr. Sara Heintzelman, as well as respected parents of current students, Judy Holden, Kristi Sadow, Melissa Howard Heptner, and Jim Shields. I am also honored to introduce our wonderful student panelists, Aidan Holden, CJ Sadow, and Robert Shields.

Centennial School of Lehigh University is a nationally recognized special education program for students with a history of persistent behavior problems in school. As an Approved Private School, funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and governed by Lehigh University's College of Education, Centennial School serves approximately 90 students, ranging in age from 6 to 21, and classified with emotional disturbance and autism as defined under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Pennsylvania's Chapter 14. Students are referred by school districts, charter schools, and cyber-charter schools from five counties in Pennsylvania. Student enrollment mirrors the demographics of students with behavioral disorders and autism in the local community.¹ Centennial School is guided by two interrelated missions: 1) to provide a world-class educational experience for students with behavioral challenges, and 2) to train aspiring individuals pursuing careers in special education and related fields.

One of the reasons Centennial School initially garnered national attention is due to its model and approach to educating students with emotional disturbance and autism without the routine use of physical restraint and seclusion. Centennial School's multi-tiered positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) model was established over 25 years ago. The model began

with creating a shared vision, establishing building-wide student expectations, and implementing evidence-based practices aimed at reducing and eliminating the use of physical restraint, seclusionary time-out procedures, and out-of-school suspensions.² During the initial implementation year, the use of physical restraints, compared to the previous year, declined by 69%,³ use of seclusionary time-out decreased from an average of 782 to 181 minutes per day,⁴ and out-of-school suspensions were curbed by 16%. Twenty-five years later, Centennial School's PBIS model continues to achieve impressive results. Data from the 2023-2024 school year affirm 100% reductions in the use of physical restraint and seclusionary time out procedures, and an 86% curtailment in out-of-school suspensions.

Across our nation, the use of aversive procedures, like physical restraint, continue to be used on students with disabilities and are a cause for concern. According to recent data from the Office for Civil Rights, 1,981 Pennsylvania students with disabilities were subjected to physical restraint during the 2017-2018 school year.⁵ From the 2017-2018 school year to the present time, zero students were physically restrained at Centennial School. Centennial School is much more than a school where harsh and punitive interventions are not part of its educational milieu. Centennial School treats its students with dignity and care, fosters a sense of belonging, supports social and emotional growth, and gives students a place where they are seen not for their disabilities but for their potential. The dedicated faculty at Centennial School are committed to creating enriching and engaging learning experiences that cater to the unique needs of every student. Through innovative teaching methods and a compassionate approach, Centennial School stands as an exemplar for other schools serving a similar student population.

Centennial School is also the only Approved Private School in Pennsylvania that functions as a laboratory school affiliated with a university. As the laboratory school of Lehigh University's College of Education, Centennial School serves as a training center for individuals pursuing careers in special education and other school-based professions such as school psychology, counseling, and educational leadership. Given that Pennsylvania's special education population continues to grow as 19.3% of public school students received special education programs and services in the 2022-2023 school year,⁶ more highly qualified special education teachers are needed to support them. To put that into perspective, Pennsylvania schools are serving 53,613 more special education students than they were fifteen years ago.⁷

In addition to providing special education services to more students, Pennsylvania school leaders report student mental health needs as the biggest challenge they are facing in their schools.⁸ The second biggest challenge is staffing shortages, particularly in the areas of substitute teachers, instructional aides, and special education teachers) as 50% of school leaders in Pennsylvania reported they had open teaching positions at the start of the school year. Centennial School offers relief in both of those areas - equipping teachers to better support intensive student mental health needs and preparing exceptionally skilled teachers to enter the teaching profession. Here's how we do it.

To address teacher shortages, Centennial School uses a teacher residency model to deploy graduate students, referred to as teacher associates and teacher interns, who receive robust

mentoring from masters-level educators with exceptional skills in teaching students with challenging behaviors and employing evidence-based practices. As with a medical residency, teacher associates and teacher interns engage in a broad range of pedagogical activities under dense supervision allowing them to cultivate and perfect essential skills. Centennial teacher associates and teacher interns spend two to three years working full-time at the school while taking coursework in the evenings towards their Master's degrees. Our teacher residency model allows us to produce a well prepared and highly skilled cadre of teachers to enter the workforce in the Commonwealth and beyond. Our teacher training program is so effective that educational leaders in and beyond Pennsylvania begin contacting us in early spring in hopes of attracting one or more of our graduates to apply to their schools. The teacher training program at Centennial School equips teachers with advanced skills to better meet the high demands of teaching in special education environments. Better prepared teachers are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction and thereby less likely to experience teacher burnout and exit the profession.

Centennial teachers work in teams and share responsibilities for programming, monitoring, and evaluation of student progress by supporting one another during lesson implementation, conducting peer observations, and providing coverage when staff absences occur.³ The use of teacher teams replaces a popular and traditional model for staffing classrooms that relies predominantly on the use of one-on-one aides, mental health workers, and substitute teachers for staff absences.¹⁰ Given the teacher shortages across the Commonwealth that continue to plague all areas of education, and to a greater degree in special education, schools should jettison their reliance on substitute teachers and move to a more sustainable and higher quality teacher teams model. Deployment of teacher teams at Centennial School has proven helpful for maintaining program consistency, especially in the implementation of student behavior intervention plans which are crucial in the delivery of effective services for students with emotional disturbance and autism.

In a few moments, Heather Caricari, who successfully completed Centennial's training program and is now one of the school's teacher mentors, will provide greater detail about how she was trained and mentored in her testimony.

For the remainder of my testimony, I will highlight two additional key features that contribute to Centennial School's success in educating students and meeting their mental health needs.

First, it is our beliefs and values that form the cornerstone of Centennial School's positive culture and philosophy, centering on the conviction that every student deserves an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters growth, learning, and self-confidence. Our espoused beliefs provide our institutional identity, dictate how teachers and administrators approach their work, and contribute to the norms for how school personnel interact with students, parents, and other professionals. Embodied in our unofficial mantra, "Nice Matters," Centennial School promotes a culture of kindness, empathy, and mutual respect among students and staff. Centennial teachers prioritize positive behavioral interventions and supports as the predominant method to improve student behavioral performance. When behavioral errors are observed, teachers

effectively manage behaviors by providing private and gentle constructive guidance that is focused on the appropriate replacement behaviors rather than providing public reprimands and admonishments which seek to embarrass or belittle the student. By using this approach, our students participate in a positive and respectful school culture and learn appropriate prosocial skills.

The faculty at Centennial School also ascribes to the belief that a rich and engaging academic curriculum helps prevent the occurrence of problem behavior and best prepares students for reintegration to home school environments. Teachers are taught to use research-based teaching practices that include matching curricula to students' functioning levels, systematic analyses of student error patterns, positive error correction, frequent feedback, high rates of active engagement and praise, systematic progress monitoring and a tenacious pursuit of mastery learning. Daily instructional plans follow a direct instruction lesson plan format, which emphasizes the systematic delivery of instruction and active student engagement.

Second, supportive partnerships with our students' parents are essential to achieving success in school. Strong, authentic, and prosperous family school relationships are an important component of Centennial School's positive school culture. Our faculty collaborates closely with families, understanding that the quality of these home-school relationships directly impacts the effectiveness of our program. We view parents as equal partners in supporting their child's success in school. Regular communication, mutual respect, and shared goals are essential components of our partnership with parents. We actively involve families in the educational process, seeking their input and feedback to ensure that our programs and interventions are aligned with their perspectives regarding their child's needs and aspirations.¹⁰

In closing, I am deeply proud and grateful for the nurturing, positive, and supportive environment we have cultivated at Centennial School. It is a place where every student, regardless of their challenges, is given the opportunity to flourish. The transformative impact of our school's environment is reflected in the success stories of our students. Centennial School not only enhances their educational experience but profoundly changes the lives of its students and families for the better.

I would like to express my gratitude for the contributions of Centennial School's staff, parents, and Lehigh University in making Centennial School a very special place and for their insightful contributions to today's hearing.

I would also like to thank this policy committee and your colleagues for passing the Pennsylvania budget with significant increases in educational funding, particularly a \$100 million increase for special education funding. Your actions underscore your commitment to an equitable education for all students.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my remarks with you this morning. My colleagues and I welcome the opportunity to work with you to ensure all Pennsylvania students participate in

educational environments that support their unique needs, help them thrive in school, and prepare them for a successful adult life.

Notes

¹ US Census Bureau. (n.d.). QuickFacts Lehigh County, Pennsylvania.
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/lehighcountypennsylvania>.

² Fogt, J.B., & Piripavel, C. M. (2002). Positive school-wide interventions for eliminating physical restraint and exclusion. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 10, 227-232.

³ George, M.P., George, N.L., Kern, L., & Fogt, J.B. (2013). Three-tiered support for students with EBD: Highlights of the universal tier. *Education and Treatment of Children*. 36, 47-62.

⁴ Miller, D.N., George, M.P., & Fogt, J.B. (2005). Establishing and sustaining research-based practice at Centennial School: A descriptive case study of systemic change. *Psychology in the Schools*, 42, 553-567.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-18, Retrieved from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov>.

⁶ Pennsylvania Department of Education. Pennsylvania Special Education Quick Reports, 2022-2023. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Retrieved from penndata.hbg.psu.edu/penndata/documents/BSEReports/Data%20Preview/2022-2023/Speced_Quick_Report_PA_Final_2022-2023.pdf.

⁷ Pennsylvania Department of Education. Pennsylvania Special Education Quick Reports, 2007-2008. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Retrieved from https://penndata.hbg.psu.edu/penndata/documents/BSEReports/Data%20Preview/2007_2008/PDF_Documents/Speced_Quick_Report_State_Final.pdf.

⁸ Pennsylvania School Boards Association. State of Education Report. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania School Boards Association, 2024.

⁹ Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? *Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, 48, 1–13.

¹⁰ Cook, S., Zaheer, I., Fogt, J., Casey, L., & Lewis, M. (in press). From theory to practice: Successful family-school collaboration in schools. In Garbacz, A, Minch, D., & Weist, M. (Eds.). *Family-school collaboration in multi-tiered systems of support in schools*. Guilford Press.

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Heather Caricari
Centennial School Lead Teacher

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Heather Caricari and I am going to speak to you about Centennial School's teacher training and the mentorship practices we use at our school. To provide some background information about myself, I am entering my 18th year teaching at Centennial School and my 16th year as a Lead Teacher in the High School program. When I first entered Centennial School's doors in 2007, I was a beginning teacher excited to begin my new career but still with a lot to learn. Throughout my first two years as a teacher intern, I was fortunate to receive quality training and mentorship from the team of wonderful lead teachers and administrators here at the time. Now, as a member of our current leadership team, I am proud to be a part of continuing these practices with our new teacher associates and interns each year.

At Centennial School, we serve a dual mission of educating children and youth with challenging behaviors while also preparing high quality special education teachers who will move onto public school positions after they complete their program. To fulfill the second part of our mission, all teacher associates and interns work under the leadership of lead teachers in their program, who serve as their mentor throughout the school year. Our lead teachers have all worked their way through the program at Centennial School, and also have a Master's Degree in Special Education.

As part of our teacher training, we prepare special educators for the field by providing them with ongoing professional development opportunities, training, and support. Each program at Centennial School holds weekly team meetings to recognize positive moments from the past week, discuss student progress and updates, share committee announcements, and review upcoming staff development sessions, schoolwide events, or schedule changes.

In addition to weekly team meetings, teacher associates and interns also meet with their mentor teachers on a weekly basis throughout the school year. These mentoring sessions are designed to provide teacher associates and interns with regularly scheduled time to formally check-in with their mentor teachers, debrief moments from the past week, and receive individualized training on a variety of topics. Some topics covered during these mentoring meetings include IEP development, leading IEP meetings, classroom management, academic and behavioral interventions, progress monitoring and data collection, and instructional planning. As teacher associates and interns are learning about instructional planning and effective instructional practices, they continue to receive regular feedback from their mentors. One tool mentor teachers use to provide feedback on instructional planning is integrity checklists for planbooks and lesson plans. Integrity checklists are used to review a teacher's planbook and instructional plans, and to provide individualized feedback including recommendations for how to structure their classes and instructional groups, as well as feedback on the direct instruction model, lesson modifications and accommodations, and formative and summative assessments.

Centennial School takes pride in providing mentoring experiences that are individualized and tailored to meet the individual needs of our teachers. We understand that our teacher associates and interns come to Centennial with a variety of experience and knowledge, some entering the classroom for the very first time, and because of this lead teachers work to ensure their mentoring practices are individualized for each of their mentees. Each program's leadership team also holds weekly check-in meetings throughout the school year. During these weekly meetings, lead teachers, along with their program coordinator, discuss and choose topics for the week's mentoring sessions based on student, teacher, and program needs. In addition to the weekly mentoring meetings, additional meeting times are scheduled as needed if teacher associates or interns are in need of additional support or training on a specific topic. Informal check-ins and homeroom collaboration also take place on a regular basis with homeroom partners.

Centennial School also provides weekly professional development opportunities each Wednesday afternoon. Our professional development trainings are regularly led by members of our administrative or leadership team, and sometimes include presenters from outside agencies. Topics of these staff development sessions include instructional planning and implementation, effective instructional practices, assessments, progress monitoring and data collection, IEP development, technology integration, and transition services and planning, to name a few. Feedback is received from teachers throughout the

year regarding staff development, and additional training topics may be added based on additional needs or requests from our staff.

These practices previously mentioned help our teacher associates and interns gain valuable knowledge, skills, and experience, and best prepare them for their future in Special Education. When they exit the doors of Centennial School and enter their very own classroom for the first time, they will enter those doors with confidence knowing they are more than equipped to implement all the best practices they learned.

In closing, with the hours of on-site training received each week at Centennial School along with their graduate coursework at Lehigh University, we believe that our program prepares some of the best-qualified special educators in the field. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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Sara C. Heintzelman

Centennial School Technology Integration Specialist

Good morning, members of the House Republican Committee. I am Sara Heintelman and I serve as the Technology Integration Specialist at Centennial School and Adjunct Faculty Member for Lehigh University's College of Education. On behalf of Centennial School and Lehigh University, I thank you for the invitation to testify on innovation at Centennial School.

When I started at Centennial School, 15 years ago, I was the typical graduate of an undergraduate program with a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education. Eager to learn more and further my education, I applied and was accepted to work as a Teacher Intern in the elementary program at Centennial School while working towards my Master's degree in Instructional Technology. I was immediately met with kindness. My mentor teacher modeled the instructional practices I had only read about in textbooks, I received high-quality training and had access to curriculum materials that would help me design meaningful lessons for my students. There was only one visible problem. Every time I went to turn on the desktop computer in my classroom, I would have to wait upwards of 15 minutes and hope that the grades I had input the previous day were saved in the clunky software. I quickly saw technology as an area where Centennial School could grow.

In my classroom that first year, we had a student who we'll call Eli. He strongly disliked writing and I was his writing teacher. After he put a hole in the wall with his desk because he didn't want to write, we sat down to problem solve and figure out how we could do writing differently in the future. I vividly remember our conversation. When I asked Eli what he didn't like about writing he said it wasn't that he didn't have ideas, it was that he couldn't remember his ideas long enough to transfer them from his brain to paper. We used iPod touches at the time to record his ideas so that he could go back and re-listen as many times as he needed to translate the speech to text. This was the start of us thinking about how to use technology as a means for bridging the gap for our students. Several years later, Eli went on to reintegrate back to public school and now as a grown adult has a family of his own.

Over the last 15 years, I've been part of the team that has helped Centennial explore different technologies to help meet the needs of our students. We installed interactive whiteboards in all of

our classrooms, moved to a 1:1 model with iPads at the elementary and middle school levels, and Chromebooks at the high school. Most recently, we installed an Immersive Learning Center, a 360 degree room where we can take students to places around the world, view footage from classrooms to train teachers, preview community field trips, conduct job site training and drop ourselves into Google Street View. The first K-12 school on the East Coast to have this technology, we are proud to be leading the way for other local schools who are considering this technology.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary [defines](#) innovation as "a new idea, method, or device." Too often, I believe we use technology and innovation synonymously, when really, this can be misleading. There are some remarkable technologies available that certainly lead us to new ways of thinking. However, there are also technologies like the one I described earlier that slow us down, cause frustration and make us less efficient. Teachers, an incredible source of innovation, are always thinking about their students and how they can do more to help.

As educators, our scarcest resource is time. Time to prepare lessons, collaborate, work with students, talk to parents, and recharge. More specifically, everytime we introduce something new, we must spend time training our teachers to implement that innovation with fidelity. Innovation takes time.

At Centennial, one of our goals is to prepare high quality special education teachers to enter the workforce in Pennsylvania and other states across the country. Our teachers have the benefit of attending graduate school and the courses they take are grounded in theory. We bridge the gap between the theory our teacher interns and associates receive in their courses and the practice they receive through mentoring and working at Centennial School. Every Wednesday, our students have a half day of instruction and our teachers have two hours of professional learning. Our professional learning is differentiated by years of experience, content area, and required training. Every teacher receives what they need to have a valuable experience and to grow as a lifelong learner. Most importantly, this professional learning is current, gives teachers time to develop instructional ideas, provides scaffolded materials, and allows our teachers time to process new ideas with support.

Recently, we dedicated several professional learning sessions to the Science of Reading. Our teachers spent time working through the Science of Reading course developed by PaTTAN. Following the course, they spent time with their co-teachers discussing and planning implementation ideas. Allocating this time to training prepares our teachers to implement research-based practices to address the academic and behavioral needs of our students. The innovation of structured, weekly professional learning is not new for Centennial School, however, it remains a valuable component of our program for teachers.

Innovation is also thinking differently about solving problems, using space, and the resources available. The Immersive Learning Center we created came out of solving the problem of how we could help students unpack our rigorous reading curriculum. The curriculum, grounded in the Science of Reading, has short stories with settings we have likely all experienced: a farm, carnival, beach, city, or mountains. The problem we needed to solve was how to quickly give our students who may not have experienced these places access to these settings. When we first introduced the Immersive Learning Center to our students one student remarked, “This is like we are on The Magic School Bus. We can go anywhere!” Another student reacted with, “I can’t believe this is in my school.” We took one of the least desirable places in the building, an interior classroom with yellow paint on the walls and transformed it into our Immersive Learning Center. This re-allocation of space gives our students access to experiences that otherwise would not be possible and our teachers access to curriculum materials that are engaging and bring their content to life.

In recent years, we’ve noticed that our students need to move their bodies outside of formal, planned breaks from instruction. We re-imagined our hallways to encourage movement through the installation of our active hallway in the elementary area, the Quantum Space Wall where students can see their body movement come to life through motion reactive technology, and Interactive Floor where students can participate in a variety of academic and seasonal floor activities. Another example is outside of our bathrooms where students wait to enter, in our elementary bathroom area we have posters suggesting movements they can do while waiting and outside of our secondary bathroom area we have Mad Libs that students can reposition nouns, verbs, and adjectives to complete the Mad Lib while they wait. All of these ideas came from carefully observing our students, analyzing data related to their behaviors and allowing our teachers the freedom to share ideas to meet these needs. Innovation takes creativity.

The stories you hear from our parents and students will illustrate innovation at Centennial School and how thinking differently about our students, the resources we have and creating opportunities impacts the lives of our students and their families every day. The solution to students experiencing success will not be found in a device or room. It will be found with us all thinking differently to innovate together.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about innovation here at Centennial School.