

Open communication makes school feel more like home for local families

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One quick search for quotes about the importance of home will turn up hundreds of results opining the benefits of comfort, safety and serenity. Dr. Catherine Kawaguchi, Superintendent of Sulphur Springs Union School District, is working to ensure her schools fit all of those descriptions and exists as a welcoming home away from home for students and their families.

It all starts with building teams, engaging families and breaking down silos.

"My style of leadership is absolutely team-oriented," Dr. Kawaguchi says. "The message I always try to get across is that everybody has a voice, everybody is welcome, and it's everybody's district. It's about enabling people to build that trust with one another; engage in conversations; and take risks knowing that it is okay to fail sometimes."

Dr. Kawaguchi says she often talks with her teams—whether it's the principal team, her cabinet team, or the board of trustees—about the idea of "failing forward." Put simply, it means trying something new and learning from where things perhaps didn't work as you hoped they would.

Those instances are just another opportunity to learn, she says.

A top priority is making sure that schools are open to all families. To encourage progress toward that goal, Dr. Kawaguchi formed a team comprised of a set of parents from each school site, who she meets with each month to share ideas, seek input and disseminate important information.



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Dr. Catherine Kawaguchi, Superintendent

She also attends Sulphur Springs Union SD's District English Learner Advisory Committee meetings.

"We have over 23 languages spoken in our district," Dr. Kawaguchi says. "In that group we can discuss how to better meet the needs of their children, as well as how we can better meet the needs of the parents themselves in terms of making sure materials are translated, or that resources are available to support them with their children.

"There's a lot of family engagement in this district," she says. "That's a huge area of importance to me."

One of the ways in which Dr. Kawaguchi has expanded communication with families is through the district's implementation of The Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A). The program, developed by School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A), is an early warning and intervention system which tracks student attendance and sends letters home to families in their home language when their child is trending toward becoming chronically absent.

"The research is clear; attendance is inextricably linked to achievement, both time on task and learning time matter and parent engagement is the key," says Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A. "By making strong, continuous efforts to build relationships with all the families in Sulphur Springs Union SD, Dr. Kawaguchi is ensuring long-term student success."

In addition to including families, Dr. Kawaguchi says the district works just as hard to make sure all teachers and staff feel at home and appreciated in Sulphur Springs Union schools.