

Successful leadership in Riverside schools requires introspection and self-care

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Dr. David Hansen, Superintendent of Riverside Unified School District, technically sits at the head of any decision-making process that occurs in the District—but if you were to ask him, he'd tell you he's just one of many leaders changing his schools for the better.

"We are all leaders and we all make a difference in the seat that we sit in," Hansen says, explaining that everyone, even the 42,000 students enrolled in Riverside USD schools, leads in four directions.

For instance, leading up means making sure you lead in such a way that your voice is heard when interacting with a superior, while leading down is what we traditionally think of when you consider who leads and who follows. You also lead to the side, Hansen says, which involves how you lead among your peers.

And the last point—which Hansen says is the most difficult of all—is leading yourself, which includes anything from eating healthy and exercising regularly, to setting goals and sticking to them, to always trying to learn something new.

"It's about having that desire to improve and getting a little bit better every day," he says. "It's usually ourselves getting in our own way more than anything else—whether it's our insecurities, or doubts, or fears."

To overcome those barriers and become the best leader one can be, it's important to understand your strengths as an individual, as well as areas in which you need to improve and grow, Hansen continues.

"It's important to learn to be kind to yourself and take care of yourself, and recognize that it's okay to have gaps and surround yourself with people that will compliment you in those areas while you lead through your strengths," he says.

Granted, he said, there does come a time when leader-



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ship of a large district requires him to put his foot down.

"It's situational, of course—I can be authoritarian and work top-down if the situation requires it, but I'm clearly not a bull in a china shop and I'll avoid that at all costs," he explains. "I prefer collaboration and harmony, and I like to include people."

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—which helps school districts improve student attendance in part by increasing meaningful communication with families—says leadership requires a positive attitude, along with an awareness of the needs of others and the willingness to engage

others above you, below you and among your peers.

"Hansen's leadership style achieves all of these," Cook says. "The impressive accomplishments his district has achieved are directly related to his dedication to inclusion, engagement, and collaboration: Valuing others, involving others and working with others."

Those kind of connections don't just happen by chance, Hansen points out. Rather, it takes intentional efforts to develop interpersonal relationships.

While surrounding districts are going through layoffs and unions throughout the country are talking about striking, Hansen says Riverside's dedication to inclusion and collaboration has been beneficial for teachers and students alike.

"In addition to establishing labor peace, we've also been working hard in recent years at building bridges in the community and making sure the District isn't seen as an island unto itself," Hansen says. "Now, because we've been working to develop relationships and break down barriers, we've been able to work with city, business and higher education leaders to make K-12 education a priority. It's a good time right now to be in Riverside."