

Superintendent is pushing toward perfection in Val Verde USD

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There is no question that innovation in education is often hindered by bureaucracy, as well as a fear of failure that may come with change. That couldn't be further from the case in Val Verde Unified School District though, where Superintendent Michael McCormick has long embraced progress.

"I almost have a Silicon Valley mentality—let's get something to market and get it going in beta version and we'll refine it as we go along," McCormick explains. "Sometimes when we start these initiatives we don't even really know what questions to ask, but if we get the wheels in motion and start working on whatever it is we're trying to solve, as we move along we'll get a better understanding of what some of the challenges might be and how to approach those."

That approach has yielded some successful outcomes in recent years. Val Verde USD purchased five Chromebooks in 2012 to start a pilot program in an effort to close the gap in technology access among students. Once it was apparent that the pilot was successful the district moved forward to expand the program, and by the start of the 2017 school year every student had a Chromebook that they could take home during the school year.

Just as in the tech world, however, immediate success is never a guarantee, but McCormick says he's okay with that. To fail is simply another opportunity to learn and grow. What's important is that a collective responsibility for district outcomes is established, and that stakeholders are a part of decision-making.

"We're really trying to create a culture of innovation in Val Verde USD, and with that comes a different view of failure. It's just part of the process," he says. "Once we get into motion and experience those little challenges or failures, we learn from those, adjust quickly and move on."

"When people feel they have agency or ownership over



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something, they're inspired to share their best work, and that's what we're shooting for," McCormick explains. "It's a culture of collaboration. If we're all willing to share our best ideas then all ships rise, and we create a better educational experience for all students."

Those efforts are paying off. Val Verde USD has been recognized as one of the top districts in California succeeding at closing the achievement gap among African American and Hispanic students by both Education Trust West and the Leadership Policy Institute.

Such outcomes are no surprise to those who have worked with McCormick. Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—a longtime partner of Val Verde USD in its goal to improve student attendance—says the district's drive to reduce chronic absenteeism has paid off across all student groups.

"Actions speak louder than words, as the saying goes, and Superintendent McCormick is someone who lives by those words and has the results to show for it," Cook says. "In our seven years working with Val Verde we have watched as not only student attendance increased, but also student achievement—largely as a result of actions taken by Superintendent McCormick in his pursuit of continuous improvement."

McCormick is proud of all the progress that's been made in Val Verde, but never one to settle for less than perfect, he says the district will continue to strive for even better outcomes for kids and look to incorporate best practices from other districts and organizations.

"We like to say around here that we're excited, but never satisfied," he explains. "We want to celebrate the successes as they come but we're constantly trying to figure out how to get better, and it's that whole spirit of continuous improvement."