

It's about helping schools work together—but “each in their own environment”

By Ed Goldman | October 3, 2019

For Dr. Paul Hillyer, an educator for more than four decades and the Superintendent of Klamath Falls City Schools in Oregon, “Leadership is the ability to problem-solve and think of solutions that may not have been obvious. We also have to respect that while we want all of our district’s schools to work together, each has a particular, unique environment.” The unifying factor, Dr. Hillyer says, is pretty basic, though: “We can all, always, do better: teachers, students and administrators. Focusing on continuous improvement and strategic planning has formed the foundation of my leadership here,” he adds.



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Klamath Falls City Schools has a motto that’s also a mission statement: “100 percent graduation is the expectation!” Note the word “expectation.” It signifies that when it comes to improving the lives of its 3,000 K-12 students, “the district focuses on getting there, not just hoping to,” Dr. Hillyer says.

A soft-spoken man who says that as a young man wasn’t even sure he’d go into education, he spent some time traveling in Europe and Asia before deciding—“most definitively,” he says—that he “simply had to do something with my life that would allow me to leave something of lasting value. I have a strong belief we’re here for a purpose—and mine is to help as many young people as I can to find their own reason for living.”

Dr. Hillyer says his district has two main approaches, “Helping students do their best work and helping them become their best selves. This is our vision statement and the foundation of all our goals.”

One way of putting his plan into action, is by focusing on kids whose parents may be immigrants who don’t necessarily speak English and show them how to organize

themselves to become successful. It’s a matter of taking this special cohort of disadvantaged kids to change from a fixed mindset of ‘I’ll never get better at learning and my life will never be better than my parents’ lives’ to a growth mindset—of setting goals and seeing them through.”

For the past six years, Klamath Falls City Schools has participated in the AVID program, Dr. Hillyer says, “which is a national program designed to help disadvantaged students go on to obtain things their parents couldn’t.” AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination.

He also recognizes the “very real necessity of students showing up for class” in order “to develop responsible habits that will last all of their lives”—and says he’s been very pleased that after just one year of using the Attention2Attendance software-and-service program from School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A), “we’ve seen an 8 percent improvement in attendance. That’s a big uptick.”

“We’re delighted by Klamath Falls’ outcomes,” says Susan Cook, Chief Operating Officer of the national SI&A, based in the Sierra Foothills. “Leaders like Dr. Hillyer, who constantly try to take their districts to the next level and beyond inspire us. They’re why we built The Achievement Initiative on a continuous improvement model—to give education professionals additional tools and processes that ensure ongoing success.”

Dr. Hillyer and Janie, his wife of 41 years and a former special-education teacher, have five sons ranging in age from 24 to 39 years old. Asked if any of them is in the education field, Dr. Hillyer smiles and says, “Our oldest is a college professor. I think the others saw my little gray hairs forming over the years and thought better of it as a career.”