

# Students succeed when leadership creates strong relationships

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If there's one thing sports and education have in common, it's the need for everyone to work together in unison toward a common goal.

In his nearly three decades of experience in education, Grant Bennett, Superintendent of Perris Union High School District, says one of his greatest takeaways in how to be a strong leader is the importance of fostering teamwork at every level.

"I've taken a lot of what I've learned coaching baseball when building that team-atmosphere in our schools," Bennett explains. "We all have to work together for the betterment of our students and our community. You can put the best game plan together but if you look behind you and no one is following you then you're not leading—to be a strong leader you need to be able to work with people."

Bennett has been part of his local chamber of commerce since 2000. He's also a member of the town rotary club. He has worked closely with the Mayor and local business leaders to ensure his students have the best opportunities to thrive as they develop college- and career-related skills.

At the same time, it's not uncommon to find him pitching in to help the custodians clean up a room prior to holding a meeting. And cooking up breakfast for his teaching staff or hosting employee recognition parties is just part of the job.

"I don't think I'm here in the ivory tower," Bennett says. "I'm hands on, and I think that came from the fact that I wasn't always in education."

Bennett says that after graduating high school, he attended college for just over a semester before dropping out because he simply wasn't ready. But the eight years he spent as a fry cook prior to going back and earning his degree helped shape his outlook in two ways. First, he's not afraid to get his hands dirty. And second, he understands that it takes every cog working in the machine to produce the best product.



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Grant Bennett, Superintendent

Which, in this case, is educated and highly-qualified students who are prepared for a future after graduation.

"I think that having that experience working outside the classroom and outside of education helped give me a great perspective," he says. "It's like, yeah I'm the boss, but I'm not all that."

To those who have worked alongside Bennett to improve student outcomes, however, he is the kind of person who is absolutely 'all that.'

About 10 years ago, Bennett partnered with School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to implement an early warning and intervention system that tracks student attendance and sends letters home to families when their child

is trending toward becoming chronically absent.

After adopting The Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A), the district saw such tremendous growth in its attendance rates that it was officially honored by the state of California for the improvement.

"Superintendent Bennett's background as a coach clearly informs his leadership practices," says Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A. "As a coach, he understood the value of inspiring the team to be committed to a single purpose. As Superintendent, Bennett leads the same way—connecting with, developing, inspiring and empowering others to achieve a common goal—improving student achievement." Cook added, "What may be subtle but critical to successful leaders like Superintendent Bennett, is the recognition that 'leadership is not about them but about those they serve. It is not about exalting themselves but about lifting others up.'"

Bennett notes that it's the strength of the relationships he's developed in his district that keeps moral high and the team focused on student achievement.

"How we treat each other is how the whole organization is going to be," he says.