

Collaborative Leadership: Dr. Adam Clark's Not-So-Secret Weapons to Win the Battle for Achievement and Attendance

By Ed Goldman

“We have about a 91 percent attendance rate here,” says Dr. Adam Clark, superintendent of the Vallejo City Unified School District, “and that may sound okay—until you realize it means that on any given day, 1,000 students are absent.” In a district of 12,500 students in 22 different schools, “that’s not acceptable.”

Dr. Clark has been with Vallejo, which has approximately 1,300 employees with 100 of those working in the district’s office, for a year. Besides his solid background in education, he brings something extra to his current post.

“Leading-edge innovators like Dr. Clark are generous both in shaping and sharing their vision,” explains Meredith Baker, vice president of sales for School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A), the national education software-and-services firm based in California’s Sierra Foothills. That vision has included Dr. Clark’s going “all-in” to reverse his district’s absenteeism by partnering with SI&A’s Achievement Initiative, which is powered by its signature software and services solution, Attention2Attendance (A2A).

“My goal when I came to Vallejo was to make sure everyone was behind A2A,” Dr. Clark says. And when he says “everyone,” he means it. After Dr. Clark requested and received feedback from his expansive group of stakeholders about A2A, he took steps to ensure that those individuals—“parents, students, teachers, the community and our classified staff”—embraced the program’s mission and possibilities.

“It is not an accident that innovative superintendents, like Dr. Clark, understand the value of The Achievement Initiative,” said Mrs. Baker. “Our product was designed around the five practices of effective leaders as outlined by Kouzes and Posner: Inspiring, enabling, encouraging, modeling and challenging. When we met Dr. Clark, we knew that he would embrace our vision of creating a culture of achievement by starting with creating a culture of showing up.”



Photo: Dr. Clark (center) at Vallejo City Unified School District

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Clark says his leadership theories are inspired “again and again” by authors Anthony Muhammad and Richard DuFour, both nationally recognized for their visions on educating educators.

“The whole principle behind professional learning communities,” says Dr. Clark, “can be boiled down to: ‘What do we want our students to learn? What do we do once they learn it? And what do we do if they don’t learn it or simply can’t learn it?’

“We need to provide individualized interventions with students who just aren’t getting

it,” he continues. “Everyone needs something a little different. You design the intervention, collect data, work together and replace ambiguity with facts. Of course, none of this matters if students aren’t present.”

Asked if he thinks leadership can be taught or comes with a person’s hardwiring, Dr. Clark pulls no punches. “Let’s say you’re a teacher and you already have a commitment to teaching,” he says. “We can teach you the skills you need to tap into that commitment. But we can’t create the fire—the commitment that needs to burn in you.

“The same goes for leadership,” he says. “If you’re not centered in your commitment to lead but you just go through the motions, people will see you as a weak leader—in essence because they’ll see through you.”

Asked what sort of leader he considers himself, Dr. Clark says, “A transformational one, I hope. I need to know that I can build leadership capacity in those around me so they’ll develop their own ideas—and if necessary, challenge the system and do things their way.”

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