

Improving student outcomes requires leadership and data

February 6, 2019

Each year, hundreds—sometimes thousands—of books are published touting how one can become a better, more effective leader. But Dr. Gerald Hudson, Superintendent of Cedar Hill Independent School District, poses just one question: What if it really isn't that hard?

"We make leadership complicated when it really shouldn't be, and we make it complicated because we make it something that it's not," Dr. Hudson says. "It all comes down to empowering others. It's about knowing your people, and knowing how to get the best out of each person—because everyone needs something different."

In his nearly 15 years in school administration, Hudson says he's found the key to empowerment is ensuring that everyone understands what is expected of them.

To be a good leader you need to set your expectations and make sure that everyone else understands those expectations, as well as their roles and responsibilities, and how their progress will be measured, he explains.

Collecting and breaking down the data measuring if expectations have been met is vital, according to Hudson, because when it comes to children and their futures, he needs tangible proof that they are receiving the best education possible.

"I don't want to have to guess if students are making progress, I want to have the data points to tell me if a kid is reading on grade-level, for instance, or showing up to class every day," Dr. Hudson explained. "I believe in metrics—there has to be some way for you to measure your progress. If we don't have measurable things that we can see, it's hard for people to tell if we're making definitive progress."

As a Superintendent, Dr. Hudson has always pushed to make sure the teachers and administrators in his district have access to more useful data as they move toward meeting their goals.



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Just last year, while with Jasper ISD, he partnered with School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to implement The Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A), an early warning and intervention system which tracks student attendance and sends letters home to families when their child is trending toward becoming chronically absent.

With A2A, administrators can see how much school a child is missing, but more importantly, they can drill down to see specifically which classes a student isn't present. If a high school student has good attendance overall but skips Algebra II a few times each week, for instance, school officials can reach out to identify why that's the case and get the child back on track.

"Perhaps, as Dr. Hudson suggested, leadership should not be hard," Susan

Cook, COO and Leadership Coach, at SI&A says. "But I'd say he is being modest. Dr. Hudson's leadership style goes beyond skills and embodies what truly separates good leaders: knowing your people, having empathy, empowering others, and having a clear vision and being able to communicate it."

"The Achievement Initiative was developed with leaders like Dr. Hudson in mind," Cook says. "Having a visionary at the helm who understands the importance of having up-to-date, reliable data to improve student outcomes is vital if districts want to achieve their goals."

Dr. Hudson says in some cases, the data will show that progress has been made. Other times, it'll show where changes need to be made.

"As a leader, my job is to manage our district's vision and help the people to see that vision, and understand the goals to help us get to where we want to be," Dr. Hudson explains. "If I look at the data and find some intervention isn't giving me the best bang for my buck I can change the intervention, but our goals remain the same."