

Superintendent pushes for better student outcomes with help of data and self-improvement

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It was Confucius who said that the noblest way we may learn wisdom is through reflection. Though he may blush at such a description, it's fair to say that Rich Merlo, Superintendent of Corcoran Unified School District, is well on the path to becoming a wiser leader each day.

Now in his 15th year as Superintendent of the roughly 3,500-student district, Merlo says he is flexible, trusting of others and highly cooperative—sometimes to a fault.

"I am flexible but what I've had to do is learn to have more resolve," Merlo explains. "So there's some things where flexibility is okay, and other things that you just can't cave in on, because we have to grow and we have to get better. We owe our kids that and we owe ourselves that."

Through constant self-reflection, Merlo has become better able to draw lines between when being laid back can help put staff at ease and open lines of communication, for instance, and when it can lead to allowing too much leeway in an effort to keep from rocking the boat.

"There were things that we used to just let go, and that became our culture," he says. "And that's something that over time is going to affect the classroom—it's eventually going to affect the kids."

Merlo remembers his wake-up call clearly. Graduation rates in Corcoran USD were low, dropout rates were unacceptably high, and Merlo says he realized that changes needed to be made to ensure students were getting the most out of their education.

"I want to know in real time how kids are doing, and I haven't always been insistent enough on that," he explains. "If you start to let things slide, kids are going to start failing, and that's something that takes a long time to recover from."

The good news is that his continued efforts to turn weaknesses into strengths has begun to pay off.



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By the end of the 2017-18 school year, the district had a graduation rate of 96 percent—up from just 73 percent in 2013-14. And dropout rates plummeted from a nearly 24 percent, to just 2 percent in 2017-18.

In an effort to guarantee he'd have the most up-to-date data, Merlo partnered with School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to implement the Achievement Initiative. The Initiative includes Attention2Attendance (A2A)—an early warning and intervention system tracks student attendance—as well as a host of other programs aimed at providing real time student data to school officials.

"When you reach the top of an organization, feedback is hard to come by," says

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A. "Leaders who excel figure out various ways to understand what is occurring in their organization. Kouzes and Posner, co-authors of *The Leadership Challenge*, indicate that self-awareness and self-management are absolutely essential to authentic leadership. Effective leaders, like Superintendent Merlo, have figured out the importance of looking in the mirror and deciding what they can do to make their organization function better. Self-awareness and data are both winning strategies for impactful leadership."

Merlo says he is always asking himself if he's making overall decisions that are right for the kids in his schools. Especially in smaller districts like Corcoran USD, it's so important that decision makers can see the forest for the trees, he explains.

To keep himself on track, Merlo says he's actively involved with a couple different networks of other superintendents who "are constantly self-reflecting and holding each other accountable, and also challenging and learning from one another."

"That's been a big part of my own personal and professional development," Merlo says.