

# Leading the way by modeling good behavior puts Arvin schools on path forward

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**D**o as I say, not as I do' may be a common refrain in some circles, but for Georgia Rhett, Superintendent of Arvin Union School District, it's the antithesis to running a school system built on transparency, teamwork, and consistency.

"Those are traits that we have all agreed we're going to live by in Arvin," Rhett explains. "If I'm going to be the leader, how am I going to expect someone else to do those things if I don't make it the way I live? If our vision is to behave with trust, transparency, and consistency, then I have to consistently improve modeling the way."

In her 30 years at the district, Rhett says she has watched the community grow from a small, rural community into a more populated—though still small when compared to others—region with just over 3,000 students.

Yet even as the area becomes busier, she said the schools have remained tightly knit, largely due to the strong communication and relationships between teachers and administrators at the three elementary schools and the middle school.

Still, as a small school district, Rhett and her staff must often juggle more tasks than their counterparts in larger districts. For instance, when a staff member came back from sick leave swamped with work, Rhett and others stepped up to help them complete their tasks—in addition to completing their own.

"It's a small district, so we all pick up little pieces and put them together so stuff gets done on any given day," she says. "We're in this together. And as superintendent you need to see your job as being part of the work."

Also important, she notes, is holding yourself accountable. When it comes to building a culture of transparency, for example, it's important to re-evaluate and realize you may have dropped the ball and identify ways in which to improve.



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Georgia Rhett, Superintendent

Instead of making decisions at the top and expecting everyone to be on board, Rhett says she tries to take care in sitting down with everybody and letting folks at the school-level be a part of the discussion.

When holding transparent discussions about the district's budget, she gives as an example, you can't just say 'we have a budget and here's what we're spending it on.' Instead, it's important to explain what the budget is, and seek out what school sites need, their goals, and then determine how money can be spent to best address them.

That type of decision-making is how Arvin Union came to determine that it needed help improving student attendance before it could

boost academic outcomes. The district partnered with School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to implement the Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A).

The early warning and intervention system tracks student attendance and sends letters home to families when their child is trending toward becoming chronically absent—opening up yet another form of communication between Rhett and members of the school community.

"I couldn't agree more with Superintendent Rhett," says Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A. "Credibility is central to leadership. 'I can't hear what you say, what you do speaks too loudly' is the refrain that values-based leaders implicitly understand."

That sort of values-based open communication and teamwork is something Rhett says she is always working to perfect, and it appears that practice is paying off.

Whereas individual school sites were once so competitive about beating one another's test scores that they were hesitant to share information with each other, Rhett says everyone has been really working hard to share insights as to what's working and to emphasize how all of the sites are on the same side: the students'.