

Cultivating parent engagement and school climate through collaboration

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After a nearly 40-year career in education working in positions ranging from an instructional aide to a district superintendent, Dr. Eric Andrew continues to take one of the most important lessons he'd learned to heart.

No leader should rely solely on themselves.

"There's a saying that 'the smartest person in the room is the room,'" says Dr. Andrew, former superintendent of Campbell Union School District. "I really believe in being a collaborative leader because no one person has all the ideas—it's important to get the voices of everyone involved in the decision-making process. And the more ideas you get, the better the decision you can make."

Though he admits he didn't coin the phrase, he says that acknowledging the passions, experiences and thoughts of those around him has strengthened his relationships with stakeholders—whether that be parents, community members, or classroom teachers.

This is especially true when it comes to his efforts to improve "school climate" districtwide. School climate refers to the values, expectations, interpersonal relationships, supports, and practices that foster a welcoming, inclusive, and academically challenging environment. Creating a positive school climate requires the people in the school community to feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe, supported, connected to the school, and engaged in learning and teaching.

To accomplish that, Dr. Andrew says it's vital that everyone involved in the discussion feel they were listened to and understood—even if the final decision made didn't fully reflect their own ideas.

"I think the most important aspect of collaboration is that when you're going into a discussion, you inform everyone who you are seeking ideas from of how the decision will be made," he explains.

This may mean saying that while you're seeking out as many perspectives as possible to make the best decision, you will still make the final choice. Or it may be that a decision will be made by coming to a collaborative solution.



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"As long as everyone comes in knowing how the decision is going to be made, you get more authenticity from those willing to speak because they know how their contributions will affect the ultimate decision," Dr. Andrew says.

Strong community collaborative efforts over his career were always made with the goal of improving the learning experiences of students in his district, he explains.

In one case, that involved bringing in implicit bias training for educators—something that would help teachers and school administrators examine the opinions and expectations they may have of students based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Implicit bias has been highlighted in recent years as a major factor in the disproportional suspension and expulsion rates between students of color and their white peers, as well as STEM participation between boys and girls.

Another decision was to improve student attendance by implementing The Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A). The program, developed by School Innovations & Achievement (SIA), is 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.

"What's compelling is Dr. Andrew's understanding of the nuanced difference between collaboration and consensus," says Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach. "Often times, these are considered the same thing yet they are worlds apart."

"Consensus is a momentum killer; it implies that everyone has to agree with the decision. Typically, nothing happens when everyone has to agree," says Cook. "On the other hand, true collaboration is a force multiplier; it recognizes the importance of each stakeholder's contribution towards a solution. Dr. Andrew clearly understands that 'none of us is as smart as all of us.'"

Regardless of his position, Dr. Andrew says he has always seen himself as a teacher first.

"I believe in the power of the classroom," he says, "and that in all decision-making, regardless of your role, you need to be cognizant of what happens in the classroom on a regular basis."