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.