

# Student voices are the key to continuous improvement for district leaders

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If you're a student, parent, staff member, or member of the general community surrounding Palm Springs Unified School District, Sandra Lyon wants you to know her face.

As Superintendent of Palm Springs USD, Lyon says that more importantly, she wants you to know you have her ear.

"I visit schools every week; I meet with our union reps; we try to really connect with staff and community members; and we meet with parent leaders from across the district—there are lots of different ways to get out there and listen," Lyon says. "One-way communication may be easier, but it doesn't really contribute to a culture of continuous improvement. You have to be about listening to what people are saying.

"I'm very collaborative," she explains. "I believe it's always better to have more heads in the room than one, and I believe in having a team atmosphere."

That's not to say building that level of cooperation is a simple process. Palm Springs USD has 27 campuses that cover an enormous geographic area. But Lyon says it's important, if one is to lead a large district, to get out and get genuine input from all stakeholders—and that includes the students.

Next year will be her 32nd year in education, and according to Lyon, it's important to realize the students of today are not the same as the students of three decades ago.

"Their lives are dramatically different," she explains. "And yet we keep trying to do the things that worked 30 years ago without really looking at data and analyzing what is and isn't working to determine what we could be doing instead."

In addition to administering annual surveys, Lyon says she enjoys going out to the district high schools to meet with groups of students every year. Doing so gives her the chance not only to ask follow-up questions, but to



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Dr. Sandra Lyon, Superintendent

see the collective responses among students, as well as their body language.

In general, Lyon says it's easy to get into the habit of doing things the way they've always been done, but that sometimes kids have great input or good ideas about why something is or isn't working.

"Students are the end user, aren't they?" she asks. "We care a lot about what parents want from us, and what our staff members want, or often what we want for ourselves as leaders—but if it's not meeting student needs then it's something we need to take a look at. The students tell me truly and honestly what's working and what isn't, so it's really valuable time."

Such meetings have led to actual changes in the district. For instance, Lyon says officials had worked so actively to ensure all students in the community had access to technology that students she met with said it was overwhelming. While students are seemingly always on their phones and using social media, Lyon says it turns out that doesn't necessarily mean kids want to trade paper and pencils for the electronic workbook for their English Language Arts class.

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—which partners with the district to improve student attendance—says Dr. Lyon knows an important component necessary to creating a culture of continuous improvement is to engage those who are involved in the work because they not only know the problems, but they know the solutions. All you have to do is ask.

"Leaders like Dr. Lyon that adopt a continuous improvement model foster true collaboration that actively involves others," Cook says. "She is an effective communicator who tunes-in to what her staff and students are saying, both verbally and nonverbally. By strengthening others, she makes them feel capable and powerful, and ultimately enables them to act."