

Believing in “Excellence in Education. Every Student. Every Day.”

By Ed Goldman | September 25, 2019

It's not as though Dr. Mary Westendorf began her job as superintendent of the Fruitvale School District in Bakersfield, California, as the new kid on the block. In fact, she first served as the district's assistant superintendent in 2008, then as superintendent since 2012—and has now worked for the district for 34 years, beginning as a teacher in 1985.

She was also there at creation: the first principal of what became Fruitvale's multiple award-winning Discovery School when it opened in 1991.

Size wise, Fruitvale has four elementary schools as well as a junior high school.

Its 3,250 students are often seen earning top-notch Kern County CAASPP scores—in a county of 41 school districts, this is notable—and are apparently the kids to beat at oral language festivals, math and history field days, and even good old-fashioned spelling bees. So what's the secret of this lifelong educator's leadership approach?

“Collaboration,” she says without missing a beat one recent afternoon.

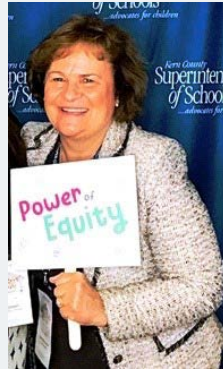
“Now, we've certainly refined it over the years—and I imagine, after all these years, my own leadership style has adapted. The world changes.”

Dr. Westendorf says one of the most important things she does is “participate in all of the hiring interviews to find the very best people for all of our certificated positions. There are some things as a leader you don't ever delegate—and one of them is creating your own team and knowing the people you'll be comfortable working with. That doesn't mean they have to always agree with me. It just means we all share the same goal, of education excellence and opportunities for young people who never thought they'd have them.”

Seven percent of Fruitvale District's students are “English language learners, who we are trying to front-load with good strategies to help them be successful with their grade level curriculum,” Dr. Westendorf says. “Seven

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Dr. Mary Westendorf,
Superintendent



percent may sound like a relatively low number because many districts in Kern County have much higher percentages.” To give you an idea of Fruitvale's demographic profile, the superintendent says that “about 21 different languages are spoken in our district.”

“This situation is true in many of the districts with which we work, in several different states,” says Susan

Cook, chief operating officer of School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A), who spearheads the company's Achievement Initiative, a program focused on increasing student attendance and learning time. “Clearly Dr. Westendorf understands the importance of communication in collaboration. It's a fact that informed parents make better decisions for their children, so by sending her communications to students in their home language, Dr. Westendorf is ensuring that her message is understood. This country's always been a melting pot—helping kids from a host of cultures to succeed in school helps them succeed in life.”

Dr. Westendorf says that Fruitvale is just starting to use SI&A's signature software-and-service program, Attention2Attendance “because we've talked to our neighboring districts and they've all seen wonderful results in getting kids back into the classroom.” She says that with growing enrollment in preschool through grade 8 and the district's commitment to striving for excellence in its programs for students, “the time to emphasize attendance has never been more appropriate.”

Fruitvale takes a multi-tiered approach to learning, Dr. Westendorf says. “We recognize that not everyone is in the same situation, and we feel we have a moral obligation and a social responsibility to ensure that all of our students are given the opportunity to learn.”

She points out that her father came to the United States at the age of 30 as an Irish immigrant “and had little education.” Working as a cattle buyer, he vowed that all of his six children would get a college education. “And all of us did,” Dr. Westendorf says proudly.