

There's light at the end of the tunnel, and students are reaping the benefits

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Now four years into his stint as superintendent of Greenville Independent School District, Dr. Demetrus Liggins says his schools are coming out on the other side of what was a fraught couple of years.

Dr. Liggins inherited a multi-million dollar budget deficit upon starting the job in the 2016-17 school year, and some campuses were struggling academically.

"It was pretty devastating for our district," Dr. Liggins says. "We had to make some tough decisions about program cuts and staff layoffs."

With those judgments looming, Dr. Liggins says teams were created in which he could work with school and district leaders to come up with a plan. There was a good amount of reflection, he explains, and each decision was a balancing act.

It was vital that we made sure to not get rid of everything that attracted kids to school, Dr. Liggins says. And it took a toll. For instance, even though kids enjoyed taking it, the district cut German language classes because it was high in cost and low in student enrollment.

At the same time, new instructional programs were implemented and assessments based on state standards were streamlined and made uniform across classrooms.

Those tough choices have paid off.

For the first time in the history of the district, Greenville ISD earned a B letter grade through Texas' school accountability grading system, according to Dr. Liggins. The district followed by receiving an even higher B grade the next year.

Additionally, district officials just passed a surplus budget, as well as a 9 percent raise for its teachers—all while maintaining a healthy savings account.

"We're going in the right direction," Dr. Liggins says. "It took a lot of hard work and took a lot of change. We've been quite the turnaround story."

Although the changes weren't easy, they allowed the



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Dr. Demetrus Liggins, Superintendent

district to get its financial house in order, Dr. Liggins said. This fall, GISD received a "Superior" rating, the highest possible grade for financial management from the Texas Education Agency. It also has a healthy fund balance and received an exemplary annual audit that confirmed the right financial practices are in place. Many people had to come together to make this a reality.

"I love to collaborate when at all possible, because the biggest brain in the room is all of us put together," Dr. Liggins says. "I think that when people come together as a team, you will accomplish more as an organization. I like to make sure people can see the big picture, and see the vision even beyond what they thought it could be."

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—which recently partnered with Greenville ISD to help the district improve student attendance—says successful leaders, like Dr. Liggins, recognize that tough challenges create opportunities to build resilient teams.

"Resiliency is the ability to endure, bounce back, and even improve when faced with tough challenges," Cook says. "Dr. Liggins created a positive environment through an 'all hands-on deck' collaborative approach. He rallied the team together by inspiring a shared vision of what was possible for them."

Greenville ISD's vision "We educate today...you succeed tomorrow" speaks directly to the concept of setting children up for success in the long run, Dr. Liggins says.

"Students are always at the center of every single decision," Dr. Liggins says. "I often say I have a head for adults but a heart for kids, because I think, as a superintendent, you have to think of how your decisions will impact the adults in the school—whether it's about implementing a new program or the processes of getting things done. But ultimately, at the heart of what we do is the kids, and the things our kids have been able to do and accomplish has been nothing short of remarkable."