

# Students score big when creative control returns to the classroom

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**S**anta Rita Union School District ended last year strong, and from the classroom to the district office, officials say they are already building upon changes made last year to further benefit students and staff alike.

“Right now in Santa Rita we’re taking an approach as a district where we’re trying anything and everything,” says Superintendent Tim Ryan. “We’re not going to do things the same way and expect different results. It’s about changing culture.”

One of the ways in which the district is moving forward is by bringing back creativity and autonomy that allows educators to teach to the best of their abilities. According to Ryan, just as every child learns differently, all teachers also teach differently.

By maintaining a ridged system requiring teachers to fit into the same box, the district was limiting them and their skill set, Ryan said. Instead, educators are now being encouraged to explore the passion that drew them to the teaching profession in the first place, and it is already paying off.

In the few short months that Santa Rita made the shift from the “one size fits all” pedagogical system to encouraging teachers to teach with creativity and passion, scores jumped from 37 percent proficiency to 40 percent. Ryan attributes this growth to well-run school sites and trust among colleagues.

“You have to unleash people’s creativity and unleash each teacher’s ability to be organic and connect in the classroom,” Ryan says. “You have to trust your principals to lead at their school site; you have to trust teachers in the classroom; and you have to trust each other that you’ll be there to pick each other up and dust each other off and encourage each other when it doesn’t work, and go from there.”

Though the reforms he helped usher in are helping children in Santa Rita USD, Ryan says that it would be disingenuous to say he is here solely for the kids consider-



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Timothy Ryan, Superintendent

ing he hasn’t been a classroom teacher for 12 years. Instead, he is here for the people who are directly here for kids.

“I’m here for the custodian who is mowing grass before I get out of bed; I’m here for the bus driver who is out picking up kids before I have breakfast; I’m here for the teachers, and the cafeteria workers, and the aides, and the principals,” Ryan explains. “That’s who I’m here for. And then they are here for the kids.”

In an effort to ensure that those who are here for the students see all children in their seats each day, Ryan recently partnered with School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) to implement The Achievement Initiative featuring Attention2Attendance (A2A). The program is an early warning and intervention system which tracks student attendance and sends letters home to families in a timely manner when their child is trending toward becoming chronically absent.

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at SI&A says everyone in an organization wants to feel like they are contributing to the vision. An important facet that allows leaders to accomplish this is to empower their employees. In fact, studies have proven that empowering employees has a measurable positive impact on the organization, as well as the individual.

“Great leaders like Ryan, empower others by allowing autonomy. Ryan’s leadership approach—to encourage and cultivate the creativity, ideas, passions, and individual talents of others—is an effective method for engagement,” Cook says. “It’s no wonder Santa Rita is seeing a payoff.”

With the new school year now in full swing, Ryan says everyone in the district is feeling enthusiastic about the future.

“Everybody is very excited for this school year,” Ryan says. “Keep an eye on Santa Rita USD, because we’re going somewhere.”