

COMMENTARY: Tipping the scale for struggling district’s students

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I recently decided to take my adopted son on a cruise to celebrate the birth of our new family. As I’ve tried to shed a few pounds for our vacation, I’ve realized my weight struggles are not unlike the challenges I faced when I entered Beverly City School District as the new superintendent six years ago.



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When I first stepped on the scale, a dismal number stared back at me. I had a choice to give up or I could be honest about the contributing factors and make some changes. In Beverly City in 2012, we had dismal proficiency rates in reading and math, and no significant progress to report over time. It was time we also took an honest look at the factors contributing to our challenges.

As I sought the advice of a nutritionist, the Beverly Board of Education afforded me the assistance of a director of curriculum. We wrote new curricula, bought resources, equipped each class with computers and Smartboards, and departmentalized the middle school utilizing highly qualified teachers. However, change takes time. In 2015, our scores showed little improvement. We needed more help.

While I know I can get thinner in the kitchen, I also need to get fit at the gym – so I started working with a trainer. In 2015, Beverly was assigned a “trainer,” the state Regional Achievement Center. With more eyes on the data, we implemented our own “monthly weigh-ins” – having teachers implement baseline and benchmark assessments to provide real-time information. We guided them to use this data to modify instruction to student needs.

I set a lofty goal to drop weight, and we set lofty goals for our faculty. We used the state evaluation system to celebrate teachers and ensure the best educators are teaching our kids. We won a tenure case and created plans to support the improvement of several teachers to best serve students. We challenged teachers to set goals with a minimum of 1.5 years’ student growth in approximately eight months’ time. Every person was accountable. All teachers, regardless of subject matter, had reading comprehension and math goals, which were linked to my merit goals. Like my trainer and me, we were in this together.

One of the most helpful tools in my weight loss journey is an app where I log my food and others can view my progress. Critics of state data systems like edConnect and assessments like PARCC are concerned with the state being able to “see” what they are doing. At Beverly, we say the more eyes on the data the better. As a scale quantifies my gains and losses, we view PARCC as one important barometer by which we gauge our success.

We run a no-secrets school district. As I can’t hide when I choose to indulge in a decadent dessert with my food tracking app, edConnect reveals trends, weaknesses and deficiencies. It also forces action. And if the state is concerned with our data, we invite them to help us – which they did, and look at our results! From 2015 to 2017, our percentages of students at or above grade level nearly doubled. We exited “Focus” status and were recently invited to share our incredible progress with the State Board of Education.

While I am proud of my weight loss to date, I still have more work to do. Likewise, I am very proud of the faculty and students who are rising to the challenge of high expectations – not “stepping off the scale, but instead defying the naysayers.

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