

Superintendent Michael Novotny leans on his vast experience to elevate students toward success

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With decades of experience in education, Salado Independent School District Superintendent Dr. Michael Novotny is an educational leader who strikes the balance between uplifting the voices of those around him, and drawing on his own seasoned perspective to elevate students towards success.

Dr. Novotny started his career as a special education teacher assistant and cross country and track coach. He then worked as a special education teacher, special education coordinator, assistant principal, principal and now superintendent, which he has served as for the past 17 years across two districts.

His perspective on leadership has been distinctly shaped by the various hats he has worn and vastly different districts he has served – from a district as large as Plano Independent School District, with 54,000 students, to one as small as Moulton Independent School District, with just 300 students total.

Dr. Novotny has dedicated the past 14 years to Salado Independent School District, which falls right in the Goldilocks zone – not too big, not too small. Each district has posed its own unique challenges and lessons learned. However, across all roles and environments, Dr. Novotny has found that there is one consistent element crucial to successful leadership – collaboration with his team and community, which is a staple in guiding his decision-making.

“You surround yourself with people that do a great job and are very knowledgeable and hardworking,” Dr. Novotny said. “It’s not about me making all the decisions. It’s about me facilitating those decisions, in a collaborative manner with all of the other experts in these different areas. Not only do we get a better decision as a result of that collaboration, but there’s more buy in from those participating as well.”

At the core of every decision is student success, whatever



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Superintendent

er it may take to get there. As superintendent, Dr. Novotny will step in wherever there is a need – a lesson he learned working in his smallest school district, where every educator took on various tasks to ensure students had what they needed to thrive.

One of the things he loves most about supporting the students of Salado ISD is that, as a bigger district with more resources, the district is able to host a wide array of opportunities for students to get involved – whether that be sports, foreign languages, academic opportunities or fine arts. It’s those extra opportunities that help encourage student engagement and provide them chances to learn and grow beyond the classroom.

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Over the past six years, the voters in Salado ISD have approved \$320 million in bond funding for the district to build a new elementary school, middle school, high school, and athletic facilities to meet the needs of their growing community.

One of the cornerstones in propelling students towards success is getting them in the classroom in the first place, so they can take advantage of all the resources and opportunities the schools provide. This is especially essential considering Salado ISD is in Texas, where state funding is directly tied to student attendance, making it even more difficult to build the right learning environment for kids if there is a track record of students not making it to class.

Creating a strong culture of attendance has become more difficult in the wake of the pandemic and the transition to online learning that followed. Dr. Novotny noticed a shift in the culture regarding the value parents and students alike placed on making it to school.

“There's a difference in attitudes now towards attendance at schools,” Dr. Novotny said. “People don't feel it is as much of a priority as it was prior to the experience of getting to stay home. Which is unfortunate, because anytime a student is out of school, they're missing out on that learning opportunity, and we're missing out on school funding as well.”

To tackle the culture around attendance, Salado ISD has partnered with SchoolStatus this year to utilize the software solution Attend, designed to help districts identify and tackle attendance issues early, and communicate to families the importance of getting students to school consistently. What seems like a few days here and there adds up, and creates learning gaps that can leave students feeling disengaged and discouraged regarding their academic future.

“We have lots of opportunities during the year to take a family vacation. Take your vacation during fall break, Thanksgiving break, Christmas break, spring break or summer break instead of when school is in session,” Dr. Novotny said. “We need to emphasize the importance of good attendance.”