

# Empowering schools to better help students

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**M**onterey, California is home to Pebble Beach and the backdrop of HBO's hit *Big Little Lies*, but Dr. PK Diffenbaugh—Superintendent of Monterey Peninsula Unified School District—wants the area to one day be known for having one of the finest school systems in the country.

Behind the scenes of the tourist haven are the cooks, and the cleaners, and the restaurant workers who fuel the industry. Those are the families served by Monterey Peninsula USD, where the cost of living is significantly higher than the state average.

"I think a lot of our parents are struggling to get by," explains Dr. Diffenbaugh, noting that the region's reputation of wealth means many assume the district is well off as well. "When you dig a little deeper you see we have the same challenges as other districts throughout the state, and we need to come up with creative solutions."

When Dr. Diffenbaugh took on the role of superintendent in 2014 he was the seventh superintendent in 10 years. There was a significant amount of rebuilding trust, relationships, confidence, and belief in the school system that had to happen, he says. And while there's still a ways to go, Dr. Diffenbaugh is proud of the progress that has already been made.

In the last five years, suspension rates have decreased, college and career pathway offerings have expanded, more children are enrolling in preschool or transitional kindergarten, and now, all elementary students have access to music and art education.

Such results can be at least partially attributed to Dr. Diffenbaugh's approach to affecting positive change by ensuring everyone feels a connection to, and ownership of, their campus.



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Dr. PK Diffenbaugh, Superintendent

"Ultimately, a leader needs to empower those around them—it's about making others better as a result of your leadership," Dr. Diffenbaugh says. "I'm trying to empower and create collective ownership around a shared purpose. While I take responsibility for district outcomes, I know I can't manage what happens inside every classroom from the district office."

Collective ownership is important because people are more likely to engage in the difficult work of improving if there is a sense of ownership over that work, he says. And creating the kind of environment where that can happen takes trust.

"I believe in doing what we say and following through, communicating well and transparently—all that leads to building trust," Dr. Diffenbaugh explains. "Trust takes time and consistency, but it's essential to improvement."

Susan Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement—which recently partnered with Dr. Diffenbaugh to help the district improve student attendance and reduce high rates of chronic absenteeism—says Dr. Diffenbaugh is successfully creating a culture where everyone is empowered; everyone knows they play an integral role in achieving success.

"Dr. Diffenbaugh communicates a clear, compelling vision that inspires others to want to follow," Cook says. "Great leaders like Dr. Diffenbaugh not only make those around them better, they make those around them better when they aren't in the room."

"We understand we're far from where we need to be, and that we need to continue to improve every day in order to get there," he says. "And I think it takes consistent leadership over time to get the kind of results that we're going for."