

Laurel School District sets clear vision for students, educators



Laurel School District Superintendent Shawn Larrimore and team have led gains in student growth for three consecutive years

Once one of the lowest-performing school districts in Delaware, **Laurel School District** has been among the [state leaders in student growth](#) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics for three consecutive years.

While Laurel leaders cite several factors as contributing to such gains, connecting them all is strong leadership. That starts at the top with Superintendent Dr. Shawn Larrimore and includes the district- and building-level administrative teams he has built over the past three years.

“Our leadership team definitely has a vested interest in Laurel,” said Amy Handy, a seventh-grade reading enrichment teacher at **Laurel Middle School**. “In my 26 years of teaching experience, I have never experienced a leadership team who honestly believes that ALL students can achieve success when given the necessary tools.” (Related: This [video](#) highlighting Laurel’s work around educational justice.)

Larrimore himself is a Laurel success story. A native of the rural Sussex County town, he lived in many of the low-income housing units that many of Laurel's students reside in today. An All-State football player and captain for Laurel when the school won consecutive state championships in 1986 and 1987, he graduated from **Laurel High School** in 1988 before heading to Salisbury University (Md.) to pursue an education degree.

He started his career in the classroom teaching American literature at **Seaford Senior High School** and **Delmar High School** before taking administrative posts in Delmar as an assistant principal, principal and chief academic officer.

He came home to take Laurel's top job in April 2015. Along the way, he earned a master's degree and doctorate from Wilmington University.

Today his own children – seventh grader Delaney and 11th grader Colin – are students in the district, excelling in academics, athletics and extracurricular activities.

“Dr. Larrimore motivates us and allows us to have a shared purpose in meeting district goals. He provides us with a clear vision, which in turn makes us want to be successful,” said Gina Voges, a fourth grade ELA teacher at **Laurel Elementary School** who has worked in Laurel for 17 years. “I've always felt comfortable discussing with him various topics because he makes you feel that you are worth his time.

“That translates to my classroom because I feel supported. If I feel supported I know my students will feel supported by me,” she said. “A positive tone has been set in my classroom because Dr. Larrimore has set a positive tone with us. It's all about the trickle-down effect.”

Teachers and administrators alike talk about a changed culture in Laurel, one in which collaboration is key and success for every student is expected.

North Laurel Elementary Principal David Hudson said his school has made some important changes over the past year such as daily shared planning time for teachers (often called professional learning communities or PLCs), further implementation of Smarter interim assessments and collaboratively built common assessments in all grade levels. But he attributes his students' great gains to teachers "truly embodying what it means to collaborate.

"Our teachers listened to each other in an engaged, purposeful and meaningful way that I had not seen in my previous years," Hudson said. "We no longer talked about 'my successes' and 'your successes' but 'our success.'

Teachers celebrated each other and critiqued each other through peer observations and collaborative lesson planning and data analysis that truly went to another level."

Voges agreed, saying building relationships with students and colleagues had a big impact on students' improvement.

"Our students trusted us to lead them in the right direction. They knew our expectations and wanted to be the best. Working during PLC time with our colleagues allowed us to share, be on the same page, and build on our strengths as a team," she said.

And those expectations were set at the top.

"I feel the culture has changed now because we have a leader who truly is dedicated to making a difference in Laurel," Handy said. "He is a product of this community and school system and very proud of that.

"The expectations for all of the stakeholders are high in Laurel now, and there is no turning away from that," she said. "The morale is 100 percent better and I believe that is because the staff is trusting of the leadership."

Handy said Larrimore brought in a team of leaders who share his vision and mission for Laurel.

“They collectively got their heads together, studied our demographics and data. They developed a strategic plan that has proven to be effective,” she said.

☒ Larrimore and his team have been able to succeed because they have a supportive school board, whose members trust their academic expertise.

“As non-educators, our trust is with our superintendent, Dr. Larrimore. With his knowledge and experience, he has brought the Laurel School District the people and resources needed for our students to achieve and succeed,” Laurel Board of Education President Linda Wintjen said. “The school board is ecstatic with the results to date, and we look forward to the future accomplishments.”

Like the Laurel Board of Education, the district’s administrators and teachers are looking to the future as well. Laurel has made great growth, but its starting point was at the bottom of the state.

“The key for Laurel is not allowing ourselves to get distracted or comfortable with our current success, but rather embrace the culture of innovation and growth that has fueled our success over the last three years,” Assistant Superintendent Ashley Giska said. “We can continue to push our practices and expectations to a higher level by finding the best curriculum and resources for our students, building strong models for blended learning and RTI (Response to Intervention), and by continually supporting individual teacher growth and leadership.”

Dr. Rick Evans, newly appointed director of academic supports and former Laurel Middle School principal, said the district has developed and implemented strong systems and practices in the district.

“We have trained people on those systems and practices. We simply have to make sure we are doing what we say we are doing, and I have no doubt that we will have continued success,” he said.

Wintjen said the district now has strong community backing, which will support continued success.

“The community needs to believe in our district, and we need to give them good reason to do so. A few years ago, the district did not have that respect,” she said. “Students were leaving our district to school choice elsewhere. In the last three years, few have left, and we are seeing students from other districts choicing into ours. Consistent communication from our superintendent, our administrators, and our staff has led to the community believing in our district again, as it once did.”

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