

Called to Lead

Superintendent of the Year **Damian LaCroix** remains optimistic during turbulent time for public education

In 2003, Damian LaCroix was hired as superintendent of the Howard-Suamico School District. He was the district's fifth superintendent in six years. The district had lost its last two referendums and was on the verge of losing a third. LaCroix remembers being at a school event when a parent turned to him and asked, "Did you even think about it before you said yes?"

Despite the odds stacked against him, LaCroix has thrived at the Howard-Suamico School District and was named the 2017 Superintendent of the Year by the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators. Thinking back on the interview process, he said that like a lot of school leaders, he was eager to help improve the district.

"When you're called to lead, you don't think about it, you respond," LaCroix said.

Today, the school district has a lot to be proud of including a high school that has been named one of the top in the country, partnerships with local

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businesses and higher education, and, among others, a certified International Baccalaureate (IB) high school diploma program. The district has also worked hard to create a culture that provides students with a safe, inclusive learning environment.

"Our new vision for the district is that we want to create authentic, innovative, connected, inspired, and experiential learning for our students," LaCroix said.

To help promote this kind of learning, the school district has focused on the theme of "What's your story?" LaCroix shared an email he received from a student in which the student praised how his teacher had created a classroom focused on respect and trust where meaningful learning opportunities could take place every day.

The district has also worked to create a collaborative environment for all teachers, administrators and staff in the district. The simple slogan, "Who do you work for?" helps keep the focus on the common goal of supporting all students in the district, no matter what school they attend.

LaCroix also stressed the importance of advocating for your schools in your own community. When he was invited to speak before Green Bay business leaders, he took an issue of *Money* magazine that ranked some of the best cities to live in the U.S. One common trait the top cities had were strong public education systems. He stressed to the business leaders that education is an investment, not



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an expense.

"Let's tell our story," he said. "Let's go on the offense, and if that doesn't work, find a different way to tell your story."

LaCroix acknowledged that the education landscape has shifted and, as school leaders, it can be hard to know where to go. Schools face challenges with achievement gaps exacerbated by childhood poverty, family and mental health issues, a shortage of teaching talent, and the uncertainty of the next two to four years. Despite this unrest, LaCroix said it is also a time for hope.

"We see the freshness of 2017," LaCroix said. "With the hope of something new comes the hope of something great ... The collective leadership we have in public education can lead to collective change ... Paradoxically, there may be no better time to be a school leader in Wisconsin." ■