

When envisioning the characteristics that comprise an ideal school district superintendent, the following attributes come to mind: Someone who will advocate for all students – even when what’s right might not be what’s popular; someone who connects with stakeholders; and someone who champions moving education and student success forward.

DuPage High School District 88 Superintendent Dr. Scott Helton, who passed away on Dec. 10, 2020, possessed all of these qualities – and more. Dr. Helton had more than 33 years of experience in education and served in a variety of capacities, including as Principal of Addison Trail High School for 11 years and as Superintendent of District 88 since 2012. He was incredibly ingrained in the District 88 community and helped build positive futures for countless students through his contributions to public education and coaching football, wrestling and track.

“Dr. Helton had a passion for ensuring all students had access to the most rigorous curriculum and the supports they needed to succeed,” said Dr. Jean Barbanente, District 88 Interim Superintendent. “He continued to implement more Advanced Placement (AP) and dual-credit courses, as well as workplace experiences, to provide valuable opportunities for all students.”

Dr. Helton was laser focused on ensuring the district connected with and cared for each child and family in the district. He took the time and went above and beyond to build trust and genuine relationships with students, staff, parents and community members – regardless of their language and cultural background. Leading a school district with student demographics of nearly 50-percent Hispanic and more than 45-percent low income can be overwhelming and intimidating, but Dr. Helton met this challenge head on. He implemented ongoing equity work and culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching and shared that work at the local, state and national levels.

“This work was natural for Dr. Helton,” said Dr. Barbanente. “He loved kids and had a heart for those who were underprivileged or had suffered hardships. He specialized in valuing each student and his or her unique background. He was famous for telling their stories. He bragged about the students who were the first in their family to go to college, how many received scholarships, how many AP credits they earned, how many went off to the Ivy League, how many were state champion athletes and musicians and the challenges they overcame to get there.”

Becky Serna, an alumna of Addison Trail (class of 2012), knows firsthand the dedication and commitment Dr. Helton had in ensuring his students’ success. Serna is now a Registered Nurse at Penn Medicine, University of Pennsylvania Health System.

“My parents didn’t attend high school and primarily speak Spanish, so they were unfamiliar with the school structure,” Serna said. “Dr. Helton made significant efforts to ensure my parents were aware of the resources available and that our needs were being met. He really was a lifelong educator and an inspiration. I’m confident his legacy will live on through the lives of the students he has touched – including mine.”

“Dr. Helton was a true agent of change,” said Eric Veal Jr., a junior at District 88’s Willowbrook High School, who serves on the Illinois State Board of Education Student Advisory Council and is part of District 88’s Youth Equity Stewardship (YES!) series. “Many students around the country do not get the chance to say they worked with their superintendent, but Dr. Helton made it a priority to change that. He made everyone feel like they had a seat at the table, and they are valued in that conversation. People like Dr. Helton were put on this planet to light up the world.”