CASE STUDY · RUSH-HENRIETTA CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Creating more personal connections at scale

For Superintendent Barbara Mullen, finding simple ways of showing appreciation to staff members has made a significant difference in the culture of her school district.

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When superintendents talk about leadership, the conversation often turns to strategic planning, student achievement, finances, or facilities. Less frequently discussed is the importance of district leaders sustaining authentic human connections across such a large, complex organization.

"The employee-to-superintendent ratio is in the thousands to one," says Dr. Barbara Mullen, superintendent of the Rush-Henrietta Central School District, located outside Rochester, New York. "It can be very challenging for any superintendent to connect regularly with every teacher or employee and make them feel valued and appreciated."

A school community of 5,700 students and 1,300 teachers, Rush-Henrietta is deeply diverse. More than 50 languages are spoken across the district, roughly half of students are students of color, and families span the full socioeconomic spectrum. Mullen became the superintendent of Rush-Henrietta in 2023, after years of serving in district leadership at other school systems in cities including Cambridge, Providence, and Houston.

"There are so many priorities, but my primary focus is always on student growth and achievement," Mullen says. "That requires thinking deeply about how we provide accessible, high-quality instruction for all kids, and that depends entirely on the adults who show up every day to do the work."

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Listening to the community

Upon first coming to the district, Mullen focused on listening to and understanding the community, through surveys, informal conversations, and hearing the stories of teachers, staff, and parents. "In my conversations, one of the themes I was always hearing about was the need to improve staff morale, and for employees to feel appreciated, heard and seen," Mullen says.

Rush-Henrietta had an outdated salary structure, as well as aging facilities and systems that helped contribute to many staff members feeling unappreciated and disconnected from the district's leadership.

A tool to create more personal connection

Mullen said she had these needs in mind when attending an education leadership conference in 2025, where she was first introduced to an employee engagement platform called Lebra Lead. "I was thinking about the challenge of connection and engagement in our district, and when I saw Lebra, it immediately struck a chord with me. It was the solution we needed," Mullen says.

Lebra Lead is an AI-powered platform designed to help superintendents easily engage with and show appreciation to employees. Lebra identifies employees with milestones such as birthdays or work anniversaries and writes email messages that can be quickly reviewed and sent each day.

The platform includes modules for connecting with employees, recognizing their achievements, and managing

relationships. Superintendents can use Lebra to send personalized emails, handwritten cards, or schedule regular check-ins with staff quickly and easily.

Showing appreciation

After implementing Lebra, Mullen began using the platform for a range of touchpoints, including sending emails on birthdays or work anniversaries. "It may sound like a small gesture, but receiving a message of thanks or congratulations from the superintendent makes people feel appreciated. And often, I have had teachers or other employees reply to those messages, and it becomes a conversation starter about something important. It helps me establish more of a connection and have more dialogue," she says.

Lebra provides a daily digest that lists employees celebrating a milestone, or who might need a follow-up from a previous meeting. "It's how I start my morning each day," Mullen says. "Then with a few clicks, Lebra generates messages, which I then review, personalize and immediately send. There is no way I could do that for so many employees otherwise."

Mullen also uses Lebra to complement classroom visits. "When I go to observe a classroom, sometimes it can make the teacher nervous or anxious. So, I started making notes in Lebra of each teacher and classroom I visited, and it reminds me to send a follow up message of thanks," she says. "That has helped reinforce to our teachers that my visits are about connection rather than compliance, and that I appreciate them."

Seeing an impact

While many of the benefits have been anecdotal so far, Mullen says the district has also seen measurable improvements.

For example, Rush-Henrietta uses a third-party employee engagement survey to track cultural indicators such as satisfaction, recognition, communication, and sense of belonging.

Compared to previous years, Mullen says there has been clear growth in these measurements of engagement across many schools and categories, including job satisfaction, work-life balance, recognition, and overall organizational health.

"Over the past two years, we have undertaken several initiatives to improve employee engagement, culture, and morale," Mullen says. "Lebra has been an important component of these efforts. It has become part of our ecosystem, and it has clearly contributed to the improvements we have seen."

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More personal and intentional leadership

"Lebra sparks conversations with staff members that I wouldn't have had otherwise," Mullen continues. "There is no way I would be able to do any of this without the platform. It has enabled these connections and engagement but without adding work for anyone."

Mullen describes the Lebra platform not as replacing personal interaction, but rather making it possible at scale, and providing a way to incorporate positive appreciation into the daily work of leadership.

"Sending some quick messages of appreciation to staff members every morning is a great way to set the tone for the day," she says. "The superintendent role can often be reactive, where you are always presented with new problems to solve. Lebra is one tool that helps me be a more proactive and intentional leader."

To learn more, go to www.lebrahq.com

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