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Harrison School District 2 leader named 2023 Colorado Superintendent of the Year



DENVER — The Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) is pleased to announce that Dr. Wendy Birhanzel of Harrison School District 2 has been named 2023 Colorado Superintendent of the Year. Dr. Birhanzel was selected by a committee of former award winners and superintendents through a competitive process. She will represent Colorado in the 2023 National Association of School Administrators (AASA)'s National Superintendent of the Year program.

A clear theme emerges in visiting with Dr. Birhanzel's colleagues and staff about her leadership's impact. She is described as someone who "walks the talk" and puts the needs of students at the center of every decision she makes in specific and tangible ways that have made a profound difference in better ensuring student support and success. Under Dr. Birhanzel's tenure, Harrison School District 2 has implemented systems and initiatives that have dramatically improved their achievement and student discipline referral and expulsion rates. A district-wide systemic focus on teaching and learning has helped yield not only an 81% graduation rate and 1.2% dropout rate but also resulted in Harrison 2 students out-performing every other district in the state with comparable demographics of at least 65% minority students and 65% of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Harrison 2's student discipline data is similarly impressive. Through the targeted work of a new Equity Council created by Dr. Birhanzel, every educator and administrator has received support and training in alternatives to suspension. Each school has a full-time social worker on staff, among other available student supports. The reduction in discipline referrals over three years is dramatic, with a decrease of 47% and a 38% drop in out-of-school suspensions.

Colleagues say she "sees the potential in every single student" and that Dr. Birhanzel is "driven to provide equitable opportunities for all students and has a special knack for partnerships with community organizations to provide a more holistic support system for families and staff."

One of the primary reasons she is highly effective in these areas is her standout priority for connecting personally with students. Dr. Birhanzel created a Superintendent's Advisory Group in both district high schools, with twenty students serving on each group. She asks them specific questions designed to garner honest feedback about the work of Harrison 2 and upcoming decisions that will

impact them. These conversations have produced new ideas for the district to consider, including better ways to provide advisory support and strategies for a more inclusive culture through high school common areas. Dr. Birhanzel visits the district’s more than twenty schools every semester on at least three separate occasions.

“Our selection committee could not have been more impressed with Dr. Birhanzel’s leadership, including her sincere and authentic work to personally connect with students,” said Weld County Re-3J superintendent Greg Rabenhorst, who chaired the Superintendent of the Year interview and selection process. “She is a fierce and unwavering advocate for her students, staff and community and the evidence of her impact is clear in every single area of the district, from transportation staff and paraprofessionals, to teachers and principals.”

Also striking to the selection committee was the high morale of district staff. Since Dr. Birhanzel became superintendent, employee culture survey scores have been the highest that Harrison 2 has seen, and staff retention is also at an all-time high. The district was named the 2022 Best Education Workplace by the *Colorado Springs Business Journal*. Strong educator satisfaction and low turnover rates have helped create a cohesive district-wide team, enabling Harrison 2 to build on its successes yearly.

“This is a big win for our District! We are so proud of Dr. Wendy Birhanzel and all that she has accomplished for our students, staff and community. The D2 Board of Education appreciates her bold leadership and ability to create endless opportunities for our students”, said Mr. Corey Williams, Harrison District 2 Board of Education President.

Dr. Birhanzel’s roots in public education are deep, with more than twenty years of experience in such roles as teacher, principal, curriculum, instruction and assessment officer, and now district superintendent. As a building-level leader, the schools she served were both honored with National Blue Ribbon Awards and named National Title I Distinguished Schools. She is a staunch advocate at the state level for better K-12 funding. She has been named 1 of 22 to watch in ’22 by the *Southeast Express*, a Woman Making a Difference by the League of Women’s Voters, and a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Transformational Leader by the *Colorado Springs Business Journal*.

Dr. Birhanzel shared that this award is an honor for the whole district. “This is the best news! Our staff and students have worked for this day for so long, and they are why I stand here today. We are honored to be recognized, and I will advocate for our school districts all over our state as Colorado’s Superintendent of the Year.”

Dr. Birhanzel will be recognized by CASE in the upcoming weeks in her district and celebrated as Colorado’s 2023 Superintendent of the Year at the AASA National Conference on Education in February 2023. As the state winner, she will be considered for the 2023 National Superintendent of the Year award; all candidates will be evaluated on their leadership in the areas of learning, communication, professionalism and community involvement.

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