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Contact: Jason Nevel
Director of Social Media and Publications
(217) 753-2213

Dr. PJ Caposey Named Illinois Superintendent of the Year

Dr. PJ Caposey, superintendent of Meridian CUSD #223, has been named the 2023 Illinois Superintendent of the Year by the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

The award was presented Saturday (November 19) during the Joint Annual Conference in Chicago co-sponsored by the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB), the Illinois Association of School Business Officials (IASBO) and IASA. Nominees are judged on the following criteria: academic achievement, preparing students for the future, social-emotional support, teaching and instruction and leadership.

“After learning I would receive this honor, I immediately called my wife. When she picked up the phone, I suddenly could not speak to tell her the news as I was flooded with emotion,” said Dr. Caposey, who has been superintendent of Meridian CUSD #223 for 10 years and an educator for 19 years. “The emotion was borne out of the immense gratitude I have for the Meridian 223 community, particularly our Board of Education and Leadership Team, and a deep recognition of the journey that we have been on together. I am unabashedly proud of the work we have done, and the turnaround we have created for the kids and community that we serve. I am acutely aware that I have the privilege of receiving this award based on the incredibly hard work of everyone in, and around, our wonderful district. Said simply, thank you to my wonderfully supportive and understanding family, the outstanding MCUSD team and to IASA for this once-in-a-lifetime honor.”

Turnaround in Meridian CUSD #223

An independent panel selected Dr. Caposey for Illinois Superintendent of the Year based on the significant turnaround he facilitated in Meridian CUSD #223, a district of about 1,400 students in Ogle County. When he was hired in 2013, the rural district was in a financial crisis, had extremely limited technology, a high staff turnover rate and outdated curriculum and teaching strategies.

1200 West Main Street
Marion, IL 62959-1138
618-364-0501 * fax 618-364-0503

2648 Beechler Court
Springfield, Illinois 62703-7305
217-735-2213 * fax 217-753-2240
iasa@iasaedu.org

800 Woodfield Road, Ste. F109
Schaumburg, IL 60173-4717
847-466-5075 * fax 847-278-1356

After making significant budget cuts, Dr. Caposey led a successful referendum campaign (the first of two successful referendums) that put the district on solid financial footing and paved the way for the implementation of numerous improvements. His accomplishments include:

- Six consecutive years of being recognized by US News and World Report as a Top Achieving High School. Never recognized previously.
- Over 85 percent of graduates earned college credit in the 2021-22 school year. Over one-third of students earned over a full semester of college credits.
- Changed the district's foundational approach at the K-5 level in both English Language Arts and math. As a result of changes, students in Meridian CUSD #223 have not experienced learning loss throughout the pandemic.
- Recognized as an EduJedi School, District Administration District of Distinction and ISTE Making IT Happen winner as a result of the district's technology transformation. Meridian CUSD #223 is 1:1 with ubiquitous wifi, even in student homes, after not having working email before Dr. Caposey arrived.
- Increased participation and performance in AP courses, earning the recognition as a School of Opportunity. Increased access to algebra in eighth grade and extended advanced coursework down into fifth grade.
- Implemented a mentoring program that has led to a 20 percent increase in ninth grade students on track to graduate.
- Added the position of College and Career Coordinator, which has helped prepare students for the future and establish partnerships with companies and organizations in the region.
- Improved social-emotional supports for students by adopting the Leader in Me program, expanding the district's counseling department and implementing policies and procedures focused on diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Developed an instructional coaching program, invested in professional development and adopted internal culture metrics.
- Reduced the annual turnover rate of staff from over 10 percent to having multiple years in the last five with zero voluntary turnover among teacher staff.

"Every once and a while you get to be a part of something special," said John Smith, Board President of Meridian CUSD #223. "What we have been able to accomplish in Meridian over the past decade, and the relationships we have been able to build, is

something unlike I had ever experienced before. I am extremely thankful that Dr. Caposey was our Superintendent during this time, and I am confident that we would not be where we are today without his leadership. We have grown as colleagues and friends, and I personally am very thankful that I have gotten to know him. He has made each of us better as well as our district. I could not think of a more deserving person for this honor.”

National speaker, presenter and author

In addition to leading Meridian CUSD #223, Dr. Caposey is a nationally-known speaker, presenter and author. In the past few years, he has led over 100 workshop sessions in over 15 states reaching an estimated 10,000 educators. He has authored eight books, published more than 50 blogs/articles and has served as the keynote speaker at large conferences, including a TEDx Talk. Furthermore, Dr. Caposey teaches at two universities, leads the Illinois Principals Association Building Leaders Cohort and averages 10 coaching clients per year. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, he emerged as a thought leader, appearing on NPR, CBS and The Washington Post.

Dr. Brent Clark, executive director of IASA, described Dr. Caposey as a dynamic leader and passionate educator who cares deeply about improving the lives of students in Meridian CUSD #223 and elevating public education nationwide.

“The turnaround PJ has facilitated in Meridian 223 is a shining example of why strong leadership matters,” Dr. Clark said. “The changes he’s made, the programs he’s implemented and the culture he’s built has drastically improved the lives of students. Accomplishing those feats takes a uniquely talented person, and PJ is unquestionably one of the most expressive leaders and gifted communicators I have ever met.”

The Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) is the state’s premier advocacy organization for school administrators with about 1,750 members.