



Reviving a Struggling District: How Strategic Leadership Transformed Marlin ISD



As part of 3P Learning’s ongoing EdChat series, we had the privilege of hosting Dr. Darryl Henson, Superintendent of Marlin ISD. With extensive experience across various districts, Dr. Henson shared his personal journey, strategies, and the hard work required to turn Marlin ISD around. In this article, he reflects on the key lessons he’s learned and offers practical insights for educators and leaders striving to create lasting change in their own communities. As a global provider of evidence-based reading and math programs, 3P Learning is committed to supporting meaningful conversations that empower educators worldwide.

When I took the helm of Marlin Independent School District (ISD) in 2020, the challenges were staggering: a decade of academic failure, state intervention, and facilities that had long stopped serving the needs of our students. Marlin ISD had become synonymous with underperformance—meaning 4,000 days of state oversight, schools without accreditation, and a community that had lost hope. It was a system in dire need of transformation.



“This is not just a letter grade; it symbolizes resilience, accountability, and the unwavering belief that every child deserves an excellent education.”

Fast-forward to 2023: Marlin ISD has earned a “B” rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Moving from the bottom to a TEA “B” required strategic leadership, systems-driven planning, and refusing to accept mediocrity. This guide shares how we rebuilt our district from the ground up, offering strategies and insights that any educational leader can apply.

A Relentless Vision and Clear Strategy

The first step to leading a struggling district is having an unshakable vision, but that vision has to come from the heart. When I first walked into Marlin ISD, I saw schools that didn’t look like places of learning, children who had been let down for far too long, and a community that had almost given up hope. I didn’t see failure—I saw an opportunity. This was an opportunity to prove that this district, these students, and this community could achieve something great.

I came in with a mindset I shared with my team on day one: *Excellence is the standard*. Mediocrity wasn't an option. Children only get one shot in third grade and in ninth grade—I knew we couldn't waste any more time. We set an ambitious goal: a 180-degree transformation in just 180 days. It wasn't about talk; it was about action.

We developed **Vision 2025**, a district-wide plan that anchored our transformation in four key areas:

- **Early literacy:** Every child would read on grade level by the end of second grade.
- **Math readiness:** Strong math instruction would prepare students for Algebra I success.
- **College, career, and military readiness (CCMR):** Diplomas would mean something again. We would graduate students prepared for what's next: college, careers, or the military.
- **Co-curricular growth:** Fine arts, athletics, and other enriching experiences would be part of every child's education.

But here's the truth: **A plan means nothing if it doesn't drive action.** I've always believed that what gets measured gets done, so we track data relentlessly. Progress was color-coded for clarity—red, yellow, green, or blue—and shared openly with our board, staff, and the community. We built trust by being transparent about where we were and where we were going.



In just two years, the results spoke for themselves. **We didn't just meet the state's targets—we exceeded them.** Marlin ISD earned a "B" rating from the Texas Education Agency for the first time in over a decade. That grade represents more than academic achievement; it's a testament to the belief, hard work, and resilience of every student, teacher, leader, and parent in Marlin ISD.

Instructional Leadership: Back to Basics

Improving student achievement isn't rocket science—it starts with high-quality teaching. When I arrived at Marlin ISD, I knew we had to remove distractions and get back to what works. That meant direct, intentional instruction delivered by teachers who understood their roles as instructional leaders.



We made a simple but powerful shift: **focus on standards, not grades.** Grades can be arbitrary, but mastering standards prepares students for success. Our teachers knew exactly what students needed to learn and how to measure that progress. It wasn't about throwing new methods or quick fixes at the problem—it was about setting clear expectations for Tier 1 instruction and holding ourselves accountable.

Walkthroughs became a cornerstone of this approach. They weren't punitive but formative—an opportunity to verify that students were engaged and learning, and to ensure teachers needed support. The message was clear: teaching matters, and so does every single student in the room.

This renewed focus on instructional leadership wasn't flashy but was transformative. By returning to the basics, we began to close achievement gaps and set a new standard for what was possible in Marlin ISD.

We adopted the mantra that **teachers must be instructional leaders.** Motivation and hype only go so far—educators need training, tools, and systems to guarantee student success.

The transformation of our instructional practices directly contributed to the academic gains that lifted our district's TEA score. By ensuring every child received quality first instruction, **we closed achievement gaps and raised expectations across every grade level.**

The Power of Systems, Not Goals

I often say: **Losers have goals. Winners have systems.** For meaningful and sustainable change, you need more than aspirations—you need processes that work. At Marlin ISD, we created systems that reached every corner of the district, from early literacy to campus operations. Early literacy became a cornerstone of our approach, where we tracked phonics mastery, sight word recognition, and phonemic awareness multiple times a year to ensure every child was on the right path. At the same time, we focused on foundational math skills, systematically monitoring progress starting in fourth grade to build the progression needed for Algebra I success. By uniting these efforts, we laid a strong foundation that supported academic growth across grade levels.

This systematic approach wasn't limited to academics. Professional learning communities (PLCs) played a crucial role in our transformation. These spaces allowed teachers to align curriculum, share effective strategies, and collaborate deeply to ensure every student's needs were met—from SPED to ELL learners and beyond. Whether addressing the challenges faced by SPED or ELL students or focusing on the standards all students needed to achieve, our systems ensured no learner was left behind. Combining clear, data-driven systems with a commitment to accountability enabled us to achieve results that lifted Marlin ISD to a TEA “B” rating.

When you combine clear systems with accountability, real progress happens. At Marlin ISD, this commitment to structure and transparency moved us from years of failure to earning a TEA “B” rating. This milestone reflects the hard work and resilience of our students, teachers, and leadership team. Our commitment to data-driven practices allowed us to **measure progress transparently, adjust where necessary, and drive meaningful change—evidenced by our improved TEA rating.**



From Neglect to Renewal: How Facilities Reflect Our Commitment to Students

Facilities are often dismissed as superficial but send a powerful, unspoken message to students and staff about their worth. When I first walked through the doors of Marlin ISD, I was heartbroken. Brown tap water flowed in sinks that had not been replaced in decades. Ceilings leaked when it rained, staining tiles with mildew, and athletic tracks were so cracked they looked unsafe for anyone to run on—let alone for students to pursue their dreams. The reality was even worse for our youngest learners: the elementary school recess area was the bus turnaround loop, a bare patch of pavement where children played between moving vehicles.

I remember thinking, *How can we tell our children they matter if the buildings they enter daily say otherwise?* Facilities are more than walls and roofs—they are an environment that communicates hope, dignity, and possibility. I knew we couldn't keep asking students and teachers to work and learn in these conditions.

Enough was enough. Our team engaged the community, sharing the tough truth about where we were and where we could go. Together, we passed the first bond in decades, raising taxes by 47 cents—a bold ask for a community that had been let down for far too long. The investment was about more than repairs; it was about restoring pride.

Today, the results speak for themselves. Students now learn in clean, modern facilities that inspire learning and foster achievement. Our football field, once a symbol of neglect, now shows what happens when a community chooses to believe in its children. It's more than a field; it's a gathering place where families, alumni, and students come together to celebrate their shared future. For Marlin ISD, these improvements were about showing our children—through actions, not just words—that they deserve nothing less than the very best.

Leadership Requires Pressure and Support



Transforming a district isn't comfortable. Hard work demands a sense of urgency, a willingness to apply pressure, and an unrelenting focus on results. At Marlin ISD, I made it clear from day one: *Every team member has a role.* Whether it's a classroom teacher delivering high-quality instruction, a custodian ensuring students learn in a clean environment, or central office staff supporting daily operations, everyone is responsible for student success.

But pressure alone isn't enough. Pressure without support breaks people. That's why, **at Marlin ISD, accountability is paired with unwavering support.** We invest in professional development tailored to the real needs of our teachers, providing them with the training, resources, and tools to succeed. Clear expectations aren't just handed down; they're modeled and reinforced. Most importantly, we celebrate progress—no matter how small—to remind our team that their hard work makes a difference.

I remember walking into classrooms and seeing teachers embrace this balance. Instead of feeling overwhelmed, they were empowered. They knew we weren't there to tear them down but to lift them up. That's the heart of transformational leadership: holding your team to the highest standards while standing beside them every step of the way. **When we lift up our teachers, we lift up our students**—and that's how we change a district's future.

The Path Forward: Sustaining Excellence

Marlin ISD's story proves that any district can overcome years of failure with the right systems, leadership, and vision. The work isn't done—maintaining excellence is harder than achieving it—but we now have the tools, the people, and the momentum to succeed.

Our success is rooted in an unshakable belief in our students' potential and our staff's dedication. Every milestone we've reached—from improved facilities to a TEA "B" rating—is a

testament to the collective resilience of the Marlin ISD community. Yet, this journey has taught us that excellence is not a destination but a continuous pursuit. It's about showing up daily with the same energy, commitment, and refusal to settle for less.

To my fellow educational leaders: **Transformation starts with clarity and heart.** It requires an unwavering focus on what matters most—our children. Hold your team accountable, but support them even more. Celebrate progress, but never lose sight of the next goal. Above all, remember this: **Potential means nothing without performance.** Excellence is within reach for every school, every student, and every community—when we choose to believe, invest, and lead with purpose. Together, we can ensure that *excellence is the standard* for every child in every school nationwide.

By Dr. Darryl Henson, Superintendent of Marlin ISD



Dr. Darryl Henson joined Marlin ISD in May 2020 after serving as the Assistant Superintendent of School Leadership in Cedar Hill ISD. Dr. Henson began his educational career as a fourth-grade teacher in Austin ISD, later serving as a middle & high school mathematics teacher, instructional specialist, and principal in the Lockhart, Ysleta, and Houston ISDs. In Cedar Hill ISD, Dr. Henson supervised 13 campuses and 7,700 students.

Dr. Henson graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, the University of Texas at Arlington with a Master of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, and the University of Houston with a Doctorate of Education in Curriculum and Instruction.

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