



## **Small but Mighty - Manchester's Big Vision for Students**

When Superintendent Stephanie Herrera started at Manchester Union Elementary three years ago, she noticed both the challenges and the potential of leading one of California's smallest school districts. With just 28 students, a few teachers, and a rural coastal location, it would have been easy to focus on what the district lacked. But Herrera and her team chose to see it as a chance to reimagine what school could be.

"We've changed a lot over the past two and a half years," Herrera said. She gives credit to her team, saying, "I am proud of our staff and the great work that they're doing."

Herrera saw early on that Manchester's bilingual community was a great starting point for new ideas. About half the students speak Spanish at home and half speak English, so she saw a chance to create a dual-language program that would match the community's identity and give students more opportunities. As she puts it, "the school and our community are already naturally a great platform for dual language instruction," and that insight helped shape the district's teaching approach.

The district started hiring teachers from other countries, including Chile, to give students a wider view of the world. Herrera says this has helped students both academically and culturally, as they are now "exposed to even more international teaching, learning and backgrounds," which she finds "really fun and exciting to see." To keep building their team in a rural area where hiring can be tough, the district also works with International Alliance Group to bring in more educators who support their multilingual goals.

Because Manchester is very small, the district has been able to change not just who teaches, but also how teaching works. Instead of grouping students by grade, classrooms mix different ages and focus on flexible learning. Herrera points out that larger schools often talk about personalizing learning but have trouble making it happen. At Manchester, she says, "with us having a smaller school and smaller numbers, we've been able to actually do it." Students learn at their own speed, move through different stations, and get help or extra challenges based on what they need, not just their grade.

Peer teaching is a big part of this approach. Herrera explains that students often take on teaching roles, especially in math, because "one of the best ways to learn is when students are also teaching one another." She has seen students confidently explain ideas to their classmates, something she used to see only in training sessions. Now, she says, "that's happening here at our site."

This structure has also reshaped the school's culture. When Herrera first arrived, she was struck by the way students interacted with one another. "Instead of it being like peers, they really treat each other like they're brothers and sisters," she explains. That sense of family continues to



define the campus, where relationships run deep, and leadership emerges from students of all ages.

The district's changes did not start with new programs or schedules. They started by listening. Herrera spent months talking with students and families and looking at feedback from the YouthTruth process to learn what the community wanted. She remembers that almost everyone brought up the importance of Spanish and multilingualism. "It seemed like everyone I talked with discussed Spanish language and multilingualism," she says, noting that these talks helped set the district's goals.

As instruction shifted toward inquiry and project-based learning, staff noticed a change in student mindset. Where students once waited for directions, they now actively shape their learning environment. Herrera says that today, students regularly suggest ideas and improvements, asking questions like why something cannot be done differently or how they might help fix it. For her, that shift signals the success of the school's evolving approach.

The changes go beyond teaching. Herrera wanted the school's look to show the creativity happening inside. The classrooms were redesigned for personalized learning, and the outside became a way to show community pride. The district worked with local artist Nicole Ponsler to paint murals on the building and fences, featuring the students. Since the school is on Highway 1, travelers often stop to take photos and ask about the school. Herrera says visitors used to think the outside did not match what was happening inside, but now the building shows the school's creativity and energy.



The rural setting has also led the district to rethink its facilities and what students can do. Since traditional resources are limited, staff started looking for opportunities outside the school. Herrera remembers asking, "What do we have out here on the coast?" The answer was a landscape full of possibilities.



This thinking led to “Kids Run the Coast,” a program inspired by Girls on the Run and Kids Run LA. The staff takes students of all ages to run on beaches and trails, combining exercise with the mental health benefits of being outside. The district also partners with local groups so students can swim at nearby pools, take acting classes, and join gymnastics and dance through community programs. Herrera says these partnerships show how much the region supports its school.

Through all these changes, Herrera keeps coming back to one main idea: the strength of the staff. She says the team is united in their purpose and always puts students first. “They’re a really tight core group,” she says. “Their willingness to try new ideas and adapt quickly has made much of the transformation possible. That shared commitment is what turns plans into real change for students.”

Herrera hopes Manchester Union Elementary can show what small districts can do when they focus on their strengths. She says the work is ongoing, and the school will keep trying to improve and grow. As she says, the goal is not perfection but progress, and she believes even the smallest districts can make a big difference in students’ lives.