

## CASE - 2026 Award Story

# Chris Gdowski

**Superintendent - Adams 12 Five Star Schools**  
**2026 Colorado Superintendent of the Year**

“Certainty as to what is — and what should be done to address that reality — is much more elusive than some in leadership perceive.”  
— Chris Gdowski, on the lessons of his legal career

### ON CAREER & BECOMING A LEADER

**When you reflect on your career so far, what moments or experiences most shaped you as a leader?**

I served as a school attorney for more than 15 years prior to becoming a superintendent, and that experience has shaped much of my approach to the superintendency. In the attorney role I had occasions where parties involved in a dispute lied; perceived things inaccurately; exaggerated some facts, and ignored others, to advance the outcome they desired; became entrenched in "winning" a dispute without regard to the impacts to the school district, students and stakeholders; were focused on short term wins that would be undone by the next school board or leader rather than seeking "built to last" improvements; and approached issues with a "win/lose" mindset rather than one that sought "win/win" outcomes through creative problem solving and a commitment to evaluating ideas based on their merits.

Those experiences have influenced my leadership style as superintendent. I ask a lot of questions, analyze a lot of data, solicit the input from a large number of informed stakeholders, embrace the devil's advocate role, and toss a lot of ideas/proposed solutions against the wall -- many of which do not stick -- with hopes that I, and others involved in decision making, will assess a situation accurately and develop a response that is not driven by ego, position power, expediency, or political winds and is instead based upon sound analysis, wisdom about choosing a path that will move the issue to a better outcome, and thoughtful planning for implementation.



**How has your school, district, or professional community influenced the way you lead?**

My family moved to Adams 12 when I was 2 years old and I've spent nearly my entire life as a student, legal advisor, and superintendent here. The people I've met along the way have shaped who I am and the values I hold. The education my classmates and I received in this school district transformed our lives through the jobs that we've held, and the economic stability that we've enjoyed, compared to our parents and grandparents. That transformative experience came through educators who were hard-working, bright, passionate, optimistic, encouraging, and lifted up the potential they saw in us.



Chris present across buildings and events throughout Adams 12

## ON RECOGNITION & WHAT THIS AWARD MEANS

### What does this recognition mean to you personally, beyond the title of the award?

I have worked lots of late nights, tossed and turned through many sleepless nights, carried home heavy loads of stress, and have been physically present at home, but mentally still consumed with the challenges and worries from work, on many days throughout the past 17 years in this role. There have been many times during the hard days and hard seasons in this job that I have wondered if it has been worth it. The standard I've used in assessing whether this challenging job has been "worth it" over the years is whether I've made a significant positive difference for our students, our community, for public education, and for others serving in leadership roles in our state. This award signals to me that the responses to those questions are "yes" -- and it has meant the world to me.



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"The need for strong, principled, and courageous leaders in public education has never been greater. The opportunity to leave an important and lasting legacy is significant."

— Advice to aspiring education leaders

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## ON LEADERSHIP VALUES & STAYING GROUNDED

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### **How do you stay grounded and connected to students and staff while managing the demands of leadership?**

I spend a lot of time listening to people and asking for their honest feedback about issues in the District. I meet with our teachers association and classified association presidents at least monthly, and with their executive committees a few times a year, to talk about challenges and concerns we're addressing. I participate on our certified Interest Based Bargaining team that meets year round to problem solve issues and determine compensation increases. I have small group meetings with our principals 2-3 times a year to dig into how things are going from their perspective and meet monthly with student representatives from each high school to get their input on everything from the school calendar and grading policies to mental health needs. And I've been known to wear a Grinch costume, dress like Elvis, and don a wrestling mask and champions belt to juice up holiday celebrations at various employee gatherings and celebrations. Much of my time with students and staff is devoted to celebrations and giving speeches -- and I love that -- but being accessible, authentic, and grounded in my other interactions helps me get honest feedback about how we're doing and reinforces that I am an equal member of this team and school community.



### **What do you believe is the most misunderstood aspect of your role?**

Many people believe the superintendent knows and directs everything that goes on in the district -- or should know and direct everything. The reality is that Adams 12 operates over 50 buildings and serves more than 30,000 students with more than 4,000 staff members. It's not humanly possible to know and direct everything that you'd like to control in this role. It's imperative to hire talented people, and reaffirm often the values and processes that you hold sacred, if you want most of the things that you're not directing -- and that is a lot of stuff -- to turn out the way you hope.

### **What leadership value or belief guides your decision-making most consistently?**

Integrity. Stakeholders will not always agree with your decisions, but they'll usually stand behind you if they're convinced you're being honest, fair, and straightforward.

## ON CASE & PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

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### **How has CASE supported your leadership journey?**

My involvement with CASE started 20 years ago when former CASE executive director John Hefty invited me to co-chair the Legislative Committee. That role pushed me to move from an observer and critic of some of our laws to a participant in trying to shape and fix them. The importance of that advocacy role -- for CASE as an institution, and for us as members -- has grown significantly during my career. The beauty of CASE is that it assembles administrators from rural to urban environments, from across the political spectrum, and from a wide variety of administrative roles -- and brings those diverse perspectives into a cohesive stance on a variety of important issues each session. I've been glad to jump in when I believe my voice can be helpful and have been so impressed over the years with the thoughtful advocacy from CASE's executive leadership, government relations staff, and colleagues statewide.

### **In what ways has being connected to other CASE members strengthened your work?**

I learn so much every single year from CASE members outside of my district -- and not just from districts close to Adams 12 or similar in demographics. That learning has come from all directions including leaders of small districts, rural districts, new superintendents, and from CASE members in a variety of building-based and technical roles. Wisdom shared from CASE members has made me a better superintendent and Adams 12 a better district. We welcome new and better ideas for serving our community and hope that we also contribute the same to others in the state.



## ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

### What advice would you give to aspiring education leaders who hope to follow a similar path?

The superintendency is a very hard job most of the time, and to endure those hard days and seasons it's important that a deep commitment to public service is your "why" behind seeking the position. The superintendency often brings greater compensation, status, power and control compared to other roles in public education -- but those factors lose significance quickly if they are not attached to a compelling commitment to serving students and communities.

I believe the work has become harder throughout my 30+ year career -- and will become harder still in the years ahead -- because of state financial constraints, declining enrollment, flares in the culture wars, and the possible introduction of vouchers.

### What advice would you offer to future superintendents preparing for the role?

There can be significant differences in the superintendent role depending on the board that hires you. Some desire a fast moving change agent; others desire someone to advance a set of political beliefs; others want a healer and consensus builder following a period of turmoil; some desire a steady hand to keep the District moving the same direction; and there can be wide differences in how boards define the authority of the superintendent to make decisions vs making recommendations to the board. It's important to do a lot of homework about the district you're considering and to say no to a job if you believe they're looking for a skill set or approach that is different from how you're wired. Fit often makes all the difference in making the superintendency successful -- or not.



“I strive to provide for this generation of students what those hard-working, bright, passionate educators provided for me — the belief that their potential is worth fighting for.”

— Chris Gdowski, on growing up in Adams 12

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