

Kirsten Stewart:

Welcome to the inaugural episode of Connect Canyons, a podcast about learning and teaching in Utah's newest and fifth largest school district. Learning is about making connections. And as the name of this podcast suggests, we are here to invite our listeners to connect and learn with us.

Kirsten Stewart:

This is a show about what we teach in Canyons School District, how we teach, and why. In the coming months, we'll get up close and personal with some of the connection makers, personalities, programs, and prospects that make our schools click. We'll meet national experts too. And today, we have a special guest, Canyons District's new Superintendent, Dr. Rick L. Robins.

Kirsten Stewart:

I can't think of a better way to kick off our podcast than with an introduction to our new Superintendent. So, welcome Rick, and thanks for taking time to chat with us today.

Rick L. Robins:

Absolutely Kirsten. Happy to be here with you. This is terrific.

Kirsten Stewart:

If it's okay, I might just take a moment to share a couple highlights from your career, by way of introduction. And then we can chat a little bit: Dr. Robins was named Superintendent by the Canyons Board of Education after a national search. [He] brings 24 years of experience as an educator to his role as the Chief Executive Officer of Canyons. Prior to joining Canyons, he was the Superintendent of the Juab School District based in Nephi, Utah where he oversaw efforts to improve the district's graduation rate, which stands at an impressive 97 percent. That's a double digit increase over 10 years.

Kirsten Stewart:

He has classroom experience as a history teacher, has worked as a high school principal, [and] an assistant principal for districts both large and small. In 2012, in fact, he was named Utah High School Principal Of The Year and he has received national honors as an innovative Superintendent to Watch. And so, welcome aboard!

Kirsten Stewart:

And I'd like to start by sharing a personal observation which is that over the past few weeks I've come to know you as a really approachable leader, someone who values and puts a premium on relationships, and who really leads by serving. So, I imagine it has been very difficult coming onboard amid a pandemic when you've had to introduce yourself to employees and patrons over Zoom. I know that you've had some personal meetings with principals the last few weeks, but [from] a safe distance of six feet and no shaking of hands. So, talk to me about what that's been like.

Rick L. Robins:

Yeah, this has been a very unique situation to say the least. First I just want to express my deep gratitude to the entire Canyons School District community for really opening their arms up to me. And, and it is sort of surreal to, you know, kind of be this mythical figure that's behind Zoom and on camera,

and not being able to shake hands and hug people and really build those relationships on a face to face level.

Rick L. Robins:

But I look forward to that. And I know those days are coming. I'm so blessed to be here and I really feel like I'm, you know, I'm very fortunate to leave a great school district in Nephi and Juab School District. And I feel like I'm coming to the best school district in Utah [and] in the western United States, and one of the best districts, and lighthouse districts in the country. So, it's an honor to be here.

Kirsten Stewart:

As you have gotten around and gotten to know Canyons a little bit better, speak a little bit about what interests you in Canyons. You've referred to it as a lighthouse district. And then maybe talk about some of your first impressions.

Rick L. Robins:

Well, I think for me, one of the things that was very attractive is that Canyons School District, much like Juab School District, has innovation as one of its tenants. That's something that I think, in the day and age that we live in, it really is a time to rethink education and what teaching and learning might look like. And I think the virus has really ushered in that opportunity. For good or for bad, it's forced us as a nation, and as a state, and as a community to really think about our priorities and what matters most. And so, for me, you know, recognizing Canyons as a leader, and as an innovative district, and really looking forward, that very much attracted me.

Rick L. Robins:

And then, I think right there near the top is just the people and the relationships that exist in Canyons. I had always been aware that Canyons really considered itself a family. And I think the opportunity for me to be part of a district that's so new, and really developing that culture and those family ties and those bonds was very attractive and something that speaks to my own personal values and beliefs.

Rick L. Robins:

And so, in that respect it's just been a great fit. And I've felt very at peace from day one coming here.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, talk about some of the ideas in education that are kind of bubbling up right now that you find really exciting.

Rick L. Robins:

Well, I think the idea of personalized learning is something that's really emerging that is taking on new meaning, right? And, and in recent months, prior to COVID, I think we all kind of had this idea that personalized learning was something that was really only centered around technology. But, what we've come to find out through this whole COVID situation is that our students, including our own children, including us, we all have different needs at different times. And, you know, the idea that one size fits all for an education system does not meet the needs of our students and our families.

Rick L. Robins:

So, it's really brought to light what personalized learning can be and mean, which I think is just absolutely exciting. And the fact that this is our time to kind of reenvision and reimagine what that can look like is very appealing.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, let's talk about returning to school in the fall. Schools have some pretty big rocks to move in terms of preparing, right? To keep children and employees healthy and safe while continuing, you know, quality instruction. What have the planning efforts been like? What have they entailed? What are some of the guiding principles that you have as sort of your light post as you make these decisions?

Rick L. Robins:

First, I just want to recognize the impact of the situation, and the seriousness because I know that there are a lot of families out there that have been directly impacted by COVID. And I first want to just express my empathy for them, and my feelings for them. Because without saying that and recognizing that, I don't think we can take the next step forward. So, you know, thinking about that, we are going to open school. Our students desperately need to reconnect. Not just for the academic part of it, but maybe more importantly the mental health side of this. And as human beings and especially children, we know that's foundational to their growth. And so, it's important that we get back to school in the fall.

Rick L. Robins:

For me, the way that I'm approaching this and really envisioning this for Canyons School District is kind of in three different ways. Really, it starts with restoring school. And that means a lot of different things, right? That means building relationships, restoring relationships, restoring our mental health, our physical health, our academic wellbeing and standing with our students, trying to return and restore students to something that's normal in their lives.

Rick L. Robins:

And then secondly, it's kind of the reimagined piece, right? It's kind of thinking new about what can be. And it's offering opportunities and options to our students and our parents as they think about their own situation. And at the same time, really ensuring that everybody returns safely, right? So, putting those provisions in place [so] that our students and our families, our teachers, our staff can all return with piece of mind that they'll be safe. But at the same time, understanding that we're going to deliver teaching and learning and this educational experience and experiment is little bit different. That it might not look like it always has.

Rick L. Robins:

We're looking at the fall as an opportunity to maybe do things a little bit different. And I think that's fantastic. And then finally, you know, really renewing all of those goals and dreams and visions that our kids have for the future. And I think that's something that we're all holding onto and we know as Americans that what is so critical for our success is that individuals have that opportunity to really chase after their dreams and their goals. So, I'm excited for the future. It's going to be a challenge, there's no question about it. There are no guarantees. I wish I could offer everyone a guarantee that this is exactly how it will go. Unfortunately, with COVID, we know that that's not how this works, and that the situation is very fluid.

Rick L. Robins:

But, one thing that I tell everybody is that we as a community, and as a school district have to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. And that's not easy, but let's take it as an opportunity and go forward.

Kirsten Stewart:

I love that. Restore, reimagine, and renew, right? I mean, the renewal of the promise of education really.

Rick L. Robins:

Yes, absolutely.

Kirsten Stewart:

A new version of the three R's. (Laughs)

Rick L. Robins:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

The pandemic, you know, in addition to disrupting in person education, has also kind of laid bare some social inequities and I know that's something that you're pretty passionate about. What are some of the conversations that you're hoping that we have as a district around the issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice?

Rick L. Robins:

For me, you know, really what it boils down to is meeting people's needs where they're at. And having said that, saying it and doing it are two different things. I think we need to listen more to each other, we need to learn more from each other, we need to respect more for each other, and I think as equity becomes more and more of a North Star that shines bright, and that we all row toward. Meeting the individual needs of our students, we'll see tremendous successes with [them] and, I'm really looking forward to that.

Kirsten Stewart:

What if you were to look back, you know, a year from now on the past 12 months? What would be some of the things that you would have hoped to accomplish?

Rick L. Robins:

You know, with most issues and situations that we deal with in life, there's always a, a path forward that kind of gets us out of the situation. Unfortunately with COVID, that has been a real struggle. It's not clear, you know, what the next step is. In fact, we're not even sure what the next day will look like. So when we look back on this, I hope it's made us better as a state, and as a country, and as a community.

Rick L. Robins:

It shouldn't be a political partisan issue, right? I mean, our children are the one place as a community, as a state, as a country that we all agree. The most cherished prize asset that we have is our children. And I don't think anyone would disagree with me on that.

Rick L. Robins:

And so, the passion and the energy, and the support that we pour into Canyons School District, and our education system as a state, you know, is worth it. That investment is the future. And we owe it to our kids to do that. And I know we will. And I'm proud to be part of that.

Kirsten Stewart:

Well, we're glad to have you here. And honestly, thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy schedule to talk a little bit about your expectations and your hopes for the coming year.

Rick L. Robins:

Thank you.

Kirsten Stewart:

... Yeah. Looking forward to the next 12 months. And beyond. (Laughs)

Rick L. Robins:

Thank you very much for having me.

Kirsten Stewart:

Join us again for the next episode of Connect Canyons. A podcast sponsored by Utah's Canyons School District. If you have any comments for us, questions, or ideas for topics you'd like us to explore, e-mail us at communications@canyonsdistrict.org. You can also follow us on Twitter at CanyonsDistrict, and at KStewartUtah. Today's show was edited by Amy Nielsen and Stephanie Christensen. We had engineering help from Grant Taylor, and have benefited from the web design expertise of Carson Fairbourn. If you liked this episode, please be sure to share it with a friend. I'm Kirsten Stewart, and this is Canyons School District.