

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.

Kirsten Stewart:

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. 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. Today, we have a special guest, Canyons District's new superintendent, Dr. Rick L. Robins. I can't think of a better way to kick off our podcast than with an introduction to our new superintendent.

Kirsten Stewart:

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 may just take a moment to share a couple of highlights from your career just by way of introduction, and then we can chat a little bit.

Kirsten Stewart:

Dr. Robins, who was named superintendent by the Canyons Board of Education after a national search, 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%. That's a double-digit increase over 10 years. He has classroom experience as a history teacher, has worked as a high school principal and assistant principal for different 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.

Kirsten Stewart:

Welcome aboard, and I'd like to start by sharing a personal observation, which 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. I imagine it has been very difficult coming on board amid a pandemic when, really, 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, really, I mean, a safe distance of six feet, 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. It is surreal to 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, but I look to that. I know those days are coming.

Rick L. Robins:

I'm so blessed to be here, and I really feel like I'm very fortunate to leave a great school district in Nephi, in Juab School District, and I feel like I'm coming to the best school district in Utah 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 you've gotten to know Canyons a little bit better, maybe just 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:

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 tenets, and 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.

Rick L. Robins:

For me, recognizing Canyons as a leader and as an innovative district and really looking forward, that very much attracted me, 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. 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. In that respect, it's just been a great fit. I felt very at peace from day one coming here.

Kirsten Stewart:

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

Rick L. Robins:

I think the idea of personalized learning is something that's really emerging. That is taking on a new meaning, right? In recent months prior to COVID, I think we all had this idea that personalized learning was something that was really only centered around technology, but what we've come to find out is that, through this whole COVID situation, is that our students, and including our own children, including us, we all have different needs at different times and that the idea that one size fits all really for an education system does not meet the needs of our students and our families. It's really brought to light what personalized learning can be and mean, which I think is just absolutely exciting. The fact that this is our time to reenvision and reimagine what that can look like is very appealing.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, yeah, let's talk about returning to school in the fall. Schools have some pretty big rocks to move in terms of preparing, to keep children and employees healthy and safe while continuing quality

instruction. What have the planning efforts been like? What have they entailed? What are some of the guiding principles that you have as your light posts as you make these decisions?

Rick L. Robins:

Yeah, so, first, I just want to recognize, too, 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 just my feelings for them because, without saying that and recognizing that, I don't think we can take the next step forward.

Rick L. Robins:

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. 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 and the way that I'm approaching this and really envisioning this for Canyon School District is in three different ways, and really it starts with restoring school, and that means a lot of different things. That means building relationships, restoring relationships, restoring our mental health, our physical health, our academic well-being and standing with our students, but trying to return and restore students to that something that's normal in their lives, and then, secondly, it's that re-imagined piece. It's thinking new about what can be.

Rick L. Robins:

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 returned safely, so putting those provisions in place so that our students and our families, our teachers, our staff can all return with peace 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 a little bit different, that it might not look like it always has.

Rick L. Robins:

We're looking at this in the fall as an opportunity to maybe do things a little bit different, and I think that's fantastic, and then finally really renewing all of those goals and dreams and visions that our kids have for the future. I think that's something that we're all holding on to. We know as Americans that that is so critical for our success is that the individuals have that opportunity to really chase after their dreams and their goals.

Rick L. Robins:

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

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah. I love that, restore, reimagine and renew, I mean, a renewal of the promise of education really. I mean, that's...

Rick L. Robins:

Yes. Absolutely.

Kirsten Stewart:

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

Rick L. Robins:

For me, really what it boils down to is meeting people's needs where they're at. 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. I think, as equity becomes more and more of a North Star, that we all shines bright and that we all row towards meeting the individual needs of our students, that we'll see tremendous successes with our students. I'm really looking forward to that.

Kirsten Stewart:

If you were to look back 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:

With most issues and situations that we deal with in life, there's always a path forward that gets us out of the situation. Unfortunately, with COVID, that has been a real struggle. It's not clear what the next step is. In fact, we're not even sure what the next day will look like, and 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. It shouldn't be a political partisan issue.

Rick L. Robins:

I mean, still, our children are the one place as a community, as a state, as a country that we all agree. That is our most cherished, prized asset that we have is our children. I don't think anyone would disagree with me on that, and so the passion and the energy and the support that we pour in to Canyons School District and our education system as a state is worth it. That investment is the future, and we owe it to our kids to do that. I know we will, and I'm proud to be part of that.

Kirsten Stewart:

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:

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Thank you.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah, looking forward to the next 12 months and beyond.

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, email us at communications@canyonsdistrict.org. You can also follow us on Twitter, [@canyonsdistrict](#) and [@KStewartUtah](#).

Kirsten Stewart:

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 like this episode, please be sure to share it with a friend. I'm Kirsten Stewart, and this is Canyon School District.