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Kirsten Stewart:

Welcome to 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're 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, including today's guest Dr. David Parker, an author, professional speaker, and educational leader who is dedicated to improving how we communicate with one another and building what he calls, "authentically inclusive climates and cultures." Dr. Parker, welcome to Connect Canyons and thanks for joining us.

Dr. David Parker:

Thank you very much and it's wonderful to be here in Canyons School District.

Kirsten Stewart:

I've read up a little bit about your history. It sounds like you've got some educational background in social work, education and educational leadership, professional sign language, right, interpreter or...

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah? And then you're an author of a series of books called The Best Me I Can Be.

Dr. David Parker:

The Best Me I Can Be series. Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

And so you were invited here today to welcome our counselors, psychologists, nurses, therapists, school resource officers to a new year and kind of talk about their role in maintaining school environments that are authentically inclusive.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

Help me understand how you define inclusion? What is authentic inclusion?

Dr. David Parker:

I'm excited that you've asked me to be here and talk with the listeners because... 'cause when you introduced today you talked about how we teach and why. To be able to teach, we need to have relationships with our students. And to be able to teach we need to have relationships with the families they come from. And authentic inclusion is intentionally creating a space - our classrooms, our schools, our district - where each and every person is accepted, celebrated, and intentional behavior goes into making sure people are validated as opposed to just lip service, you know. So we say something and then we put action to our words so it's not just, "Everyone is welcome here but not you because it's not the right day of the week," or something like that. So, making sure that our belief and our behaviors are aligned is what's meant by authentic inclusion.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yes, so you used the word intentional, right?

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

Because it... You would think this kind of thing would just come second nature, but it doesn't necessarily, right?

Dr. David Parker:

No, it does not. A theme throughout the workshops that I did today in talking with the teachers and the wellness staff and the SROs - the school resource officers - as well as the psychologists, in each of those workshops they talked about how being exclusionary is the easy way to go. There's a lot less work in that. If I just interact with people that I already know, if I just interact with people that look like me, dress like me, worship the same way I do, that's easy to do that. So we have to intentionally make some changes in our behavior if we want to create a space where everyone feels included and accepted.

Kirsten Stewart:

What were some of the common things that you hit on today with our counselors and psychologists? How do you go about, you know, being intentional? I mean...

Dr. David Parker:

It's much easier said than actually put into practice. But intentional in the sense of the words that I use when I'm talking to students. Am I listening to my students? Or am I listening just to hear their voice or am I listening to understand where they're coming from? Those are two different actions. 'Cause when I'm listening to understand, I'm looking at the student. I'm acknowledging the student with a nod of the head similar to what you are doing now as we're talking. You can't see that at home, but she's nodding her head to let me know she's listening. She's listening for understanding. You're not glancing out the window, you're not glancing at your watch, et cetera. Children, young adults, pick up on that. We all do but they pick up on that tremendously. It lets them know if you matter.

Dr. David Parker:

We want... everyone wants to matter to someone. They want to matter to the folks in their school. You know, the counselor, the social worker, the school resource officer, my teachers, the principal, et cetera, I want to know that they see me. And when I listen for understanding, the student has my full attention and I'm not evaluating what they're saying, or putting my own meaning to it, or negating their experience. So when a student comes to, let's say, a counselor or a social worker and says, "XYZ happened to me," the counselor or social worker will respond to that student about how... find out how they are feeling and doing with that which happened as opposed to saying, "Really? Did that really happen?" You know? "This is a nice school. I don't think anybody would do or say something like that." That negates the child's experience, it negates the child, um, their feeling of self-worth. So an inclusive school makes everyone feel important and valuable.

Kirsten Stewart:

And I think that's probably good advice for parents as well, right? I mean often times as a parent... I mean, there have been times when I haven't probably been fully present for my children - or really listened to what they were saying.

Dr. David Parker:

Mm-hmm. I know. And parents have a crazy life, you know. At any given minute... at any given moment you're like 18 different people in one situation, but over the course of time your children realize that sometimes they're there 100 percent and sometimes I'm only going to get 75 percent. But there's a relationship that's there and a trust that's built up from the consistency of the interaction. With the teacher, even though that's the person I see the second amount of time as I spend with my family, that consistency isn't the same. And there's more questions that the student might have about the teachers care about them as opposed to the consistent relationship they have with their parents because you've known your kids since they were kids.

Kirsten Stewart:

Right, right.

Dr. David Parker:

Being aware of the types of things that can cause us to not behave in a way that is accepted and inclusive. Stress is one of those areas that will cause the most caring, compassionate person to look and act and behave as if they're not present. So ways to reduce stress for people that don't feel appreciated in their work, that low self-worth that they have from their workplace is another way that shows up in how they interact with students. Having nebulous goals and leaving too many areas of subjective interpretation allows for more behavior that could result in not making an inclusive space.

Dr. David Parker:

So, developing a culture within a school and a district where the teachers, and the support staff, and the wellness people feel valued and appreciated, not just with a cupcake every couple of months, but some real tangible ways of letting people know the good job that they are making, the impact that they're having on the students, on the families, on the district as a whole. That goes a long way — giving people an opportunity to talk and have conversations about the difficult things that take place in each school or throughout the district. Because when the students come back, they're going to come back with a lot of questions, a lot of experiences, a lot of misconceptions. How prepared are we to have conversations

about the full-reigned gamut of what students are going to want to talk about? Because if I can't talk about those things, that could interfere with how I will learn or what I will learn.

Dr. David Parker:

Are we prepared to have those conversations? Are we prepared to do that reflection that's needed to make those intentional changes? It seemed today from the conversations in the workshops, that the support people, the wellness folks, the school resource officers, and the psychologists are all ready to do that work and each workshop indicated, "You're talking about very hard work that needs to be done but our children are worth it." That's an exciting thing to hear. That's very exciting, especially for someone like myself that works with schools all over the country, and I don't always hear that. So, it's exciting to be in a place where everyone was saying that, "It's hard work, I'm afraid, but I'm ready to do that."

Kirsten Stewart:

That's fantastic. What's fascinating, too, is our school resource officers and our therapists, I mean they're on the front lines and, as you said, they do have such an opportunity to make so much difference because they encounter so many different children, right, in a given day, in a given month, in a given year. You, probably when you're in the trenches you lose sight of that. [You] probably don't ever lose sight of the weight of the responsibility, but maybe just the upsides to that, right? The empowerment that you should feel to make a positive difference in their lives.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes, because from the resource officers perspective, as best as I can understand it, they see students at their worst. You know, they're not called into a classroom or called into a situation because student XYZ is doing something marvelous, you know. That might be a rare exception, but more times than not they're called on when something is going wrong. So for them to see that they can have a long-lasting positive effect on student... not just on the students that they're working with, but students all around them. I feel that they need to know that. At the same time, I feel that they need to know that sometimes they get dealt an unfair hand because... And I'm not talking about this district 'cause I don't know as much about the school resource officer relationship with the classroom teacher... but in some districts, the school resource officer becomes a pseudo-disciplinarian.

Kirsten Stewart:

Mm.

Dr. David Parker:

You know, so when the teacher is unable to manage an individual or a group of individuals in a class, they call upon the school resource officer and that person becomes the disciplinarian in the class or the school, which is not a law enforcement issue. But also, what it does for the child, it gives them a negative interaction with law enforcement. And too much research has indicated that the more contacts young people have in situations like that, it increases the chances of them having a long-standing relationship with the law enforcement, such as the detention centers we have here in Utah for youth that are basically incarcerated. So, it begins in our schools in many cases.

Kirsten Stewart:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, and I know we look to them as valuable partners in keeping our schools safe, welcoming, and prepared and I think, you know, they're sort of an inviting presence in the hallways, you know, from elementary school on up. and I think that they are in a position to establish meaningful relationships with our students and I think many of them are very valuable role models.

Dr. David Parker:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

Any parting thoughts or words of advice that you may have for teachers, and counselors, and parents as we sort of begin what is going to be a very challenging year?

Dr. David Parker:

Don't shy away from those necessary, needed conversations. Those conversations about where I as a district fell short in regard to responding to all the children when this crisis... when the pandemic began. Don't shy away from the conversations where all children aren't being treated in an equal and fair way. They may not even be aware that they're doing something or saying something that is hurtful but if we continue to be silent and continue not to have the conversations that are challenging but it makes me stronger in character and therefore stronger as an educator, we're not really going to be there 100 percent for our students, and that's for all the students across the board because you don't need to just have conversations of equity with minority students. That's a conversation for every person to be involved in because all of us make up the community and we have to decide what type of community we want to live in, what type of community do we want to go to school in, worship in, et cetera? And we need to have those conversations.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's one of the things our superintendent has been saying. That we need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes. Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

And, is there a way that, as an individual, you should go about having those conversations? I mean, you know....

Dr. David Parker:

Look at the conversation from a point of growth. An invitation to grow. When I started learning to ride a bicycle, a two-wheeler, when I was younger, I ran into fences, cars, fell so many times, we had to get a new fender put on the bicycle. There's pain in that.

Kirsten Stewart:

Mm. Yeah.

Dr. David Parker:

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But, now some 10 million years later, I still could hop on a bicycle and ride it without any difficulty. It's basically the same thing. You know, getting through these conversations about fairness and inclusion and what is my role in continuing an unfair situation? Those are painful but the other side is so exciting. The other side is so exciting and refreshing for everyone.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's wonderful. Sort of like the subject of the podcaster, right? Which is making connections and...

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

build relationships by learning and growing together, really.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

It's never easy but it's always worthwhile.

Dr. David Parker:

Yes. Never easy but always worthwhile, yep.

Kirsten Stewart:

Well, I sure thank you again for taking time to chat.

Dr. David Parker:

Oh, thank you.

Kirsten Stewart:

It's been a long day for you and, anyway, I look forward to hopefully crossing paths again.

Dr. David Parker:

Sounds good to me. I look forward to it as well. And thank you everyone for listening to this podcast today.

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](mailto:communications@canyonsdistrict.org). You can also follow us on twitter at [@CanyonsDistrict](https://twitter.com/CanyonsDistrict). If you like this, please be sure to share it with a friend. I'm Kirsten Stewart, and this is Canyons School District.