Kirsten Stewart: This is Connect Canyons and I’m Kirsten Stewart.

Kirsten Stewart:

They’re excited and a little nervous, eager to meet new people and try new things, and grateful to be returning to the familiar rhythms of school. It’s a new school year in Canyons District filled with familiar hopes for students and teachers — and there’s something comforting about that. Something comforting about knowing that, amid all the noise dominating the airwaves, social media, and our head space, buses are rolling and school bells are ringing — that schools remain a unifying force in the community and a safe haven for learning. With headlines focusing so much on what tears us apart, we’re kicking off the school year with an exploration of what brings us together. We recently interviewed a handful of students and first-year teachers. We asked how they were feeling about the school year, and about their fears, hopes and aspirations. And guess what? We discovered that there is far more that unites than divides us.

Ray Stonacek:

Good, I'm excited. Yeah, a little anxious. I want to get through the first couple of weeks and build the routine and get to know my students. But overall, I'm really excited and hope to have a ton of fun and yeah, it should be a good year.

Kirsten Stewart:

Ray Stonacek is a new fourth grade teacher at Midvale Elementary. He's feeling the weight of teaching in a pandemic. He knows there's work to be done to help students regain ground academically and heal from the trauma they've experienced. Add to that the fact that he's a newcomer to the school and you can understand his mixed feelings of nervousness and excitement, but he's not alone. Students are internalizing similar feelings. Even those with the accrued wisdom of high school seniors like Annie Brimley at Alta High.

Annie Brimley:

I am nervous, yes. I'm nervous just for everything. I'm nervous social wise, I'm nervous for school, senior year, college applications, but I'm also very excited. So it's going to be a good year, I'm excited.

Kirsten Stewart:

With all of the swirling developments in the world, there's comfort in knowing some things never change. So much of our formative time is spent at school, shouldering pressures, building friendships and discovering new things about ourselves.

Kirsten Stewart:

This year is no different for Canyons' 34,000 students. Some of whom told us that what they most look forward to was making new friends and reconnecting with familiar faces.

Kenley Colman:

I'm super excited to meet my new teachers.

Eva Heidelberger:

I'm excited to have school dances again. That's one of my favorite things about high school, is just being with all your people. Having fun at the dance, jumping around, saying hi to people, getting all dressed up.

David Okerlund:

Excited to see all my friends, especially with summer coming to an end. Just seeing all my friends in the hallways and seeing my old teachers.

Kirsten Stewart:

Feeling connected and building a sense of community at school is a theme for the year. It's a common goal for both students and teachers. As Alexis Lewis, a junior at Brighton High School, puts it.

Alexis Lewis:

Definitely want to try and make everybody feel as included as possible, because I hate being left out. I just want to make more friends and meet new people.

Kirsten Stewart:

David at neighboring Alta High shares the same goal.

David Okerlund:

My goal for the year is just make as many new friends as I can, because there's a lot of people that maybe don't feel included or feel like they fit in. So just try to do the best I can to make them feel included.

Kirsten Stewart:

Teachers too want their classrooms to be places of kindness and mutual respect. Safe havens for the free exchange of ideas. Spaces where students can voice their opinions and muster the courage to try new things and make mistakes. Remember, Ray Stonacek at Midvale Elementary?

Ray Stonacek:

I think the biggest thing is just to be open to new ideas and be ready to try, and to know that it's totally fine to not be right. I mean, I'm sure it's my first year and I'm going to make a ton of mistakes as well. So I think if we go in there with a positive attitude and we can all work together and know that mistakes are totally fine.

Kirsten Stewart:

Haley Eveland, a first year biology teacher at Brighton High, offers these words of encouragement.

Haley Eveland:

And there are going to be a lot of cool things that people didn't get to do before, new opportunities and experiences that we can explore together. And really a really unique and authentic way for us to learn together.

Haley Eveland:

So this is my first year too. I'm going to be learning with you. And I think that's a really cool spot for all of us to be, that we can be a little bit more cohesive as a community.

Kirsten Stewart:

For many teachers like Haley, the hopes they have for their students harken back to their formative years, and the influence their teachers had on them.

Haley Eveland:

My high school biology teacher was a wonderful man. He was always the biggest proponent for me, whatever crazy dream I had, which changed week to week. I would go in and talk to him about it and he would say, "Yeah, absolutely. You can do that." He was really the first person to point out that, "Hey, you're really good at this. You're really good at this science gig. You should take a look at some stuff."

Haley Eveland:

And I pushed it off and ignored what he said for a long time, but because science was hard for me. Biology was really hard for me and I struggled a lot, but I loved it so much that I didn't care. I would struggle through all of it and I would do it again because I love it so much. And I think too, the other big thing is I know what an impact that teacher had on my life. And I like teenagers. They get a bad rep, but they're really good people. And to watch them learn and grow and become successful adults, I can't wait for that.

Kirsten Stewart:

Alta View Elementary Kindergarten teacher, Crystal Miller, too is realizing a long held career aspiration, a dream set into motion in her earliest school days.

Krystal Miller:

I actually ran into my kindergarten teacher a couple of months ago and she remembered me and remembered my name. And that just blew my mind that she was able to that. But I think it just really shows how much she loved her students, and I want to be able to do that too. To love my students and to know them and know their interests and to support them in whatever they want to do in life.

Krystal Miller:

I think I want to create a atmosphere in my classroom where failure is encouraged, where they can make mistakes because they know that's how they succeed. So just doing positive reinforcement, cheering them on when they succeed and helping them gain confidence, I think is huge. I feel like I was a very confident kid and I owe that all to my teachers for giving that to me.

Kirsten Stewart:

Teachers are passionate about the subjects they teach, and love nothing more than to see that same spark come alive in the eyes of their students. But they know school is about more than reading, writing and arithmetic, it's about challenging oneself. "Growing and acquiring the character traits," said Brenna Thomas at Alta, "that we all need to become responsible adults and citizens. And it's about having fun."

Brenna Thomas:

The whole goal, obviously I'm trying to teach kids math, but at the end of the day you want them to leave being someone who can succeed in the real world. So maybe working, being comfortable working with people that wouldn't maybe be the people that you would choose to work with, and being able to clearly communicate your ideas with others.

Haley Eveland:

I hope that that students can be curious. I hope the students can be curious about the world around them, that they can have an appreciation, oh my gosh, for the world around them. Have fun doing it, work together and be kind. be kind, be happy.

Kirsten Stewart:

Aaron Edwards, a computer science teacher who was helping to build an eSports program at Alta High, wants to create new and different avenues for students to develop confidence and find their passion and purpose.

Aaron Edwards:

Whether it's like me, teaching a skills class, or whether it's the other core teachers teaching English or math or anything like that, as far as I know are all geared up to help all of the students get ready to move on and be able to live their lives.

Kirsten Stewart:

And he wants parents to know that his hopes for students match theirs.

Aaron Edwards:

All parents want the best for their student in that's what I hope for all of them as well. And I think when we find that place of mutual agreement where we're all just supporting the student, I think it helps a lot. We're working towards the same goal, and that contributes to a lot of success.

Kirsten Stewart:

Canyons District teachers showed up for students last year when students needed them most, and they'll answer the call again this year. It's simple really, with the start of a new school year we're all excited, anxious, and hopeful. We may not all agree how to get there, but our goals are the same. We want to succeed, we want to help others feel successful, and together we want to have a good year.

Kirsten Stewart:

Haley at Brighton hopes parents know just how much their students mean to her. And she wants her second year and 12th and 25th to feel as exciting as her first.

Haley Eveland:

The level of teacher dedication that they saw last year, hopefully they know that that's the norm. That we're here, we're invested and we're dedicated to these things. So we'll work together and we'll do our best. And that's the best thing that we can do, is to have that open line of communication and we'll know that your child is what I'm really focused on, and I have their best interest at heart. Just I'm really, really excited to be a teacher.

Kirsten Stewart:

You've been listening to Connect Canyons. This episode was reported and edited by Kristen Stewart and Stephanie Christensen. Have an idea for a story worth sharing, be sure to email us at communications@canyonsdistrict.org, and don't forget to subscribe.