Kirsten Stewart:

When you enroll in a college or university, you expect that your tuition dollars are being put to good use, and one important measure of quality is whether the institution is accredited. Accreditation is a big word, but really it's a form of quality control or assurance that the school you've chosen meets certain standards, and it applies not only to colleges, but to K-12 schools, specifically high schools.

Kirsten Stewart:

Each of Canyons District's high schools are fully accredited, which means that employers and colleges will accept with confidence, the diplomas they award. But accreditations have to be renewed periodically, and Canyons has decided to take its accreditation a step further by seeking district-wide certification through the Utah State Board of Education, endorsed agency, Cognia.

Kirsten Stewart:

Why go district-wide? What does the accreditation process look like and how long will it take? Who better to answer these questions than the two administrators charged with overseeing Canyons District's accreditation, School Performance Director, Cindy Hanson, and Associate Director of Instructional Supports, Jesse Hennefer. Welcome to Connect Canyons, Cindy and Jesse.

Cindy Hanson:

Hi, Kirsten.

Jesse Hennefer:

Thanks for having us.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. First things first, how did you two wind up with this heavy responsibility? Did you lose a coin toss?

Cindy Hanson:

I have been involved in high schools for a really long time, and so I volunteered because I felt like I probably had more firsthand knowledge of the accreditation process as a teacher, and then at our last accreditation, while it wasn't a district-wide accreditation, but when Brighton High School was accredited six years ago, I was the assistant principal who was in charge of that process and led out for the school. I felt like I had done some site visits, I had the background and so I volunteered.

Jesse Hennefer:

The first year that I was in this position was the year that our high schools went through that accreditation. After it was done, in discussions with the principals and our Assistant Superintendent, Bob Dowdle, we found out that you could do this as a district and so that it was all together rather than five individual high schools. When it came time to start thinking about accreditation again, I brought that up, that idea, and it built steam and this is where we're at.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yes, this is a massive project with so many moving parts. How are you managing to pull it off in a year when we're still coping with the pandemic and while shouldering your regular duties? And, why is Canyons taking this on now?

Jesse Hennefer:

Well, we started the process prior to the pandemic. Best laid plans got derailed, but once we were into it, we thought, "You know what? We, we can continue through," mainly because what Cindy and I are doing as coordinators is we're coordinating. We have a huge team here at the district office that has supported from the time we said, "Let's do this," 'til now. We have specialists and directors and associate directors that have all given time and work to do this, which is one of the reasons why we are able to do it. It is a lot of work coordinating and pulling that all together, but we're not the only ones working on it.

Cindy Hanson:

I will say also that one of our primary goals, as we learned about the district and system process from other districts who've done this was to take the weight off of our principals. That was one of the beautiful things about a district piece is that each school doesn't have to do all of the heavy lifting.

Jesse Hennefer:

We were able to stretch it out over, like I said, some time, but now that we're in the home stretch, it has become more time intensive for at least the two of us. It is a challenge balancing our given duties with this additional one, but it's worth it for the district.

Cindy Hanson:

It is.

Kirsten Stewart:

You had mentioned that it started some time ago. Was it 2019?

Cindy Hanson:

About a year and a half ago I think we really started our early timelines and looking at touching base with Ogden District, Davis District, because they were going through the process or had been accredited by the system.

Jesse Hennefer:

I believe our board approved and gave us the go ahead, fall of 2019.

Kirsten Stewart:

The higher level question of accreditation. What is it? And why is it important?

Cindy Hanson:

When you think about accreditation, it's really a way to measure the quality of the education, a quality system. Typically that's a high school piece because to enter colleges to go beyond your high school, you need your diploma to be accredited by a viable accrediting agency, right? It has to be something that allows the people who are accepting that credit to recognize that it means that there was a quality education attached to it.

Kirsten Stewart:

If you don't graduate from an accredited at high school, will a college accept your transcripts?

Cindy Hanson:

They don't have to.

Jesse Hennefer:

They don't have to. Yeah. Accreditation means that your credits are more transferable between public education and higher education and then within higher education.

Kirsten Stewart:

They might say, "Sorry, go back to a different high school that's accredited and get your diploma there?"

Jesse Hennefer:

Or you'll need to go to a place that you can get into, for example, Salt Lake Community College. So, after you've received your diploma, you could maybe get into an open education system like our community colleges allow, and then build a transcript from there to have a transfer.

Cindy Hanson:

Or an online college or something like that. But our bigger colleges and universities require that accredited diploma.

Kirsten Stewart:

Gotcha.

Cindy Hanson:

It's a big deal that, that we have that. What we wanted was to make a whole system viable in the same way. To really look at what are we doing, K-12, to get kids ready for graduation? What does our system look like? We've been a new district, we're the newest district in the state. What have we done? What have we accomplished? We really are anxious to see our progress and to be able to continue to make progress. In order to do that, we feel like we need a K-12 view and not just a 9-12 view in terms of really measuring our growth and our progress and being able to hold ourselves to specific standards and goals.

Kirsten Stewart:

High school, that's at the very end of many years in public education, right?

Jesse Hennefer:

Right.

Kirsten Stewart:

It's sort of a continuum and I'm sure that measuring it and seeing it from that lens is of use.

Cindy Hanson:

Holds some value.

Jesse Hennefer:

Yeah, it does. It is where our schools have a school improvement plan. This is looking at our system improvement plan and how we as a system, K-12 and Canyons School District are not only doing well and measuring how we're doing, but looking forward to how we can improve on that.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. A district-wide accreditation is this a new trend? Are we seeing this nationally, or is Canyons striking out ahead and forging a new path?

Jesse Hennefer:

We are on the forefront in Utah. There are, I believe only two other school districts in Utah that have pursued and received a district-wide accreditation. We'll be the third in Utah, but it's not unheard of. It is more rare. It's common to have your high schools going through the accreditation process because as Cindy said, those are the credits that are needed for college, but looking at it from a system's improvement, going through the district accreditation really gives us the information we need to make sure that we are providing the best education K-12. So we wanted to be part of that. and it's kind of nice to be leading out on it, being one of only three districts.

Kirsten Stewart:

Let's get to nuts and bolts then. The entire accreditation review from start to finish, it takes five years, correct?

Jesse Hennefer:

No, not the review. The preparation, which is what we're in right now, has taken about a year to pull together all of the evidence. The actual review with Cognia representatives coming out, that's only five days. They'll come out, they'll look through our evidence. They'll interview stakeholders, from students, to parents, to administrators in the buildings, and here in the district. Then once they've gathered all of their information, that's when they write a report for us to tell us what they found.

Jesse Hennefer:

We're telling them what we think we have, and they will tell us, "Well, this is what we saw. And here are some things you can improve." We get that about a month after. Once we get that back, it's up to us with collaboration, with our Board of Education, our Superintendent, our principals to say, "Okay, what are our steps to improve," part of the strategic planning, which our district is going through right now as well. Then once we have our plan we're good for five years, our schools are accredited.

Jesse Hennefer:

Cognia gives us that time to work through our action plan for improving our district. Then they come back and we take part in this cycle again, to reflect, see where we're at, measure our growth, and have an outside organization go, "Yeah, you are seeing these things, and here's some things you may have missed."

Kirsten Stewart:

The preparation is really just compiling tons of data on the district, whatever information they need to know, everything from the makeup of the community we serve to our academic achievement data, what have you. Then they digest all that before they do the actual physical review, which I guess is actually not physical, it's virtual this year. Then as part of that review, do they interview parents, patrons, students?

Cindy Hanson:

Yeah. There'll be nine groups that they interview. They interview the Superintendent, the Board of Education, the parents... A lot of the groups, the parents, the students, the principals, we divide by level, so secondary elementary, things like that. Parents, they have two groups from the district administrators. So, basically, your academic focused administrators and then your business operations focused administrators. They'll interview building principals, teachers, and students.

Kirsten Stewart:

Wow.

Jesse Hennefer:

From our experience being on two, one review team for a school here in Utah, and one for a system in Texas, we spend a lot of time, or Cognia spends a lot of time with our students, our parents, and our principals, those main stakeholders in the schools. We found that very beneficial and is honestly one of the shining points of an accreditation visit is to check in with the kids and see what they think of the school district that they're in.

Cindy Hanson:

Well, and it really helps give context to the data because you're looking at all these documents of, “oh, we do this, we do this, we do this. Here's our testing. Here's our evidence of all of these things,” but then when you actually talk to the people who use it or who are impacted by it, it really gives you that needed context and that needed understanding of how well it's really going, and where we can make recommendations or where we can celebrate successes.

Cindy Hanson:

Yeah, it's quite thorough. I was just going to add, the way, when you talk about all the evidence, there's three domains, so you have leadership, learning, and resources. Then within those three domains, there's 32 standards, so we're really finding evidence for 32 different standards that each have multiple key concepts to them. It is a lot. How long is our document now, Jesse? 80?

Jesse Hennefer:

76 pages.

Cindy Hanson:

76 pages long that has multiple links per page to evidence, so they're going to be a busy visiting team.

Kirsten Stewart:

Next steps then, how will our stakeholders be invited to participate? What should they expect? How does that work?

Cindy Hanson:

The groups are pretty small. The focus groups, they only will want eight to twelve. That was due this week. Jesse and I are now going to be looking at that and trying to make sure that we can represent the whole district in the people that we invite. Then he and I will be sending out invitations to those parents, students, teachers, to let them know the specifics about, this is what we're going to ask you to do. It's all virtual so we'll be giving them links to the Zoom meeting when that comes up, so they can do that from home.

Cindy Hanson:

If we need to make arrangements for any people to come into schools, or if we need any translators, anything like that, we'll take care of that. That's our next step this week is to get all of those invitations out to our focus groups. We've already spoken with the Board of Education and with the Superintendent, they know when their times are, and then we'll be also contacting the district administrators for who will be speaking and what time they'll be meeting.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay, and you had mentioned the volume of documents you’re collecting, right? We're going to make that publicly available after the review, correct?

Cindy Hanson:

Yes.

Jesse Hennefer:

Yeah.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay.

Jesse Hennefer:

We want our families, our parents, our students, the patrons that live in Canyons School District…we want them to see all of this because this is their district and the improvement that we're going through is for our students. I think that's one of the reasons that families and patrons should care about this. It shows how confident we are as a new district. We're still only 12 years? I think into our 13th year. We're a new district comparatively, but it shows how confident we are in what we've built so far. It shows how confident we are in the systems that we've created. It shows how confident we are in the expertise of our teachers and our principals. It also shows that we are not so confident that we think we've got all the answers.

Jesse Hennefer:

We want to do an evaluation. We wanted to reflect on ourselves, our system. We want to be able to open that up, not only to Cognia, but also to our parents and our patrons to say, "Here's where we were really rocking it and here are the things that we found that we need to work on for our students and for this system."

Kirsten Stewart:

You've been listening to Connect Canyons. I'm your host, Kirsten Stewart. Join us next time when we discuss the big, important job of school principals, just in time for October, which is national principal's month.