

CUSD Cares Podcast

Meet Superintendent Kathy Hoffman

Season 1, Episode 15– February 19 2020

Brenda Vargas:

Greetings parents and thank you for joining us for another CUSD Cares podcast. Today we are so incredibly lucky to have with us Superintendent Kathy Hoffman. How are you superintendent/.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Doing great, thank you so much.

Brenda Vargas:

We're so glad you can be with us today and join us for this parent conversation. I know that you and your team here at the ADE (Arizona Department of Education) are working on so many important initiatives and we're going to start with really sharing with parents that it sounds like what we're doing in Chandler and I think a lot of our sister districts as well in creating social emotional wellness opportunities for students within the constraints that we can work with right on a school setting. And I think that's something that the ADE, your office, your initiatives are also trying to do, but student wellness as you know, is a very hot topic. We want to make sure that we are definitely concerned and intentional about our students beyond the academic piece because we know there are so many other influences and factors that really make a big impact with our students. So in servicing the whole child as we talk about social wellness and social emotional supports for students, share with me, if you don't mind, some of the pieces that the ADE has really kind of decided this is going to be something that's going to be a focus of ours and here's how we're going to do it.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yeah, it's absolutely been a huge priority for us and I greatly appreciate districts like Chandler also making it a priority for our students, for our youth, because we do see such a need across the whole state of Arizona. So some of the things I'm really proud of that we've been working on just to start is some of our collaborations with other state agencies. So for example, we've been working with Access, as well as the Department of Health Services. It's also their priority to be having these conversations around policy in regards to our youth mental health as well as suicide prevention and those types of topics. So for example, one thing we offer from ADE and also utilizing some federal funding is Youth Mental Health First Aid training. We offer those free out to educators and community members. We do train the trainers across the state and all you have to do is request that training from our team. And we are happy to go out and provide that training to people who are working with youth across the state. And they also can help connect schools to a network of comprehensive school threat assessment guide trainers. So we take school safety very seriously and we also do work with the School Safety Task Force around this to provide recommendations. That's one example. We also work in working with Access, have been able to leverage other federal funds that were directed towards opioid use prevention. And they thought the best way to address this in Arizona was at the K-12 level. The best thing we can do for

prevention is start young. And so we've been partnering with them in helping to implement a very research based program called the PAX Good Behavior Game, which is a training that we're providing out to teachers across the state that helps teach the teachers on how to best support students in skills like self-regulation. So having strong social skills that with this type of program we can see improved academic performance and also lifetime outcomes. So we're really excited for those types of partnerships with our other state agencies to really make sure we're leveraging federal funds effectively and making sure the training is reaching our teachers and students.

Brenda Vargas:

Thank you so much for sharing some of those really important partnerships. I think sometimes we are not aware when receiving the information, how it all happens, the fact that as the ADE, as an organization you really have to reach out and bring other community agencies with you on board to really share in coming up with a solution. And that evidence based training, Youth Mental Health First Aid is strongly recommended. We are certainly supportive of more opportunities to train anybody and everybody because we believe it is a community responsibility to educate our entire community about mental health, the need for mental health and really challenging that stigma. So thank you for doing that. I think one of the things you mentioned in regards to the substance abuse training we have certainly I think as an entire state state seen and heard all of the very tragic stories around youth and what has happened as a result of them making poor choices when it comes to coping skills and choosing maladaptive behaviors. We know that the epidemic with vaping has been more impactful than I think what we were really were prepared to do and, or prepared to handle. I don't know if there's really any preparation in that. So I'm certain that that will become an initiative on your part and that will all be swooped into that whole substance abuse prevention piece. So thank you. As we think about some of the partnerships, we can't help but think about our student's voice in this work that we do every day. They are our customer, they are the people that we serve. And I know as our department, we have really made intentional efforts to really talk to kids, talk to students, right? Let's hear it from their mouths, what they're saying, how they're feeling, what are their struggles and if you would share with our parents what you're doing to make sure the student voice is included. It's a part and really that you're anchored in that work to making sure it comes from students.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yeah, I'd be happy to. It is I say the best part of my job and I think part of it is that I do miss being in the classroom, so being able to elevate the voices of our students and hear directly from them is so encouraging and so inspirational. I truly see them as the future of Arizona and when I hear what their ambitions are and their priorities, it gives me so much hope for the future of our state. So I do look for every opportunity to include them.

Brenda Vargas:

And doesn't it give you that sense of youthfulness again, as we look at it from their eyes, right? They don't see obstacles or any roadblocks. That's probably the biggest joy. But I digress. I apologize. Continue.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Well I just think we don't want to make any assumptions; there's the adult perspective of what we think kids need and then there's their perspective. And I think we need to listen with open ears and let that help guide us when we make these big decisions.

Brenda Vargas:

And some of them are big decisions and I'm so glad you said open ears and I would add in open hearts because sometimes it's hard for us as adults to sometimes hear what they have to say because we might have to adjust what we're doing for them. You know?

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yes and I love their honesty and directness with which they advise us.

Brenda Vargas:

So it's kind of like- are we really ready to ask? Right? Because they're certainly going to tell us and be brutally honest.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yes, which I appreciate. So some of the ways that we've been able to elevate the student voices here at the Department of Ed is I do have a number of advisory councils. So within the different types of advisory councils such as we have an African American advisory council, Latinx, Indian Education as well as one for Equitable and Inclusive Practices advisory council. So for each of those, we created two student positions or around two depending on the council. But then I felt that that was not enough., and also I serve on the Board of Regents and this actually was partly inspired by their work that they have had for many years two student Regents that are from the Arizona State Universities. They currently have two from U of A, but they rotate out every year. And so I was really inspired by them. They are just so impressive. And so I created another council that is only for students that are Student Advisory Council that is made up of 5th through 12th graders. And we have 20 Student Advisers on that council. And we went through a rigorous application and interview process for them and they serve a one year term and we have students currently from all over the state. We gave students the option to video conference in or call in whatever was convenient for them, but we've had students drive to participate from, or their parents or even a teacher has helped them get to our meetings, but we've had students drive from Winslow, from Prescott, Sierra Vista, Tucson; all over the state coming to be a part of our Student Advisory Council, which just shows their dedication and motivation to be here and do the work together in person was I was just so impressed by that.

Brenda Vargas:

It shows so much commitment.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Exactly.

Brenda Vargas:

The fact that they really feel like their voice matters, and that they could in some ways be a part of some positive change. That's fantastic. I can't imagine driving from all over from some very remote areas in Arizona to get here. And I'm sure that there's no easy way to get here.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yes, and then I was looking for ways to even elevate this opportunity even further. So I worked with the State Board of Education staff and recently have been able to provide them the opportunity to give a

Student Report at the beginning of the State Board Meetings, which is just such a great way to start the meetings because it helps set the tone and helps remind board members of why we're here and hear directly from students. And so when they have those opportunities, they give a presentation on some of the topics we've been talking about in our meetings to report back to the state board of what the council is most interested in talking about.

Brenda Vargas:

That's exciting. That's really super exciting. You are definitely using the student voice for what it's most intended for and that is really listening. I think this generation Z is definitely unique in their own ways and the fact that they do have an opportunity to share and really be heard. I'm sure most parents would agree. You know, there's some things we don't want to know, but sometimes we just have to be patient and listen.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Exactly.

Brenda Vargas:

Fantastic. So there's more than one way it sounds like. So if people wanted information, my guess is they would probably, I know that I saw a couple tweets. I appreciate that as I try to become just very Twitter savvy. Parents out there, I know that most of you have an account; definitely follow our Superintendent Hoffman so that you can stay in the loop with maybe some of the latest and greatest pieces as these very important opportunities come up that you could share either with your student, a neighbor or someone that you know, that this would be a good fit for. So that's fantastic. So getting back to the student voice is so important, but with the same level of importance. I think parent's feedback and parent input is extremely valuable for us. I know as a parent myself that it is probably the hardest job I will ever have. And I'm sure most of my parents would agree out there that it certainly has its ups, its downs and its challenges. Superintendent Hoffman, I know that the parent voice is important to you as well. Share with my parents, share with our community as to what is the ADE continually doing that in order to reach out and/or be more available so that we can hear that parent voice because we know that experiences come with challenges and celebrations as well. What is your office doing to make sure that we can gather that information and use that obviously with just intentionality and good.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Yes. So a lot of that work also does happen through our Advisory Councils. So having some parents as members as well as of course many of the people who they may be serving as an educator or superintendent, but they're also parents. But then we do also have parents that are directly involved as well. I know that we partner also, have so many different parts of our department and some work more directly with parents than others. So it can vary. For example, I would say one area that does have a stronger connection with parents would be our exceptional Student Services Department; they may be more involved in supporting when there's questions because we know the special education system is so complex. So I think that's one area where resources can be helpful to families or questions can be answered through those means. Whereas other parts of the department might be more focused on teacher trainings or other things that maybe aren't as useful to parents. But I would encourage parents to go on our website, which is azed.gov and there are sections where you can click through as parents. And actually one resource I would recommend parents look at that I just think is a great resource is our School Report Card System, because I know that's a question that we get a lot from parents as they're

struggling to choose a school, there's so many different options these days. And I'm sure within Chandler, even at each school, it has its own very unique school community. And so on the school report card website you can find out does this school have music or arts? It's not just the test scores. We like to make sure we're also highlighting other things like are there sports or other types of features that a school might be proud of? So I think that's a great resource that our department offers because I know that can also be difficult for parents.

Brenda Vargas:

It can be daunting, especially if you're a first time parent, if you're a parent that you're sending your first to kindergarten or you know, maybe you moved here from another state and you're used to things running a little bit differently and you're just getting acclimated. So I appreciate the fact that you share that resource that is on the azed.gov website that parents can peruse and take a look and see. So that is really important. And I know with certain populations a lot of times our parents are their child's voice, right? Because their child can't communicate and can't cheer. So I'm glad that you, your department is highlighting and really focused on the population that maybe cannot give and so we're spending or emphasizing a little bit more time with those parents to make sure that we listen.

Brenda Vargas:

So I know Superintendent Hoffman that you have been in addition to working with the different partners within our state, you have certainly worked very hard in order to make sure that you are working with the Governor's Office on initiatives that I think really fall in line with what Governor Ducey is currently doing in his office and his initiatives as well as ADE, so side-by-side working alongside each other, which is very promising. If you don't mind sharing with our parents, what are some of those, if you were to give them kind of a sneak peek if they haven't tuned in. I know there's a lot to watch on the news and sometimes I like to say let's focus on some positive pieces and the fact that we're moving forward.

Speaker 2:

I also love focusing on the positive and seeing where can we work together to move the needle because there are things that we can be doing. So one huge win for us this past year that we worked with the Governor's Office on was the School Safety Grant which was expanded last year. They added an additional \$20 million bringing the total of \$32 million that was allocated and that is for our School Resource Officers, and then for the first time they added School Counselors and Social Workers that can also be funded through the School Safety Grant. So with that additional funding, we were thrilled to be able to award new positions to 383 schools across the state! We really need to celebrate that and keep celebrating that.

Brenda Vargas:

I would agree and CUSD was awarded as well. So we were very pleased and I'll tell you there was a lot of celebration when we received that information. Our principals were like yelling on the phone, they were so excited. So that's going to have a direct impact on many students.

Superintendent Hoffman:

That is fabulous to hear and I am very optimistic that work will be continuing this year because we did have almost 900 schools that applied. And as I say, school safety should not be competitive. It should be schools and students get the services they need. So we are optimistic and partnering with the

Governor's Office again that we can add an additional \$38 million. It is in his current state budget proposal which would fund all of the schools that had submitted applications, which would bring the number up to almost 900 schools. So we're cheering that on as well and doing everything we can to advocate for that funding because it would just make such a huge impact for our students,

Brenda Vargas:

And I think we know some important things that you made sure that to make happen. I know your department was working tirelessly to make sure that as we looked at safety, we not only looked at that school resource officer piece, which is so important, but also the prevention piece when we look at from a counseling and social work perspective and making sure that we have this model of prevention that's collaborative and that we are not being by any means, not reactive on the punitive side and definitely pursuing more restorative justice type of practices and working a lot on the prevention piece as early on as we possibly can with students because we know that once they fly the nest and as they become interdependent and are on that quest for autonomy, during those nice fun teen years, that they're going to learn and they're going to make mistakes and we want to see them through that. And I think individuals in these roles, they're vital. They're vital to our school. As vital as a teacher is just wearing a different hat within our schools to make sure that students get everything that they need and have someone to go to inside the classroom as well as outside of the classroom.

Superintendent Hoffman:

That's so true. We want all of our students to have high academic achievement, but if we are not meeting their needs in terms of their social, emotional or mental health needs, then we know they won't be ready to learn and that they're going to struggle. And that might be something that we might not see visibly, but that could be an underlying issue as a reason of why they might be struggling academically.

Brenda Vargas:

Well, it's simply nice to have a collaborative approach with the Governor's Office to be looking deeper. Right? Kind of under the magnifying glass has to what is really at the root of the cause. As we ask some tough questions when either subgroups and, or certain groups are not achieving maybe a mark compared to their peers or compared to their counterparts. So I am glad that those questions are being asked because that allows us to be brave, to have the discourse necessary to say, what else can we do? Or what are we missing? You know, what do parents need or what does the student need? And collectively all stakeholders together, right? Then we can come up a plan that really is going to be solid and that works for all kids. So I'm grateful as an educator as well as a parent. Thank you. I know that in tandem with the Governor's Office there's been a lot of legislative pieces that have really kind of pushed us forward as it relates to student well being. I'll kind of use that umbrella encompassing all. And what I know that you have been really supportive and your office has been very supportive as to some of those student wellness pieces. I don't know if you would like to kind of just share a tidbit or some of the ones that are near and dear, most recent for you.

Superintendent Hoffman:

Well last year we were really happy to see that the Mitch Warnock Act passed so that we can make sure that all of our teachers are trained in suicide prevention. And then we're again supportive of that this year that Representative Bowie's bill SB 1445, would make sure that the school counselors and social workers that are currently in training programs are currently in a college program working on their

degrees, would also be required to go through a suicide prevention training. So, we had really positive things on the front. One other one I've been watching and cheering on is that would require our schools and also our colleges that use student ID cards to have a resource phone number, like the teen lifeline number as another suicide prevention measure. So those are just some examples of legislation that I think are kind of kind of no brainer. This is kind of like, Oh why didn't we have this before? So to me it just makes sense and they have a lot of bipartisan support. So I'm feeling good about those.

Brenda Vargas:

I can speak on the behalf of the counselors and social workers in our district, to know that that support is there. It means the world to us and our students as we know that all of these legislations that you just mentioned really support each other and this initiative to make sure that we're getting information out there so that, students, when they find themselves either feeling hopeless or in desperation or when they're assisting someone else, a friend, because we know that youth tend to go to each other before they come to an adult. And yes, parents, they do still come to us and you know, we need to still make concerted efforts so that they continue to do, however we know that most likely they're going to their friends probably before they reach out to us. So we want to make sure to equip them with what they need and let them know that these services are free, that there is really someone out there they can talk to. We live such busy lives and sometimes, you know, in one minute they're fine in the next three hours later, you know, for whatever life circumstance, or whatever stressor they might have, they might have a struggle and we just want them to know that there's always someone to help. So I personally thank you for supporting that. I know that our colleagues all across the state will see a great impact in making sure that information is out there for our students. So thank you. Superintendent Huffman, you've done quite a bit in such a short amount of time. Your office has certainly been busy. As we wrap up and bring this to a closing, is there anything that you would like our parents to take away or any last minute info for parents of CUSD and even the East Valley or whoever is listening out there, this some important piece to know from you?

Superintendent Hoffman:

I think just I would end on broadly that this work is a part every minute of every day. It's not like we're encouraging there be one class on mental health or social wellness. It should be integrated throughout our school programs or school classes as well as in the homes and the community that it's because I think even adults are struggling sometimes with the stresses of life and we all get so busy and that's something that the students on my Student Advisory Council brought up to me is they just said, well, everyone's so stressed. And so I think it's something that everyone is coping with on some level. And some people more than others, but we all have our ups and downs. And so I think that I would just end by saying these skills can be integrated into every part of our lives and our children's lives, so that we can all be a community of support and make sure that they're looked after and have every chance of success.

Brenda Vargas:

You couldn't be more right about that. We're all living in the same boat as we just need to be here to help one another. On that note, parents, I couldn't have said it better, but please know that we are here for you and we have amazing resources on our website. You're also welcome to reach out to me as well. vargas.brenda@cusd80.com. Follow us both on Twitter. We're there, I'm sure you can find us pretty quickly, but we have incredible resources and community supports in regards to all of the things mentioned. Thank you for tuning in for another CUSD Cares podcast. Have a fabulous day.

