



2023 STATE OF THE DISTRICT MESSAGE

(ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT)

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Hello, This is Dr. Jeff Craig, superintendent of the West Aurora Schools. And welcome to our annual state of the district. In an effort to reach a larger audience, we've taken a different approach this year. This podcast will include full interviews with district leaders who will reflect upon the accomplishments of the past year and share key initiatives for the coming year. We will also create condensed video summaries of each segment of this podcast, which can be found on all of our social media platforms. And for those who may be interested, the English and Spanish transcripts of our conversations can be accessed on our website at sd129.org. So let's get right to it. I have here sitting with me my first two guests, West Aurora Board president Mr. Rich Kerns and Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, Dr. Michael Smith. Welcome to both of you. Thank you. Absolutely. Thank you for being here. This is a great opportunity to have a really in-depth discussion about where we are and where we're going. And I want to share with our listeners the reason for putting you together. We are some of the most important responsibilities of any school board. First of all, is hiring and evaluating the superintendent. And so this past fall, our Board of Education appointed Dr. Michael Smith as our next superintendent of schools who will succeed me when I retire. And I want to say this succinctly, June 30th of 2024. And so I want to start off with board President Kerns, if you could talk a little bit about because I know there's questions and we had the advantage of being able to identify our process early on. And so if you could talk about the timing of our selection process and the announcement and some of the rationale for how you approach this.

RICH KERNS

Exactly. So first, we as a board, we're very happy with the sort the progress the district has made under Dr. Craig, with our finances, the programs, the direction we're going. And he's also done a great job developing and building our leadership team. And so what that has allowed us as we've had some awesome candidates right here in the House and coming off the heels of the pandemic, the last thing the board wanted to do was to bring in someone new that isn't familiar with our culture, doesn't know what's

going on, doesn't know where we're going. And the board thought that that could be the worst thing that we could do to our students and to our staff. So since we wanted to do an internal search, we felt, let's do this. Last year as so that then we can have that person selected, Dr. Smith, and then be able to have Dr. Craig be able to mentor him throughout the remainder of his tenure with the goal and purpose really, of being able to have us have a smooth transition as possible with minimal disruptions. Because, you know, Lord knows we've had so many disruptions the last couple of years that to be able to say, hey, work and hand this baton off smoothly, keep all cylinders going and keep our progress moving.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

So if I could, I heard a couple of things pop out. I just want you to expound upon, if you would, please. You talked about our culture. You talked about consistency. Why was that so important for the board?

RICH KERNS

Partly because we have an awesome culture here. We're very happy with what has been developed and built over the last ten years, and we want that to continue. And so we felt as an internal candidate, they understand this, they live this, they've helped create this. And so we want to continue that going forward.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Awesome. Thanks for sharing that because that's really important for our listeners to hear. There is sometimes they don't understand some of the background or some of that rationale that goes with it. So thanks for sharing those pieces. Dr. Smith, if I could turn to you. Sure. I know you really developed a detailed plan for the board over the next 18 months at that time.

And now those months are starting to shorten as I've been made aware. But if you can share a little bit about what that transition plan looks like and what people should be able to anticipate, how we're going to work together in something we want to accomplish together. Absolutely.

DR. MICHAEL SMITH

What I was able to present to the board, should I have been identified as a successful candidate, which again, thank you to board President Kerns, members of the board, for trusting me in terms of identifying myself for that role. But in terms of the transition, really, what a blessing it is to have a year and a half to walk in your shadow, quite honestly, for a little bit as I look to step into the role and we've already begun, as you know, some of those actions, I can appreciate the fact that you made a point to sit down with me.

We pulled out the transition plan and we went over it pretty much bullet by bullet specifically. It was the introduction of what it is that you do in sharing your perspective. I can honestly say for our listeners, for board President Kearns and those that don't know as an executive leadership team, you're fairly transparent with what it is that we do. We work as a team, so there are things that I was aware of, but until you're sitting in the seat and you actually have that view, there are things that we didn't see. Even though we sat on your executive leadership team. So as a result, I know you have looked at your calendar specifically and have started to invite me to sit in, not be an active member unless it is appropriate for me to do so, but to sit and listen, to catch up to speed on different conversations that are going on, that weren't might not have been germane to what I was doing in h.r. But as i look to step in the role of superintendent, i would need to be aware of. So we've definitely started doing that. I know you have processed with joy for our executive assistant. Just key contacts. I know you have phone calls and meetings with city personnel, LUDA representatives, the large unit district association for the state of Illinois. And you just paused and think, okay, this is someone I'd like Mike to meet, and I've appreciated those introductions. We've started those. And as the school year progresses and winds down, we've been a part of conversations about what it is that we want things to look like, I should say, going forward. And this speaks to my conversation with the board, to Dr. Current, our board President Kearns is point. We weren't rebuilding anything. We have a nice structure that was developed under your leadership, but we talked about maybe doing a little bit of remodeling of the furniture inside because people are changing seats and naturally it will cause us to think differently about how we process even via the nature of me moving into the seat of superintendent, what does that back feel look like? How does that affect our executive leadership team? How do we want to think about our senior leadership team? Those are the conversations that again, yes, you've given me the autonomy to make the decision as the incoming superintendent, but I know I do that with counsel with you next to me, asking questions from the perspective of a superintendent and almost starting to train me to start thinking along those lines. And again, what a tremendous gift that is from the board. And what I appreciate in terms of our partnership as I prepare

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Well, appreciate your thoughtfulness about the approach. I think, you know, one of the things that that I learned early and that you continue to experience, even as recently as the other night at our State of the City address, just all of our different community partners in putting names and faces and making those connections about the roles that they play as it impacts our district.

DR. MICHAEL SMITH

Absolutely. Actually to that point, at the state of the city, I had an opportunity to meet, meet or reintroduce myself to Chief Cross. And as I introduced myself, he paused because he said, I heard your name and I thought I knew who you are. And he pointedly said, We have a great connection with Dr. Craig and we want to continue that with you. So again, that's an example of what we're talking about.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Those are good partners to have for sure. So, Mr. Kearns, this is this is a restatement of, I think, what we all believe, really excited about what we do and who we are in District 129. And I think, you know, one of the things of my peers that every year since most recently retired, they cautioned me that my to do list will never be completely exhausted and so I plan on really pursuing our agenda and a lot of the things that we want to get done until the very last day. But one of the challenges is, is bridgeable to tell our story of our district. And how do we do that in the various ways that people will listen, pay attention, internalize what the messages we're trying to share. If I could ask you to share with families and with staff members that are listening as they as people make decisions to put down roots and decide what community they want to live in. Because a lot of times it's the schools that drive those decisions. There is price and there is availability and location, but a lot of times it's old school systems. What are some things that our our community may not be able to discern through social media? The websites? That's really the vibrancy of our district. The long way to get to the question.

RICH KERNS

Yes. Yeah. Well, and quite honestly, too, there are a lot of answers to that because I think, sadly, the online searching is so inadequate to really display what is going on in our district, what our district is about, what our community is about. And first, it might seem like we have a large district, a large community, but it's really a small town feel. And we have a lot of families that have gone through our system, have gone off to college or started a job. But when it comes time to raise a family, they're moving back into our district to raise their kids here. So we have a lot of families that are choosing to be here, which I think is a big difference. Secondly, along with our teachers, we have students that have gone through our buildings and graduated to get a teaching degree to just come back here and teach. Absolutely. And it's one of the highest percentages I've ever seen in a district and can't be understated because I think it really goes to show the ownership that our teaching staff have for our students and our community, that these are their schools and they want the students, they have this next generation to have what they had going through this and want to continue that on. So that's a huge point. Also, the offerings that we have in our schools, the choices and options that are available really account that every student honestly can have a place that they fit.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

That's it's hard to match. I think that any of our surrounding peers would be really hard to match what we do offer and I think that's a huge attraction.

RICH KERNS

Yes. And so we have over 70 clubs, activities, fine arts, sports that students could be able to plug into some of the largest app and dual credit offerings in the area. If a student knows what kind of track that they want to go on, whether that's for a career or for a major, we have multiple lanes that they could go down that would put them so far ahead of other students out there, whether that's going into the workforce or going to college and a great example of that is what's across the parking lot here at a Weisner Center that now is on all cylinders here, working with all the bays filled out from our , C&C to welding to advanced robotics to all the various trades that we can offer so that realistically when these kids are getting out of school, they have a job waiting for them.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Absolutely.

RICH KERNS

And and a well-paying job. Or if our kids are going to college, they're able to take a lot of courses in high school that count for college. The now is saving real dollars. And in today's world, that's a lot of money. Colleges are not cheap anymore. Another point that I think is really important that a lot of people don't really get to see from the outside is we're a district that's very healthy financially now. It's been a long road to get here and it's very been a lot of hard work. But what that means is that we have stability for our programs, for our students, that that protects us if we have any financial issues in the future of dips in funding or other various things that could pop up. This has also allowed us to be able to really deal with our infrastructure and get that fully up to date and almost fully there come in here shortly. That then allows us now to just be on a maintenance schedule and shift funds that we have to more to teaching and learning and which I think is really important as we get through these next couple of years here. And then finally, there's one other one that I'll mention, there's a multitude of others, but that I think is very impactful for our children, and that's that we are in a very diverse district with over 54 languages being spoken, students and families coming from a multitude of backgrounds that this is so helpful for our students to be able to experience as we... This is sort of our reality now as a nation and as we have become a very globalized country for our students to be able to converse with all sorts of people from different backgrounds and thoughts, to then grow from those experiences, to then take that to real life beyond high.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

School, I think we can take this segment and send it to all of our real stories and use it as a promo for our district...that's awesome. Well said. Well said that, you know, if people don't get excited about the opportunities for kids based on what you just shared, I don't know what does that that's certainly has a lot of positives for us. So thank you for sharing that. So as I turn to you, Dr. Smith, one of our highest priorities is to make sure that we have the very best in front of our kids every day in terms of our staff. So could you share with our listeners some of the efforts that you and your team take to recruit and retain the highest quality in any level and in our district to be in front of our kids and around our kids?

DR. MICHAEL SMITH

Sure. And really, I can't go very far in answering that question without again, recognizing and honoring the connection and partnership that we have as a leadership team with our union leadership. We haven't gotten to where we are by accident. There has been some intentional action. There has been intentional planning, there have been difficult conversations. There have been and there's been an effort to seek to understand the perspectives of the many various players that make up District 129. So that's the backdrop to what I would say in honoring Dr. Brent Raby and what he's brought to bear with professional development. You talk about what do we offer our staff. We have a comprehensive and very robust in-house West Aurora University where our staff can go be trained in concepts that they can take right back into the classroom. But more importantly, they're being taught by people who are here in district. So it's not a drop in training when let you go, it's a drop in, come alongside you, help you grow, and then walk with you as you develop that again. That doesn't happen everywhere. And that's also part of that partnership. And where I would highlight Dr. Angie Smith and our operations team, the experience of our staff, once they are a member of the staff, is something that we work hard to make sure people feel supported, cared for and via our financial resources and how we adjudicate those. We want to make sure we're competitive. You talk about recruitment. We don't want staff to say we're not honoring or respecting what it is that they're doing, showing up every day via what they see on their bank account. That's not the only thing. But we hold our heads high that we're not at the bottom. We're competitive with what we offer because we want to respect the job and the roles that we're asking people to fill day to day. Those are a couple of small things that we do. But in terms of the other steps that we've taken from a human resources perspective, we have some pretty strategic partnerships with area universities. Board President Kerns talked about staff who have gone to school here, who have come back to teach. We are at a level where we are identifying those juniors and seniors in high school that want to go into education, identifying a path for them where we track them

all through their college experience so that when they're ready, they're coming back to us to student teach, which by default puts them in prime time position for us to identify them for and secure them for teaching positions. So I mean, talk about a comprehensive process and approach to support those that understand what it means to be a Blackhawk and what it means to be a part of District 129.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

And, you know, think going back, jeez, ten or 15 years ago probably would never have been a thought, you know, start engaging with our kids when they're in our own schools, preparing them for when they come out of that pre-service to come back and be service members up here and ever them. You know, as we've come out of the pandemic, we have found that the work environments have changed dramatically. You know, there's some entities, some organizations that are still gradually bringing employees back in-house. People have choices. And in our our business of education, not being in person is not a lot of choice. And so we kind of have to be here. And sometimes people choose to do that for a variety of reasons. So I'm going to put you on the spot a little bit. What gets you here every day? What brings you the joy of serving in the role that you do now and moving into the future?

DR. MICHAEL SMITH

Sure. If I could selfishly answer that question, I would say what gets me up? What has me come every day is I'm selfish enough to say I don't want anyone else to do to do it for me. I am at a position not even title-wise, but having invested 23 years in the District 129 and knowing where we've come, where we're still going and being excited about that journey, I don't want to off-board that opportunity to anybody else because I'm not done yet. So that's what wakes me up. That's what gets me out of bed. It's not about a why I'm not defending what I do. Sure. You know, there are some people who may not want to step into education and be a part of what we do every day. But those that understand and really have tasted and seen what we've gone through the pandemic and are still celebrating what our students are displaying and showing that they're able to do, not just our students, but quite honestly, I applaud our staff. There's a resiliency in education that should be applauded and to be a part of that, That's what I get to do and that's what excites me about the opportunities I have each and every day. And I honor the leadership of our unions as well. Talk about partnership. I applaud them. Again, where we are doesn't happen by accident. We've had difficult conversations. We've not always agreed, but we've partnered in our focus on students and wanting to provide the best opportunity for them. That goes all the way up to the levels of leadership of our school board, our parents, our community. It's special. Unless you've been a part of it, you really don't know. So great telling a story of people listening to people listening to this who may not understand. But that's part of the invitation. That's why we're doing this

right now. We're doing our best to share and tell this story of why West is special and quite honestly, to encourage those that are part of it. We're not perfect, but we're getting better every day. And wow, look at where we were versus where we are now. It's something to celebrate.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

Well, and that's a great positive way to share that story and certainly gives them lots of confidence that we're going to be in great hands moving forward. So thanks for sharing that. Mr. Kerns, If I can ask you a similar but I think going back, I remember my board meetings in February of 2014, seeing you attending board. You weren't a board member. You were a concerned citizen and a concerned parent. When we were challenged with passing a capital needs referendum, a significant one in a very difficult economic environment. We asked you to take on leadership along with Don Pilmer, to lead our West Aurora Volunteers for Education, which was the community leadership piece for our referendum. And then now we're sitting on the board and then leading our board as the president. What is the call to service to provide that you don't get paid for this, You're not under contract. This is your time that you're giving and you have kids and a wife and a family and your own life. But what is your call to service each and every day and each and every time of all the things that Dr. Smith has outlined, the things we've gone through, what is it that brings you to service?

RICH KERNS

Well, it starts. I love our district. I love our community. I want our schools to be the best that they could possibly be for our students so that when they move on from here, they can be proud to say I'm a Blackhawk. And even potentially when they go to raise their family, they're coming back here and doing the same thing and repeating this all over again. So that's big for me. I also want to leave our district in a better position than when I found it in. So that's striving me to make decisions and or wanting to improve things, making wise decisions. And the other part of it too, that that's that we get to experience that a lot of people don't actually see us at our board meetings. We get to see students come before us that have set big goals before themselves and achieve them, and that sense of achievement, that sense of, Hey, I set this big one out here and I hit it and that's awesome. And I really hope that all of our students can be able to experience that before they graduate.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

That level of accomplishment.

RICH KERNS

Exactly.

DR. JEFF CRAIG:

That. Well, gentlemen, I appreciate your sharing your thoughts, your wisdom, your passion for our district board. President Kerns and Dr. Smith, thank you for your time today. We appreciate it. On behalf of all of our students and staff of District 129. Thank you.

DR. MICHAEL SMITH & RICH KERNS

Thank you.

MUSIC

DELANEY BASTIAN

Hello! I am student board member, Delaney Bastian. The role of a student board member is to serve as a liaison between the board of education and the student body.

I attended Fearn Elementary, Herget Middle School, and as a senior at West Aurora High School, I enjoy participating in tennis, the National Honors Society, and band. Upon graduation, I plan on studying sports management at a four-year university.

In the next segment of the State of the District, Superintendent Craig, and his guests will discuss the current instructional environment, how School District 129 helps support its students and its teachers, and what is up next in the world of teaching and learning!

But before I let you go, did you know that 71% of West Aurora High School students are involved in at least one of our 25 unique sports OR one of our 71 diverse clubs or organizations? And involved students have a grade point average nearly one full point higher than those who do not take advantage of these opportunities. School District 129 offers numerous extracurricular opportunities at each level, so encourage a student in your life to get involved today!

Now, let's turn things over to Dr. Craig who is sitting with our next guests.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Thank you. Joining with me today, I have our assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, Dr. Brant Raby, and our executive director of Elementary and Secondary Education, Dr. Sarah Waddell and Mrs. Liz Wendel, respectively. Welcome. It's good to have you here. I'll address my first question to Dr. Raby, put you on the spot right from the get-go. So we came in together back in 2014. So this is finishing up year nine that

you have been at the helm of our teaching and learning division. So a lot's changed. We've had a lot of nuances from referenda to state funding, throw in a little pandemic, and now we have some high expectations of our teacher learning group as we come out of this. Can you talk to us? Describe for us the instructional environment for District 129.

DR. BRENT RABY

Yeah, I think one of the things that we've really tried to think about is how we want to greet students every day. We want students to feel like our buildings are their second home and that they come in and that they feel a part of the instructional culture and they really want to be here. And that all starts with our vision around curiosity, complexity, and joy. We've spent a lot of time talking to our teachers about how to make that come to life within their classrooms and that our kids, our students on a daily basis have that experience. Because when they really feel like they're getting to explore concepts themselves, I think that's really where we see engagement and that we see attendance rates improve. We see kids having more interactions with their teachers rather than just kind of sitting and listening to someone all day.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

You know, it's an interesting piece that you raise because when you think about teaching and learning instruction and those strategies that come alongside that, you don't necessarily think about creating a a greeting strategy, a purposeful induction of kids into our schools. Why is that so important?

DR. BRENT RABY

Yeah, I think everything and I think now more than ever as kids had a little break from what traditional schooling is, I think sometimes we have to we have we have this amazing opportunity. So I know there are a lot of challenges that came out of the pandemic and virtual learning and all that good stuff. I think why we had this amazing opportunity to reset some of those expectations. And I think that's, you know, very simple. The fact that somebody saying hi to you as you walk into the classroom, it means a lot to kids is that they actually feel seen and known and that they want to be part of that instructional environment and we really want to engage with them. And it's just not a compliance activity that they need to endure every single day. And, you know, some of that gets into we've done a lot of learning with our staff around, you know, it's one thing to say curiosity, complexity, enjoyable. What is that really look like in practice? And we've had a lot of conversations about how do we really challenge kids, and that just doesn't mean more work or harder work. That really means how do we get them to think process, collaborate within the classroom? And that comes to the conversations that we're having on the classroom. And we use the word dialog or exploratory talk that

we really want to hear students interacting more than we want the teachers just to throw out questions. And that, you know, it all boils down to our commitment to the learner. Are we meeting their social emotional needs as well as their academic needs within the classroom? But it's really hard work and we have a lot of staff members that some days are better than others and they're working hard at trying to get there. And we're trying to put a lot of structure around that to make it easier.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So I think it helps and I appreciate you articulating that because I think we can use our jargon and our philosophy and to break it down for people that to answer the way, I think it helps our focus. Plus, I think it's a great message to all aspects of our organization. The little things make a difference. I appreciate you sharing that, Dr. Waddell. I'm going to focus back to you a little bit. Given your purview over all of the elementary instructional aspects, how does that translate into our early childhood in elementary levels?

DR. SARAH WADDELL

Yeah, I think really, actually, just even starting with early childhood, I don't know that everybody knows that we have a prenatal to three program and then our preschool for all program and our preschool expansion program, which is our full-day sections. I think that when we think about meeting our learners, we're meeting our learners prenatally and really working with our families, getting them into the district. From the very beginning, I think I really want to highlight the work that early childhood has done and part this year, because all three programs have been extensively monitored through state and the programmatic pieces. And that's it's a lot for our teachers. And I think that we don't often understand that the 3 to 5 program is not just daycare. There's a lot of learning that is happening and we really are trying to meet students really where they are developmentally and then see them grow. So when I think about that early childhood perspective, again, I just like to highlight that we do have some of these programs here in the district.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So I'm going to push a little more on detail because I asked, you know, we had a presentation at our board meeting earlier this week and to draw that out a little more, I'm not sure people kind of scratch their head prenatal, how do we deal with prenatal? And then can you share with those listeners the difference between our preschool for all and our preschool for all expansion and what that means to our community?

DR. SARAH WADDELL

Sure. So for our prevention initiative, which is that prenatal to three, really, we start to find families who are expecting and we start to have conversations with them in their homes. So this is our home visiting program, really helping them to access different services throughout the community, helping them then eventually transition hopefully into our preschool programs at three and so we have two preschool programs. We have a half a day program. That's our preschool for all. And then we have our full day program, which is the expansion program.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And I think that's something that a lot of our community members probably had no idea that we offer, especially when we do the home visits, creating that welcoming portal into our district. Absolutely. Thank you. I'm going to move on to our secondary level. The great Big mysterious 6th through 12th grade. So Mrs. Wendel, can you talk a little bit about what this means from your purview 6 to 12.

LIZ WENDEL

Yeah, I think one of the things that we're most excited about at the secondary level is we really do want our students to be active learners and recognizing in the classroom that their thinking matters and that it's important. So a lot of the work that we've done over the past year has really been around trying to help think about the environments that we want our students to experience. At the middle school level. We are seeing an increase in our departments that are trying to really use an inquiry or problem-solving-based approach, which fits really well with the commitments and pieces that you heard earlier from Dr. Raby around really that dialog and connection to our students in the classes. So we're really trying to encourage our teachers to take risks. We're trying to encourage our students to take risks. And one of the things that we're really starting to see with some of our science classes is that they are really trying to take questions that students have about learning and apply those to being able to think more critically, ask deeper level questions, and really extend their learning beyond typically what we've done in the past, which is just here's a fact, memorize the fact. So we're really excited about those changes. We also have really put an emphasis at the high school and really from our transition into fifth and sixth grade, really trying to stress the importance at all levels about this idea of kind of being Blackhawk-ready, to steal that from our high school staff. One of the things that we're trying to make sure is that students are aware of all of the opportunities that we do have. I think sometimes when we're in middle school, our students don't necessarily know what the high school has to offer. So one of the things that we were able to do this year, we actually brought all of our eighth graders over to West High for an Electives expo where they were really encouraged to find their passion about things that they were interested in. So we were able to show our current students different electives that are available as they head into ninth grade next year. And I think

any opportunity that we have as an organization to help our students and our families recognize that we value and really appreciate the multiple pathways that our students have to graduation and commencement and really what that means post-West High. Sure. Sometimes I think we think only a college and career aspect, but we know that a lot of our students have career aspirations and we want to make sure that there are pathways for all of them in our secondary world.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Yeah, thank you for sharing that insight. And I think one of the pieces that I think you've hit sadly on is a lot of our kids really don't know that we have all these opportunities and that there's something for everybody. And, you know, they think about the 60 plus clubs and activities, full scope and sequence of academics that just probably didn't exist years and years ago that I think we pride ourselves on at West Aurora and I and I think that's a real important piece to be able to expose them to that. So I appreciate your sharing that. And I probably goes back to what Dr. Raby was talking about that you alluded to with that student-driven student to their own self learning. I think that that's a real important piece to keep pulling out. The kids have a role in this, too. A lot of folks probably don't understand that this time of year is when we start planning for next year. And even though we're just early into March, but this is the time to start thinking about how we set up for August and moving forward. So I'll open it up to whoever feels like they want to jump in. What's a little peek behind the curtain about what we can expect for the 2324 school year?

DR. BRENT RABY

I think the theme, if we're going to tie it all together and obviously I would like Sarah and Liz talk about the things that are happening at elementary and secondary specifically. But I think it's about purpose and it's about being purposeful and looking really at our intent. And our kids have a lot of needs and there's no doubt about that. There's only so many minutes of the day. We're trying to be the most effective as we can within those minutes of the day. So, you know, in a second or two you'll hear about things that we're doing at the elementary about really being a little bit more purposeful and clearer about what our intent is and what our focus is going to be in the same thing at secondary and you know, about how we can best utilize every minute of the day to maximize student learning and to make sure that we're trying to meet some of these really lofty goals. And it's not all just about test scores, but it's all about it to make sure that the students are having the best educational experience that we can have when they walk into our building.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So thank you for sharing that. I appreciate it.

DR. SARAH WADDELL

I think when I think about the elementary level, we've just been doing a lot of work in both literacy and math over the course of the last 3 to 5 years. We have literacy residents right now that will be going back into the classroom who've done extensive letters. I'm training, but we're going to be offering more letters, training for cohort. So we'll be excited to extend that to cohorts three and four going into next year. But we've been doing a lot of work with our foundational skills reading so that from phonics to reading, but then also really being mindful of what does this mean for our multilingual learners and how does that look in the classroom. So we have a lot of learning to do, and I think I say that every single year. But I think that is really important and a teaching and learning department to just honor the amount of learning that we've done and all of the learning that we're still that's still on the horizon. We are working on some shared literacy revisions when we think about the literacy components. And all of this kind of comes under that umbrella of relooking at our instructional minutes. At elementary, we have 380 minutes every day, and that's actually not a lot of time when we think about the mandates, but we also think about what we want to do with our students around literacy and mathematics. And so really trying to be purposeful about how do we make sure that all of those minutes really count. We've been working extensively with math. We've implemented investigations since 2018. But as you can kind of think about those years that was punctuated by COVID. And so this was one of our first years of actually seeing the program throughout. And we're excited. We've been able to work with the writers of investigations, with our math residents and our math interventionists that will continue to because there's a lot that goes into two plus two. You know, in elementary, it seems as if that should be very, very simple to be able to teach elementary mathematics by its I think every elementary teacher would attest to both the literacy and the mass, The the professional learning to be able to get those concepts out to students is is immense. And it's a heavy lift. And there's a lot of background understanding to understanding just there are 15 stages to knowing how to count. So that's a lot. Sure it is. And I don't know that prior to the work that we've done, we really understood that fully. I think the other thing that is exciting for us is that we do recognize the need for some more social emotional learning components within our day for elementary. And part of our day next year will include an articulated time for our class community where we can work more on some of those social-emotional learning standards through the CASEL Competency is talk more about wellness and safety and some of our digital citizenship pieces. So all of these things that we've always needed to do but really have not carved out time to do them. We're really trying to be explicit about that. We know that there's still a lot of learning to do, and that won't be perfect going into next year, but I am excited to have those pieces in place.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So we don't check our learning capacity at the door when we graduate college and take our first job. And you know, to your point about the 380 minutes we've talked about, how do we effectively and efficiently use that time and it's like how do we get more just because we have more to do? So I appreciate you sharing that as well from the secondary lens.

LIZ WENDEL

Definitely. So we are similar to elementary, actually. A lot of the things that I think you hear there. We've also been really working with at the secondary level over the past really 18 months. We've been having conversations with our middle school and our high school staff around how do we best utilize the time that we have for our students in the day and next year? One of the things that I'm excited to see happening as we think about the history of where we've been all of our eighth graders next year, the vast majority of them will end up with two electives as an eighth grader, which is not something that we have seen historically. Some of that is the shift of, I think six years ago now, we moved to a double block structure of mathematics for our sixth graders. Those students are now sophomores at West High, and it's been interesting to see that progression of something that we implemented through COVID and even still seeing how that really has impacted things that we can do at the high school. One of the things that we definitely have next year is a revamp of our mathematics curriculum for grades six through eight. That's just kind of the natural cycle of the resources that we had from six years ago. But that will really allow us an opportunity to help our instruction move forward with the conversations that we've had with staff about really wanting to make those experiences not just better for our students, but also to really allow staff more autonomy to really think about how they're setting up their classroom cultures and the learning in those classrooms. So that'll be one of the big things for us at the secondary level when we think about math instruction six-eight, we also at the high school are really trying to look at pathways for all students and really focusing on some of our students who historically may not have taken an honors level class or may not have taken an AP-Advanced Placement class. We're really trying to find ways to support students that feel like they really do want to push themselves academically and also giving them the support throughout the day to be able to do those things. Next year, we'll kind of have a bringing in a new piece with our Advanced Placement Pre Calc honors class. So that'll be a little bit of a shift. We obviously offer pre-calculus as it is right now, but one of the things that we're always trying to assess from a secondary lens are the courses that we offer. Are those meeting the needs of our students still and are there gaps that we're seeing either based on things that we see happening in the world around us or just changing based on needs that we see more of the student body at large? Absolutely. So we're we're those are kind of some of the big things that we're

looking at at the middle school level. We're also really excited about the opportunity to relook at our student support periods. So we have a group of staff that will start working here pretty soon on really thinking about how does social emotional learning fit within the middle school day and how are we really strategic and sometimes maybe more explicit about helping our students that we know are coming to us with some additional needs in terms of how they really can be successful in our schools.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

You bet. Well, thanks for sharing that. You know, I heard some themes with all three of you about student needs, talked about how do we support our students, talked about greeting our kids, feeling connected and welcome into our buildings. And I don't think we can underestimate the interruption that we experienced the past two and a half years. And so we were marshaling resources to attend to our student needs. What are we doing to attend to some of our adult needs now? The staff that we would transport our kids, that we serve, our lunches, that we support in the classrooms, our instructional leaders. What are some things we're doing for our staff?

DR. BRENT RABY

Yeah, I think that's a really good question. Teaching...actually just working on education in general is a really hard job....I try to tell people that as much as I can. It's not that the kids show up, you teach it, they learn it and then they go home. That's not exactly how it works. And I think one of the things that we've really tried to do is build support structures around our staff to do that hard work. And we invested a lot of our Esser dollars in those things. I know Dr. Wardle mentioned it earlier about the Litt residence in the math residence that we had, so we invested a significant amount of time into their learning. So they could go back to their buildings and support their peers when those questions come up with more of a real time support, the same thing at the secondary level with our instructional residence. For a global perspective, I think we've built one of the more elaborate and premier professional learning systems for all staff. We we've really tried to we don't get a lot of time with our staff. So, you know, I know institute days are really hard on families and because their kids are home and etc., but they're really valuable for us because, you know, we get three days a year where we get to try to cram in all of the learning for our staff members and all the different things that were mentioned before. And I think that's challenging. So we've tried to extend by offering things like self-paced classes about learning some of the computer programs that we have like competency based badges. We have those open for our office professionals, our paraprofessionals, and our teachers right now. So like programs like Schoology and Seesaw all the things that we use, we used to have to pull our way into a computer room or like a computer lab and try to teach them the program. We don't do that now. So we have it's all self-paced and it's online and people can learn how to point and click

and navigate on their own. And as long as they show competency, we can endorse them in that we also have built an in-house university, basically where we don't outsource all of our learning to colleges and universities anymore. We've taken that upon ourselves and we have micro-credentials and equity. We have it in instructional technology. We've done some things around some seminars around math this year, so we keep looking for opportunities for people to learn and learn from our own staff members.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And what's our rationale for approaching it that way.

DR. BRENT RABY

Because it's about building a common instructional language. You know, there's not a secret about how to get the best results as you can in education. It comes down to the classroom teacher that we put in front of kids on a daily basis. That's the one thing we can control. So if we really invest in that one singular piece, I think we'll consistently see improvement within within our system. And the other thing that we did with our ESSER money that I'm really excited about, we speak a lot of different languages . What are we?

DR. JEFF CRAIG

58 languages.

DR. BRENT RABY

And as Dr. Waddell mentioned, that multi-language learners within our system are throughout and that doesn't mean they're always in bilingual classes or ESL classes. We want to keep our students within the core curriculum. So we've really expanded and we've taken over our own ESL cohorts where our staff members can get ESL certified by the Illinois State Board of Education. With our partnership with AU, it's all taught by our internal staff members. It gives us a lot more flexibility about how we can deliver services to students, and we've embedded a lot of cultural understanding within those classes, too. I'll go back to what I originally said. We have a better understanding how to greet people into our instructional environment every day and where students feel like schools, not somewhere they just visit, that it's actually like their second home.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

It's awesome. And I'm sure folks are glad to hear our thoughts behind, you know, Institute days aren't just a blow off day or a fluff day. It's about our professional learning and we're trying to customize it to what they need versus one size fits all. So as we lead

into this last question, I'm going to approach this in a whip around and I start with and this is Wendell, just so you're ready.

One of the things that we are prioritizing and my goals in my role with our board is about recruitment and retention of quality teachers. All three of you talked about how do we put our best foot forward with our kids every day, meaning the adults we put in front of our kids. That's a really important piece. But we know with COVID, the world has changed dramatically. People's wants, needs, ideals about what their workday might or could or should look like and not always being present physically in their workplace. And so we don't have that leverage. We're a people business. We talk about that all the time and so that's a really challenging chunk to the world of education that's challenging anyways. But now you add the people aspect. So from your personal professional lens was, well, what brings you to this job, this opportunity every day.

LIZ WENDEL

Thanks for making me go first. I appreciate that.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

I gave you a little warm-up.

LIZ WENDEL

You did. You did. You know, it's interesting. I so I have actually been in the district almost 20 years, which is a little scary to think about. I started this was my very first job right out of college, kind of coming over from Iowa.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

But you're only like 12 years old. Yeah.

LIZ WENDEL

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And I don't think I ever really could have articulated at that time that I would be here as long as I've been here. I think to your question, one of the things right now that is really exciting for me is we have worked really hard over the past eight, ten years to improve on the things that we're doing, make them better for all of our students. And for me personally, I would say the thing that brings me, I think the most excitement is seeing that through a parent lens in my own two kids. So I won't get emotional. But it's definitely different. I have two kids in the district and knowing that every day the things that we're doing are creating a better experience not just for them, but for students down the road. They cause me every day to question. What I do, to really think about is that the best choice for all of our students. And are we really providing not just one avenue of what learning looks like, but really trying to meet the needs of all of our students? So I would say to that it's absolutely my kids and they

definitely provide me that lens of wanting to make sure that we're always doing better. We're doing really great things, but I know that there are still things that we can improve on, and that really is what keeps me motivated each day, even when I know sometimes it can feel like we've already had that conversation or we just talked about math and we're talking about math again. But that's the reason why we know and want to recognize that our thinking as an organization does change. And it's through all of our daily interactions that I think really give us the perspective to make decisions as we move forward into the future.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

You know, it does get personal, and I'm glad you said it that way because some of our parents, I think maybe they believe that we saw it in a book, read it in a magazine, and we picked it up and said, let's try this. But we really do leave with our head and our heart. And so that comes out really clear. So thank you for sharing that, Dr. Waddell I want to put you on the spot. Okay. What provides your personal coffee to wake up, get up and be here every day.

DR. SARAH WADDELL

Sure. Well, this is where I wish I wasn't going back, because I was really a lot of the same kinds of ideas I have for boys of my own that don't go to this district. And I think said every time, every decision I make, every possibility that we're considering, I, I can't divorce that from what I think about my own kids and what I want this in front of my own kids. And that's not the only lens that I wear, but it certainly is a strong lens. I feel that public education is very, very important to a strong participatory democracy. And I would like to think that my small part in this world provides something better for my own kids, that we are strengthening that democracy because we are able to be thinkers, that we are able to have those foundational skills so that we can actually participate in the day to day workings and question the day to day workings of our society. So that's what I want for my kids. And by extension of that, that is what I want for other people's kids as well. So they are, I think, a reason why I get up. I want them to see what it looks like to go to work and be really passionate about the work that you're doing. They would probably say maybe not be as passionate at times. I'm sure when I'm like, Can we just read another picture book about this idea? I just kind of want to get your feedback on whether or not you like it. But again, I think becoming a mother has put that lens of education that I never had prior to having my kids.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So thanks for sharing that. Appreciate it. Dr. Raby, I'm going to ask you to wrap us up here.

DR. BRENT RABY

Yeah, those are tough answers. So mine's probably a little bit more simply stated, is that what you know, what gets me to come every day is I simply want to help. And I think we have really good people that work really hard, that have the best interests of kids in mind. And it's hard to know that systems and structures and policies and governance and all the things that get in the way from people just trying to help kids learn. And so like anything I can do to try to help that, that's kind of what drives me. It's not about programs, it's not about, you know, sometimes we have to be creative and all that. But as much as I can get out of the way for them to do their jobs every day, that's what drives me.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Awesome. Well, thank you for that. And I, the parents, community members that are listening today, they got to feel really confident and really good that the educational and instructional aspect of their children's lives are in really great hands with you folks at the leadership helm. So thank you for what you do and thank for sharing your thoughts today. There are lots of great things that are happening in our teaching and learning department. We're really proud of what we do every single day for all of our kids. So thank you again. Appreciate it.

DR. BRENT RABY

Thank you.

LIZ WENDEL

Thank you.

MUSIC

ANDREW WONG

Hello! My name is Andrew Wong and I am a senior at West Aurora High School.

I attended Schneider Elementary School and Herget Middle School. In addition to serving as a student board member, I am a member of the wind symphony, StellarXplorers, and I serve as the Air Force JROTC Corp group commander. Upon graduation, I plan on studying engineering at the University of Illinois.

In the third segment of the State of the District, Superintendent Craig, and his guests will discuss recent trends in school safety, the preventative measures School District 129 has taken, as well as the importance of communication, and our efforts in sharing the good news of our schools.

But before I let you go, ***did you know*** that in 2022, our Air Force JROTC cadets were named Armed Division National Champions? In fact, we have a number of clubs and organizations that compete at the national and international level, such as Health Occupations Students of America, Business Professionals of America, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, as well as the SkillsUSA, StellarXplorers, and the International Student Science Fair competitions!

Now, I'd like to hand things over to Dr. Craig who is sitting with our next guests.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Thank you, Andrew. And now my next guests are the executive director of Student and Family Services, Mrs. Marti Neahrng, and our director of Community affairs, Mrs. Anna Gonzales. Welcome, ladies.

MARTI NEAHRING

Thanks.

ANNA GONZALES

Thanks for having us.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Absolutely. This is a good opportunity to have a look behind the scenes because so much of what you guys do, people don't understand some of the thought process. And so I want to kind of ferret that out a little bit today. So in that vein, when you think about community affairs, which is our public relations arm of our organization and student and family services is a broad term and people don't necessarily put those together, but certainly there is a lot of collaboration that comes into play, especially when it comes around school safety, which is certainly been very prevalent over the past several years. So I want to start there. I want to turn to you, Mrs. Neahrng. You have had been called into service to share your expertise, some of your efforts in terms of school safety at a variety of levels, whether they're state, regional or even some of the national opportunities that are conferences. You serve on a variety of executive boards. One in particular, the it's in a northern Illinois school Safety for Administrators Association, and so a variety of those other organizations. And I would also point out selfishly that you were the focus, the theme of our most recent podcast where we talk a little bit about school safety. So if you can talk to our listeners today, what's some of the procedures or some of the structures without giving away the entire playbook that we have in place to keep our students and staff safe in our district?

MARTI NEHRING

Sure. Absolutely. And again, thanks for having me. And it was great being part of the podcast recently, so I really appreciate that opportunity as well. You bet. I am proud of the agency relationships that we've established for our school district with our police departments and emergency management, fire departments, regional Office of Education and surrounding school districts. So we're really lucky to have all of those people on our side if we ever need some additional support.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Really collaborative.

MARTI NEHRING

Absolutely. So as far as structural features, you know, I think we can start with when visitors come to our buildings. Every visitor is asked to ring the bell and state who they are and what the purpose for their visit is. So we start there before we even let anybody come in our building. And once they do, we have locked vestibules. So there's a little bit of a trap in between the first, the first door, and the second door that gives our parents the opportunity to or visitors the opportunity to present their picture ID to our office professional so that can be scanned and it creates our visitors badge, which the visitor would have on their person during their visit that also log our visitors in to our safety monitoring app, which is called Raptor. We use Raptor to account for staff and students if there is ever an emergency situation. And when a visitor scans into the building this allows us to account for them as well. Sure. But it also screens the national sex offender website or registry so that we know that we're letting safe people into our building. And if there's any orders of protection that have been put in place and parents have provide us with that information, it scans that information as well.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Yeah, I think what people don't realize is that our world has changed dramatically where the schoolhouse doors used to just be wide open. Correct. And we were very trusting society and environment back then. And we had reason, you know, reason to be able to have a level of trust and that has been eroded over a lot of the violence we've experienced. And so we take the safety as you share that every time and first and foremost of our students and staff. So that's important for our community and our parents to understand that this isn't by accident. It's very purposeful.

MARTI NEHRING

I think it's also important to note that we have three school resource officers assigned to our district, one from North Aurora, Officer McCoy, and then two from the Aurora Police

Department. Officer Petoskey, who was assigned to our middle schools, and Officer Dopel, who was assigned to the high school.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Full uniforms, fully equipped with their their tools of the trades?

MARTI NEHRING

Absolutely. And then our police departments, Montgomery, North Aurora and Aurora also provide liaison officers to all of our buildings. So someone on regular shift, an officer may stop in just to say hello, walk around the building, shares their information with our building administration. So if there's ever anything anyone needs, they know who they can contact.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And I'm glad you shared that, because I think one of the things that we enjoy and work hard at is continuing to build and manage those great relationships with our municipalities, police departments, fire departments, those first responders, hundred percent. So I want to when we talk about the structures we have in place and our processes that we we engage in. Could I ask you to talk about a little more globally from a your lens, some of those trends that we see not only here in Aurora but across our state and country?

MARTI NEHRING

Sure. Absolutely. I think probably the one that I'll mention first is centered around our students behaviors on social media and electronic devices. We frequently see incidents where students are using their phones and their devices for bullying and harassment, for sexting, completing challenges to destroy property, and then for threats of violence. So I guess that's something, you know, we do have a content filtering platform that we use, but it doesn't capture everything. Sure. So we still I guess my plea would be we still need parents to come alongside of us and partner with us on that. We need parents to know who their kid's friends are, their friends on social media. We want parents. I encourage parents to friend their kids, friends, friends, their friends, their kids, friends, parents. So we know what's going what so they know what's going on.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And if I could just underscore that, you know, we've got Mrs. Gonzales, who is our communications arm of our organization, and we push out in a variety of ways, in a variety of formats. And if I could just shout it from the mountaintop and say it over and louder and emboldened, we need our parents to partner with us to help keep our schools and our kids safe. They need to know what their kids are doing. You know, we

didn't always have cell phones around. You know, back in the day we had other tools, whether they were pagers or whatever. But we still needed to know what our kids were doing and be engaged in the world. I don't care if you're six or 16. We need those parents to be partners with us to help us with that safety.

MARTI NEHRING

Yeah, 100%. I would encourage just a couple of pieces of encouragement for parents. You know, I think it's a really good idea for a charging place to be established in the home. We see a lot of our content filtering alerts come through in the evening hours, probably when moms and dads have gone to sleep. So we know kids are on their phone and they're searching items that are inappropriate. So I would encourage that those charging places be maybe in mom and dad's bedroom or in another area of the house and not in the student's room.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Creating those positive structures.

MARTI NEHRING

Correct. And then probably one other little tidbit of information for parents privacy is not a real thing at home. So parents have the right to say no and to ask for their students phone and to see the things that they're that they're doing.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So and probably not the most fun aspect of being a parent. And it certainly is an integral part of.

MARTI NEHRING

It as it is not. And we've all been there from.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

From both ends. Absolutely. That needed those boundaries of the parents setting those.

MARTI NEHRING

That's right. That is right. The other trend that you asked about is something that we're seeing more recently now across the country and even in our state. And it's called swatting. And swatting is essentially when a false or hoax call is made to say a911 center and they make the claim that there's an active shooter at a certain location. And a lot of times that's at a school. So we're seeing this again across the country. And most recently, multiple school districts in Illinois have been recipient of those hoax or false call alarms.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

I don't think that people just don't understand the fallout that or the reaction to that. If you can see your child's school, I don't care if it's an elementary school, middle school or a high school, when you have five, ten, 15 squad cars, emergency responders converging on your child's building and potentially weapons being drawn because there is a perceived threat because of a hoax call, that's unnerving. And that certainly is not a traditional environment we want our kids and staff to experience. So let me just one more tag on to that. Let's just say maybe there is a bomb threat. You know, we used to get bomb threats called in in the springtime when the weather was nice, final exams, big homework assignment was doing when we call in a bomb threat. And in times like that, sometimes we have to evacuate our buildings. And so we have a process in place. Can you describe So when we have to evacuate, let's just take an elementary school. And what does that look like and what are our procedures?

MARTI NEHRING

Sure. So our buildings all have designated rally points. So when we have to leave a building, students and staff all know those designated rally points and that's where they evacuate to. We then put in place the motion of our Transportation department, so Mrs. Cathcart would dispatch busses to come to those rally points and collect our students and our staff, and then we would take them to a reunification location if that was the next step.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Great. Thanks for sharing that. So I'm going to turn to Mr. Gonzales. And I said earlier that sometimes you wouldn't necessarily put your two departments together, but as we have seen over the years, we spend a lot of time collaborating. So if I could ask you first to talk a little bit about the role of community affairs as it relates to school safety. Talk a little bit about the lessons about the role that you guys play.

ANNA GONZALES

Sure. So I have the pleasure of collaborating with Mrs. Nearing. Any time there is an incident in a building where there needs to be some communication to some targeted groups. Sometimes that's something as seemingly benign as a maybe a fire alarm that was inadvertently triggered. We had to empty the school to that rally point for a little bit of time. And then while we check it out, then those kids come back to that building. We want to make parents aware so that when Johnny gets off the bus and talks to mom, dad about what went on, parents know about it. We also then communicate about other instances that are more central to maybe the potential school threat. But in each of those scenarios, our goal is really simply stated that we want to provide clear and very timely communication to our targeted groups and those are in their internal groups, in

their external groups. When we communicate with our internal groups, we want to make sure that that language is very plain language. I think there was a time in school safety where maybe schools would use some code words, code red, code blue, code green, or maybe hard lockdown, soft lockdown. Those will not be terms that you would ever hear my department tell to are internal groups or external groups during a crisis. Now we use very plain language things like hold in place and teacher so that our staff knows exactly what they're tasked to do. And that scenario, maybe it's a student in a hallway who we just need to keep the hallways clear because they need some medical attention. There's many, many reasons for that. But anyway, when we then communicate with our external groups, we push that information out in both English and Spanish, because we realize that about 30% of our families appreciate that Spanish communication as well. So I'm lucky enough in my department to have a translation specialist to help me with that. And really our purpose when we communicate with our external groups is to relieve some stress in a very stressful moment. And there's a little formula that my department uses in that communication, and the acronym is FAPE. And you might know that as free and appropriate public education. But from our perspective, that is, first of all, what are the facts of the situation? So we make sure to not share that information or any information that might be speculation. We want facts for our parents. A is for actions where the actions that the district has taken promise is promising our next steps. Maybe it's promise of a follow-up because maybe at that point we don't know what our next move is. And we always, always and this is very important to do that with empathy. Sure. And so that's kind of our formula for our communication that we use. But I would also add that both Todd, Mielcarz, myself and our department, we really try to voice ourselves in the area of school safety. My background is having been a teacher at the high school, coming through the curriculum role. I have not been a building administrator. I have not been a dean. And so I've really used and leveraged Martin's group, the Aurora Area School Safety and Kevin Triplets Group, who is our school safety officer to really brush up on. And I've been in this role since 2019. And for that amount of time, I've been part of those monthly meetings. And it's so valuable to be able to meet with law enforcement, fire department, local, parochial, other public schools in the area to hear about what some of the trends are, to see how they're communicating that information. And, you know, when you, God forbid, there is a bigger accident that happens or some kind of an incident, you never want it to be the first time that you would be dealing with that public information officer in that instance. And so it helps us just to be able to build relationships with one another. And that's really key.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Awesome. So I don't want our listeners to think that the sole responsibility of our community affairs is about school safety. A lot of what I showed earlier is the many different ways that people communicate. People share a lesson that we will when we

celebrate the great things that happen in our district, promoting those celebratory events, telling the story of District 129 and then in so many situations over the last two and a half years throughout the pandemic, communicating the various modes that we were in, in terms of mitigation strategies, what are the expectations, what rules were we following and pulling that out in a written format, the visual format, the audio format, so many different ways that you became very creative. Can you talk a little bit more about the many areas that you guys get into each of our 21 facilities and some of the things that you guys do, we're tasked with through building leadership and district leadership.

ANNA GONZALES

We are a small but mighty department, and although we each have our own slice of the pie and our own responsibilities, I would say we collaborate on 99% of those things. So I'm really proud of the work we do. So I'll just kind of share with you what some of our responsibilities are. First is the website. So we create, we manage our district's website. We also support our 18 buildings in managing their website. We also manage all of our social media platforms and we create the videos which you reference that we started to make quite a bit during the pandemic when people were home, the podcast promotional materials. Even this year, the district address is the work of my department and then some of the fun stuff that we get to do or some of the events. And so I'll just share a few of those. Last year we were able to host back to the Books event for our students before the start of the school year. Thanks to the generosity of some community supporters as well as community in schools, we provided 1500 backpacks to our community.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Which is huge. Yes, it is.

ANNA GONZALES

And I'm excited to announce that this coming August, we're looking to give away 2500 backpacks. So our families can actually look after the 4th of July, will be pushing out registration so families can register ahead and then we can save those backpacks for those students for that event. We also got to celebrate some really fun things this year, the ribbon cutting at our operations and our maintenance center, Also the dedication of our revamped Ormond Stadium. These are kind of fun things that my department gets to do. And looking ahead, we have, I think, in the neighborhood of 30 retirees this school year. So we're going to be hosting a retirement breakfast here in May and then also an open house to celebrate the new advancements in our Weisner Center. As you're aware, of course, phase one and four have had programing this year in the areas of cybersecurity, robotics, and advanced building trades. And so we're going to be having an open house on May the 10th in the afternoon so folks can look to our

newsletter for that information. If they'd like to stop by and say hi to us and see what's new there.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Absolutely. Yeah. I think that covering the highs and the lows and the gloom and doom versus the exciting things that we do, I think that all gets encompassed through community affairs. We appreciate that. All right. So I'm going to ask you both the same question and then I'll probably start off with Mrs. Nehring. And I've been asking this of all of our guests. So when we think about just our day to day, you know, the pandemic has changed the landscape of occupation. And what does it mean to go to a job or be employed somewhere doesn't always necessarily mean you go to a place. And the pandemic changed the choice and the options that people have. And, you know, even some of our agencies educationally throughout the state not necessarily engaging every single day in person. And so we don't have that luxury where we're in the people business, even though we're in education, we are absolutely in the people business and we need to be here. So Mrs. Neahrng

MARTI NEHRING

Yes.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

In order for you to be here in person and address some of those challenges that you just discussed, what gets you out of bed in the morning, what gets you here with that smile on your face and able to attend to some of the not so fun things that we deal with?

MARTI NEHRING

Well, I think personally, you know, my family is a part of that. And my husband is a public education teacher in a neighboring district. And then my daughters, Kelsey and Katie, they are my motivation for everything Awesome.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Good plug for the girls.

MARTI NEHRING

Yes. But when you talk about work, I just feel that I'm very, very lucky to be able to come to an environment that I trust and believe in every day. And that means a lot to me because I don't say that just because I get to have the opportunity to help create safe environments for students so that our teaching and learning department can do the awesome things that they do. So I get to do that and I also have the opportunity to help people solve problems. And, you know, I walk the stairwell every day in this building and

it's printed in our stairwell that we have the opportunity to help people solve problems. So student and family services is just very near and dear to my heart. And that's what keeps me going.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Awesome. Thanks for sharing your perspective. Mrs. Gonzales.

ANNA GONZALES

Well, very simply stated, I think I could sum it up almost in one term. That's a part of my title and that is community. And I think I would even emphasize it is this community. So for me, I'm a third-generation West Aurora High School graduate. My kids are fourth generation. I'm a new graduate and a sophomore at the high school. And although this is not really unique in school District 129, it is my story and maybe some of our other interviewees throughout this podcast will kind of make nod to that as well. We seem to really retain people have been part of this community as students come back to serve, and that's my story. And this is a community that raised my grandparents. My, grandmother was an English teacher at West Aurora High School. My mom retired from Goodwin Elementary School, my aunt from Schneider after her entire career and my little sisters over at Washington middle school is a volleyball coach and a science teacher. So shout out to Emily Deppeler. And I guess I share all of this to say I think educators everywhere, it's a hard role. And certainly, Mrs. Neahring myself put in a lot of hours, it's not unique to us. It's a lot of work. But there is no other school district that I would really work this hard for. This community has been they're really special people. They've been very loyal to me and they've been very good to me and my family.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Awesome. Well, I appreciate both of your perspectives. Certainly appreciate you telling your story and giving some insights into the departments that you guys lead and want to personally extend a thank you for all that you bring and contribute to our community and our school district. That's greatly appreciated. So thank you for joining me today.

ANNA GONZALES

Thanks for having us.

MARTI NEHRING

Thank you for having us.

MUSIC

CRISTAL GUTIÉRREZ

Hola! Soy Cristal Gutiérrez, miembro de la junta estudiantil y estudiante de último año en la Escuela Preparatoria West Aurora. Hello! Cristal Gutierrez here, student board member, and senior at West Aurora High School.

My passions include studying different cultures and languages, and I also serve as the vice president of the French Club. Upon graduation, I plan on studying computer science.

In the final portion of the State of the District, Superintendent Craig and his guests will recap the recent developments of our operations department and discuss what's next in their efforts to provide a safe, clean, and welcoming environment that supports the educational process.

But before I let you go, ***did you know*** that School District 129 ranks number 15 among the most diverse school districts in Illinois? And this year, 85 students earned a STATE COMMENDATION TOWARD BILITERACY, while 74 students earned the STATE SEAL OF BILITERACY across 11 unique languages. I am proud to say that I have earned a SEAL OF BILITERACY in both Spanish and French.

School District 129 also has a strong English Learners program comprised of students who speak 65 languages! Being able to speak more than one language is a valuable asset that can open up many doors for our students.

Now to Dr. Craig, who is sitting with our final guests. Au biento!

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Thank you, Cristal. My guest for the final segment of our state of the district are assistant superintendent for operations, Dr. Angie Smith, and our director of operations, Mr. Jeff Schiller. Welcome to both of you.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Thank you.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

This is going to be a fun, fun conversation today. So I know that the two of you just given Angie, your purview over all of operations and Mr. Schiller with your response to the operations department. You guys collaborate a lot. You know, and one of the things that we're going to expound upon a little bit later is the coming on board of our two new operations buildings. And we want to talk a little bit more in detail about that. But, Jeff, if

you could describe for our listeners the role and responsibilities within your department under operations and maintenance.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yeah, absolutely. I have a team about 90 people in the department, and that is building engineers and night engineers maintenance, and that includes electrical plumbing, H Fair, general maintenance, grounds, painting and we try to do everything we can internally to keep the system going every day. I also have a coordinator, an office professional and a custodial manager who works in the department as well. And so basically, you know, with all of those folks, they make it happen every day.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And if I remember, you smartly had a little quote on the back of one of your shirts, most recently talking about within our 21 buildings, roughly a little over a million square feet.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yeah, if I recall, I think it's like 1.8 million. So, yeah, that was my brainy idea.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

That's a lot of space to cover.

JEFF SCHILLER

Lot of space to cover and, you know, we take care of it all.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And that, you know, can underscore enough the importance of, you know, we talked earlier with some of our other podcast commentators about the welcoming aspect of our of our schools. You know, you think about our bus drivers, that that's kind of the first phase that our kids see. But then wanting to our kids to come into a warm, welcoming, well-lit, functioning environment on an everyday basis so that we can do the good work of teaching and learning.

JEFF SCHILLER

Absolutely.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So I appreciate all the work you're doing. So your team recently transitioned again, and I'm not going to ask you to count the number of moves, but you guys move most recently from underneath the stadium. Yes. And into a more permanent housing. And so you have two renovated spaces over there on Morton and New Haven. Talk to us a little

bit about the efficiencies that you're realizing and the effectiveness of being consolidated all in one spot.

JEFF SCHILLER

Well, I'll tell you, it is just amazing with the space that we have today. I mean, we were under the stadium two different times in my career being here with the school district. And I can tell you that now with the three facilities, the two on Moore Avenue and the one on New Haven, we have room. We know what we have. We have supplies at the ready. So when facilities need those supplies, we can get them out immediately instead of waiting and relying on the supply chain, our staff, our maintenance staff, our ground staff, we have room to store things and be able to work in a facility that is suited for them to do their job. Absolutely. And so I think it's really it's funny that the crew always says to me they're like, we just think this is a dream. You're going to pull us out of here one day. We're going to go back to the stadium. And I said, No, it's a one-way ticket, guys. We're staying here now.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

It's a big investment to change.

JEFF SCHILLER

Absolutely.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

But I think it's an important part about the investment part, because not only is it better for the staff, but it's an investment we made to save money in the long run, because there are things that Jeff Staff is able to do now in-house because they have the space to have an actual shop that we can buy in bigger bulk, that it was an investment, but it's an investment that's going to pay for itself over time.

JEFF SCHILLER

Absolutely.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And it looks good. I think we've I think we've dressed up the entire neighborhood. Yes, we did.

JEFF SCHILLER

And sir, we did.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So I'm going to turn to Dr. Angie Smith. And Dr. is the more recent moniker.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Yeah. Now we're up to three Dr. Smith's

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Yes, we are.

If we're not confused enough, we are not. Right. So I want to talk a little bit about the most recent renovation to our Ormond Family Stadium. A variety of funding sources. We had some community contributors, we had some private donations. We have a the Boosters did a yeoman's work of getting that. And I know we had an anonymous matching donor was significant.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And so the last piece is are now in place will be ready to go for later this spring and then into the big fall opening. So if you could describe a little bit about what that project entailed and what we look for.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

I think you touched on the really important part, first of all, which is this was a really a collaborative effort on our own. The district would not have been able to tackle this project all at once. It would have been spread out over a lot more years. But thanks to the work of the boosters and our anonymous donor, we've been able to get things done. Unfortunately, as sometimes happens with things after the pandemic, we had some supply chain challenges, so we didn't get everything done prior to the start of the last season. We are excited that everything will be ready for our 2324 first season, but people will start to get a sneak peek because as people are probably aware, we changed out the bleachers, we changed all the fencing, we redid the football field, we redid the track. They all look fabulous. The one piece that we were kind of a little bit later on were the main gates, as well as a concession stand. But those will get a little bit of a test run this spring, with the goal being that we have a full grand opening come fall when everybody can sort of appreciate it. But it's going to be a great space for our boosters. It will let them serve a little bit more efficiently. I think it's a testament to all the hard work that they've done, that they have that nice facility, but that it's also as people come to, you know, event at the stadium, it's a lot more welcoming than it was before. A lot more...a better face, I guess I would say, not that we didn't appreciate what we had before, but it was time for a refresh. We're also able to add, you know, more of a separate visitor's entrance and have more clearly identified to the signage and things like that or better think everybody appreciates just kind of that facelift and the pride that comes with that for all of our teams and our PE classes as well, because it's important

to remember that that field turf just isn't just for football, it's for soccer, it's for PE every day. It's for some of our track and field events. It gets a lot of use and even.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Our fine arts.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Even fine arts with the marching band. But having that turf lets us do things that we might not be able to do if that was just grass. Because we all know with Illinois weather that can be difficult.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Absolutely. You know, I want to just kind of highlight you brought out some things about the pride. I think there's a sense of pride only with our kids and our staff. But this is a high quality environment. This is not just your run-of-the-mill environment and experience. And for our kids to be able to have a place to call home like that is it's really an exciting thing for our community to kind of be very proud of and kind of showcase what we're able to do in our district.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Well, another thing I guess I kind of forgot that when you bring up the fact that Mr. Schuler and his crew moved out, it also let us expand our weight room facilities and the conditioning facility so we're now able to use that under stadium space a little bit more effectively for storage. It let us get rid of some of the containers that we had that weren't as attractive, but it let us expand our offerings. Tom Crust is a fabulous job with our conditioning program, and this let him have a little more space as well.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Excellent. Thank you for sharing that. So my turn back to you, Mr. Schiller. You know, we have a lot of capital projects that we have with 21 facilities to stay up, but it's kind of if our folks are listening today, think about the upkeep of their homes. We have 21 homes and there are much larger homes that we have to make sure that we attend to keep our facilities safe, warm, functioning, well-lit and all the pieces. And so some of those are, you know, fixing doors, fixing sidewalks, which are, you know, not real exciting. But then we have some other pieces that we have to attend to that are h-back and our lighting, our security and all those pieces. You have a variety of repairs and responses that you're you know, you talked earlier about some of your skilled trades that work for you, that that have an appropriate shop now.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

How does taking on those folks but then all of these different types of repairs, how does that impact your decision-making and your process on a day-to-day basis?

JEFF SCHILLER

So basically, the process that we take every day, obviously, if there's an emergency out there, something's not working correctly a door or we don't have heat, or if it's too hard to call whatever it might be, we take care of those immediately. And that's really what we do in operations and energy is said this in the past, you know, like we're behind the house. You know, we take care of the behind-the-scenes things in the world of operations. But we want to make sure that our customers, our schools, our staff, students, they're being taken care of. And so if and when things come up, you know, we take care of those items right away. Obviously, like you said earlier, it's not always exciting things. But, you know, we but we do take care of our homes and that's just something we do. And with having the space that we have, we're actually able to you know, we know what we have on the shelf. Before, when we were at the stadium, it was just stuff on top of stuff.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Absolutely.

JEFF SCHILLER

And so now it's things are more organized. So we're we can definitely get to things faster also.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And you know what I, I think can't be underscored either that people just assume that they're going to get fixed or you're in your home. You have to prioritize. Can I afford it? Is it you know, is it going to deteriorate that fast? But you provide that and your team provides that and certainly to be appreciated that we have great facilities to come in and out of every day. Returning to Dr. Smith that you had the opportunity to present, I believe was a triple II this past fall regarding some of our green initiatives. One of those other things that just is way behind the house, people don't see it. They're on our roof. They're on the ground. But can you share this is a this is a really exciting aspect of what we're able to do for our community and for our global environment. If I want to be a little embellishing about it, but talk a little bit about our green initiatives, what we've done and some of the impacts on our day to day costs.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Sure. And I think we are super proud of the benefits to the planet. But I will say that most of these decisions started out because they made fiscal sense. So, for example,

courtesy of the referendum, when we needed to look at our HPC systems, we made the decision to go with geothermal in one of our buildings. What that means for us, practically speaking, is the only gas we use is to heat hot water. So it's very limited. So, you know, all of our initiatives added together. We saved about \$800,000 a year in utility costs based on what we're doing. So we started with geothermal, but then we built that. So Geoff's team has done things like replacing LED lighting. We've moved to both of our, I should say, all three of our cars now for driver's ed are EVs. So they're all plug-ins, so we save money on gas there. Those are also paid by a grant which is always nice. Do a little benefit for doing good over the past few years, what we've added to significantly is our solar footprint. So we were one of the very first districts in the state to be approved for Illinois Solar for All grants. We're still the district that has the most approved. We've got solar at seven locations, and will add to a couple more again this summer. We continue to look at those opportunities. We don't currently have any that are what are called ground-mounted where people can see, as you said, they can't see ours now they're on the roof. Although we have some beautiful photos that Community Affairs has taken of it with drones. But that's reducing our electrical usage all year round. We've really tried to as much as possible, look at opportunities to make small changes. I'll give you an example. We moved to trash compactors, which you might say, Well, what's the deal there? We say \$75,000 a year now in trash pickup because the trucks are coming more infrequently. But the side benefit is they're also then not destroying our pavement. They're adding less CO2 to the environment. So we've tried to pick things off here and there that makes sense. We always look at them as terms of how fast of a payback we have. But I really do think it's an important story to tell because that's going to save taxpayers money forever. Yes, we all know I think we all know we've seen our ridiculously high gas and electric bills this year. And our gas bills aren't high here in the district because we've now gotten to the point with West High getting finally tied in this summer, we will have the vast majority of our buildings will all be geothermal. So super proud of it. I think it does make us stand out from some of our neighbors, but can't go without saying that That's because we had the benefit of the referendum and then some of the funds that have been freed up from other savings that we've done.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And it's a great point that you make, too. I mean, that, you know, our community really rallied and supported that referendum effort. But I think the fruits of their labors and the fruits of that process is really going to pay dividends for a long, long period.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Yeah. And we continue to look for opportunities in different areas In Jeff's world. We're going to move to some cleaning products that are better for the environment. But also

use less plastics that don't require as many trips. So we're trying to find those opportunities and there's things that are getting, you know, being developed all the time that come our way. And not everyone makes sense. Some of them we've looked at and said, That's great, but the cost is too, you know, prohibitive. So we look at each of them, but we really want to do what we can for the planet.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

What I think is important is you're willing to look at it for what's what those options are. So this will open this up for both of you guys. You guys can tag team on a little bit because both of you probably have a different story to tell. But both of you are long-term residents and taxpayers of our district. You know, we heard a little bit from some of our other folks that talked about from a very personal sense. They look through the lens as a parent of their kids. I'm going to ask you to talk from your lens as taxpayers. And how does that influence or impact your decision-making?

DR. ANGIE SMITH

So since you've worked here since you were 17.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yes.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

I'll let you go first.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yes, that's a great question. I think for me, you know, I've been here my entire life. I mean, literally, I was born in Aurora. I've been here my entire life. So to me, the community means a lot. And for working for the school system that I went to school at and giving back and in knowing what we have done as a department in operations and seen our buildings just changed the last nine, ten years, it's very proud moment. And knowing that, you know, we have something to do with that to make those changes within all those facilities.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And ownership there.

JEFF SCHILLER

There's ownership and, you know, it's and it's great when, you know, people in the neighborhood or in the public will come up to me and say, what? We've really started noticing the change. You know, we've noticed that the parking lots are not falling apart

anymore or we've noticed that you're doing this or that. And it's really a feel-good that you've been part of that process throughout the way. And I think the other thing, too, it's like, you know, when people know that you live in the community, you know, I live right in the neighborhood and people know that. I think, you know, that says a lot. You know, it's just not I'm just doing a job and I'm going home at the end of the day and I'm living somewhere else. They know that I'm doing this because I live here as well.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

You bet you.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

But yeah, I agree with Jeff. I think that's super important. I didn't go to school here, but all three of my children did. All three. My children are West graduates. Before I worked for the district, I was a board member. And I guess the way I look at it is in my role. Since I'm ultimately responsible for the budget, I want to spend money the way I would spend if it was my own money, because it is my own money because I'm a taxpayer. So I think that when when you look at things that way and you know that, hey, if we make bad decisions, somebody might beat us up in the grocery store about it. Sure, it's different than if you just kind of drop in for work and leave. So I think there's a different vibe to it. You also get to see, I think, you know, more the benefits of those investments that we make. And I keep using that word investment, but I think it gets missed sometimes that a lot of what we do is about investing. You know, sometimes you have to spend money to make money, I say. And so sometimes people may seem like, well, that's a really big investment in geothermal. Yes, but we're going to save hundreds of thousand dollars a year for the duration of the system. So I think the fact that, you know, we can look at it and say, yeah, I live here and I'm proud of that and I'm proud of the decisions that we made. You you just know that if you're not making decisions that are in the best interests of all of our stakeholders, students, parents, taxpayers, they might see you in frescoes and give you their peace of mind or woodlands or wherever you may have the ultimate accountability. The ultimate accountability, Absolutely.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Yeah, Absolutely. So if I could ask you to put your future hats on what are in the works for the 23-24 school year and the operations group.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

So you got a lot more capital projects that are coming our way. As I mentioned before, we're going to do some of the final tie-in to geothermal for West High. We're also improving the system at Jewel. We've got a ton of pavement. We've really tried really hard to get on top of some of these things and have them be more preventative

maintenance that happened to completely rip out and repair. So Jeff and his team and a couple of team members that aren't here that I will mention Pat Dacy and Pat Callahan are part of our construction group, have made sure that we're staying on schedule. We do have some more playgrounds going in this summer. We've got some playgrounds going in at McCleary at Freeman Hill, at Greenman, and that's continuing Some of the things we started in the last couple of years, sort of refresh and also add pre-K where we didn't have it before. Some things that aren't as exciting but that are pretty expensive and pretty important. We've got a lot of windows and doors head of the next couple of years, some things that we maybe would have wanted to do this summer because of what's going on with the supply chain and because there's so many projects going on nationwide we've have had to push off to next summer. We always want to make sure we don't bite off more than we can chew and then we can actually manage the projects we have. But and then just Tim always has some things they're doing internally.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yeah. I mean, there's there's always some projects that we need to get done during the summer months. And one thing I want to point out to our listeners that behind the scenes of all of this, you know, a lot of people think we just, you know, we go into a room in April, right before summer break, and we start planning and what we're going to do. We start planning for summer summer repairs in construction like year in advance, you know, So we as a team, I'm looking at you as well, because obviously you're part of that process. You know, we start talking about summer of 23, 24, in the summer of 22. Yes. And it's such a long process, but it's a good process. I mean, because we go through multiple different steps and multiple different meetings before we bring the finished product to the board and says, here's what we want to do. And a lot of people don't understand. Like, it's just that we're in a room and we just say, okay, you know, I think we're going to do these things this year. That's how we're going to do it. No, we actually have this process of we go through multiple sessions before we say, okay, here's what we're going to do. This makes sense. We notice this is becoming more of a problem. We need to address this before it costs us more money in the end.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And I think one of the shifts that we've found in the last several years that we haven't been able to do for a long time is we're able to be more proactive in our planning and our thought process rather than react to crisis and emergency. And that saves us probably money in the long term.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Longer Yeah, and I do think, you know, we have obviously benefited from the fact that we've had ESSER which are funds that have been made available by the federal

government that's led us to attend to some things a little faster. But we already had a plan in place, as Jeff alluded to. So it wasn't really a matter of, well, now what do we do? It was what can we accelerate? Because now we have funding that we didn't think, you know, we thought we're going to have to do this over five years now. We can do it in two or three. What things do we pull forward? But you can only do that if you have a list and you have a team that's nimble enough to do it and.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

As we've said, never waste a crisis.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

That's a goal.

JEFF SCHILLER

And it's correct.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Absolutely right.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So I'm going to talk a little bit about the one thing we try not to talk about much, and that's what we've come out of through the pandemic, Jeff, probably more so in your your space than some of our other departments. Is our challenge to recruit and retain quality folks to come do the good work that we do every day. You know, a lot of our world has changed. People have made decisions and have opportunities not to come physically into work. You know, can I work two days from home? Can I work five days from home? Can I all those different options that aren't really available. It's hard to clean a floor if you're not here. Yeah, you know, it's hard not to fulfill some of our jobs in our roles if they're not physically present. What I'm going to ask you, just be thoughtful, but I'm going to turn to you, Angie, first. When you don't really have a choice but to be here, you're going to continue in this role. What gets you up every day? What gets you excited about the work that you do.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Just you two, right? Just getting to see you're smiling.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

You know that you want to go. That could be a side bonus.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

I would not specifically you too, but I think in general it is a team that we have. You know, I genuinely like to come to work. I like our team. I like to personally problem solve. I sort of felt like, yes, the pandemic was challenging, but I looked at it a little differently, I think, than some people in the sense that as long as we were doing the best that we could do, there wasn't a right decision that if you did these things, it would turn out fine. And if you didn't, it wouldn't because everything was constantly changing. But as long as you felt like, Hey, we're making the best decisions we can based on the information that we have, I'm good with that, sure. But I personally feel like, you know, you need to leave some place better than you found it. And I really believe that, you know, if I left today that I can honestly say that. And I think that's all you can really ask for. Now, a ton of that is because of the fabulous team that I have. But that's really I guess it for me. I mean, I genuinely enjoy being part of this district like we've talked about before. This is where I live. This is where I want to feel like if I'm going to make a difference someplace, why not the community I live in instead of someplace else? So I, I don't tend to let some of those things overwhelm me, like during the pandemic, because I really felt in my heart of hearts that as a district, we were doing what we could based on the information we had. And that's all you can really ask people to do.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Well said. All said thanks.

JEFF SCHILLER

Yeah, I think it's one of the things with just even the pandemic, you know, it was changing sometimes by the hour and it was very frustrating at times, you know, when we would sit there and like, okay, we're going to do this, and all of a sudden it would change and now we have to do that. But I think one of the things that gets me going every day is knowing that people are counting on me and they're counting on my team. And during that pandemic, I remember, you know, the three of us for consistently talking all the time about, okay, do we have enough PPE? Do we have, you know, can we get this? Can we get that? You know, and that was sort of like the challenge, like, okay, let's see where I can pull this from. And we were pulling things from Texas, California. I mean, I think we even had something flown over from across from China. You know, we were watching this plane. Yeah. You know, FedEx Tech advisor. And so it was just crazy. But it was just really one of those things where, you know, just for people to say, okay, you know, we're counting on you. And then obviously we made it work. And I think that's really something that, you know, gets me going every day, that people look at me for the answers or look for me for the solutions or whatever and make it happen.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

I think something that you kind of touched on that I think the pandemic showed people is there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes to make a school run, like not to diminish the role of teachers. But schools are not just teachers without clean classrooms, without PPE, without bus drivers, without, you know, planning for how we're going to feed kids during the pandemic. All those things that we kind of took for granted that are in my restaurant terminology, you know, back of the house, those became a lot more visible and a lot more important during the pandemic. And what I hope is that people don't lose track of that over time. And forget, I had to laugh the other day. I was in a building and kids asked if they could have soda and when they one of the reasons they were given that they couldn't was that if you spill that it makes a sugary mess and the building engineer would have to clean it up. The kids are like, Oh, we don't want to make Mr. So-and-so's job harder. So I think there is now more appreciation of like, listen, these things don't just magically happen overnight. You know, everybody leaves a school and we go like this and the rooms are clean. I think people now understand there's a lot more to it than that.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

And sometimes we don't appreciate it until it's.

DR. ANGIE SMITH

Absolutely, absolutely.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

Well, I just want to say an appreciative thank you to Dr. Angela Smith and Mr. Jeff Schuler for all that you do for setting the stage for our students and staff every single day to make sure we have a safe, clean and welcoming environment that is our portal into our district. And we appreciate all you do. So thanks for your conversation today.

JEFF SCHILLER

Thank you.

DR. JEFF CRAIG

So much. So that's a look behind the scenes for our various departments for what has happened this year and some previews for what is in store moving forward. Looking forward, my mission is simple, but not easy. I will continue to work on a smooth and effective transition for Dr. Michael Smith and his team that is ongoing until June 30th of 2024. I will continue to be a strong advocate for our pre-K programs in our district and in our state district-wide. This has an impact on our community and provides a welcome portal into our school district. It helps families identify resources and puts their child on the right foot heading into our K-12 offerings. I will continue to champion our efforts in

career and technical programming. Our students need choice, and our community needs more skilled craftsmen as a result of our CTE programs. For too many years, we have told our kids that it was college or bust. We need to get back to a balance of options. We will continue to ensure financial stability for our district. It has been a nine-year effort to get to this status. Our actions have led to us giving us good options for decision-making for our students and staff. We will always seek to provide solutions for social emotional healing for both students and staff. We have experienced a rough patch and it will take a big lift to get us back on track. But we are up to the task. We will be sharing more details about the upcoming opening of our school-based health clinic in the fall. I and our team will be working hard to provide solutions for our students and their families as we smooth out the logistics of this offering. Our partner DNA will be our medical provider and they have been outstanding to work with. And finally, if you haven't guessed, I am unapologetically proud to be an advocate for the American education system and to have the honor to lead one of the most diverse public school districts in the state of Illinois. You know, our public schools educate approximately 90% of our nation's children, and second only to parenting. The quality of our public schools will have the greatest impact on our future. We have a lot to be proud of, and I want to be a voice for elevating the conversation around public education in the West through our schools.