

Joliet PSD is meeting students where they are to pick up and build forward

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N“Normal is a setting on the clothes dryer,” quipped Dr. Theresa Rouse, Superintendent of Joliet Public Schools District 86. “I don’t want to build back better, I want to build forward.” Dr. Rouse is referring to more than addressing the “unfinished learning” or social-emotional supports needed in the wake of the pandemic and school closures.

Dr. Rouse joined the preK-8 district six years ago, with an immediate push for equity and cultural proficiency—tackling discrepancies in discipline, reducing suspensions and altogether eliminated expulsions. She flipped the paradigm to restorative discipline, brought in the role of a Chief Equity Officer and posted her Equity Blueprint for Action on the district’s website to ensure that every stakeholder, at home and in the community, shared her vision for closing the achievement gap through equity.

“We’re really looking at the deep-seated pieces that we need to learn about—our biases—to make the changes we need to better meet the needs of our students and our families.” Dr. Rouse explains. The culture change is reflected in the discipline data improvements and relationships developed with local businesses, faith-based and community organizations. Along with its network of local resources to cope with critical social and economic needs, JPSD offers free breakfast and lunch to all students along with social workers in every building for both students and staff. “Because we were remote basically the entire year, we found that everyone felt the lack of personal connection.”

“Education is an emotional job,” Assistant Superintendent Dr. Sunni McNeal, chimed in. “We’ve recognized *that* in the pandemic, if we hadn’t before.” Dr. Rouse and Dr. McNeal stressed the importance of caring for oneself as well as others. They implemented additional staff develop-



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ment supports with innovative ideas like virtual yoga for relaxation and creative team building to learn about—or from—each other while exploring their purpose for being in education.

Dr. Rouse employs an eclectic form of Distributed Leadership—a philosophy that’s built on cooperation, trust and confidence. She believes that relationships matter and supports her leadership team by relying on their expertise. She considers her staff an asset, engaging in deep conversations that go below the surface to move things forward. “I am not a believer that I have all the knowledge in the world. I need these people around me.” Dr. Rouse’s 88-member Leadership Academy works collabora-

tively as a sounding board and steering committee to ensure the best outcome for every student.

“I am looking for their voice,” Dr. Rouse says of her parent community. “We all care about them and are here as a partner to support them and their child as they move though the education system, which is not always easy.” To provide a wide swath of supports in the fall, JPSD will offer a remote learning option alongside the traditional classroom model.

This year, Dr. Rouse’s goal is not to go back to normal—not to press that button—but to build forward with her families, staff, and community.

This commitment has her working overtime to give unrelenting support for the social, emotional and academic impact of last year. “We’re talking about ‘unfinished learning’ as we come back from the pandemic, not ‘learning loss.’ Nobody lost anything, they just didn’t quite finish what they might have done in a normal school year, and so we’re going to help them pick up where they are and go forward.”