

Richardson ISD's recipe for student success includes more than a pinch of fun

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Sprinkled in between tweets celebrating the achievements of school counselors and teachers in Richardson Independent School District, Superintendent Jeannie Stone shares spoiler-free reviews of the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*, as well as a photo from 40 years ago of herself beaming in a Shaun Cassidy t-shirt.

It's not a stretch to suggest that Dr. Stone enjoys mixing work and fun, and she invites those around her to do the same. While improving student outcomes is the number one goal of any school system, she says strong results don't have to come at the expense of loving the work you do.

Rather, it's all about developing positive relationships.

"I'm not driven by power or authority," Dr. Stone says. "I'm really driven by building relationships and connecting with people, and I think that is how I connect with people best—by letting them know I'm a real person who just wants to have fun and enjoy work. And I think it's important for people to relate to you."

Since taking over as superintendent in 2017, Dr. Stone has been working with teachers, school staff, community organizations, and industry leaders to develop a culture of equity in Richardson ISD campuses.

To accomplish that, it's vital to establish buy-in among teachers and community members, she explains, which circles back once again to relationships, and ensuring everyone feels heard and understood.

Her commitment to building strong, two-way relationships with the students, families and teachers in her district was a key factor in being named 2019 Texas PTA Superintendent of the Year.

Dr. Stone says she believes she can build a relationship with anyone given the opportunity, and that such relationships can be leveraged to better motivate, or mentor, or support her staff.

"One of the things about my leadership is that I don't lead from the top down," Dr. Stone explains. "I think teachers need to be the ones at the very top because they're the ones closest to the students—that's where the magic happens. Every position, mine included, exists in support of classroom teachers."



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As a former classroom educator, Dr. Stone understands that regardless of what changes are made at the executive-level, it's the teachers who have to implement and live with the changes.

That's why she still lives by advice she received from her own mentor nearly 25 years ago when she moved from the classroom and into an administrative role: 'take the teacher's eyes with you.'

"Whatever position I've been in, I take the teacher's eyes with me," Dr. Stone says. "And I talk about that a lot with teachers so that they know that's how I lead, and they have a lot of buy-in to things we're doing because of that."

Connecting with others is one of the most effective ways one can lead, according to Susan

Cook, COO and Leadership Coach at School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A)—which is working with Richardson ISD to help the district improve student attendance.

"Connecting with others to achieve district goals is subtle but powerful," says Cook. "People are at the center of all leadership efforts. Leaders cannot lead unless they understand the people they are leading."

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of *The Leadership Challenge*, describe Dr. Stone's successful leadership practice perfectly, "When leadership is a relationship founded on trust and confidence, people take risks, make changes, keep organizations and movements alive."

"We've seen before that new programs can only succeed in helping children achieve when everyone is on board," says Cook. "Superintendents like Dr. Stone, who emphasize strong relationships with their classroom teachers, often make the biggest impact in student growth."

Dr. Stone notes that leading in a way that lifts teachers' voices up and makes educators feel supported isn't always easy, and requires much more than talk.

"I promote this and talk about this overtly because I want them to hear me from my heart who I am and what I'm about," she says. "And then the biggest thing is to walk the walk, and that's what I try to do every day—because actions speak louder than words."