

Superintendent Spotlight: John Stratton



You boast an impressive 30+ year career in public education with extensive experience in school-level and operational leadership, having started your career as a special needs teacher, then moving on to serve as a behavior specialist, staffing specialist, 8 years as an assistant principal, 7 years as a principal, and two years as a district administrator before being appointed Hernando School District (HSD) superintendent in 2018.



Of all the positions you have held in public education which has been the most rewarding and why?

Although I have truly enjoyed each position I have served, the most rewarding and enjoyable were my years as a principal. I had the pleasure of serving as principal for all levels, including alternative education. My most enjoyable level was high school. As a principal I felt that I had the most autonomy throughout my career. I enjoyed the pace of the principal position as you are faced with more decisions in one hour than most face all day. Your word is often final and you are able to implement ideas more quickly than those implemented at the district level. Your impact can be more immediate, whether with students or staff. The business of a school family is contagious and I found it hard to have a bad day or stay in a bad mood. The best days are still those when former students recognize you and, through your interaction, they let you know you had an impact.

Over the last 2 years you have added VPK programs to your schools. Discuss how these programs have been received, any benefits you are seeing in kindergarten and beyond, and any further initiatives you have in this area.

Eight school sites host the 3-hour reimbursement VPK Program. In Hernando we have collaborated with Title I and ESE Pre K to offer the families a free full day program, which is conducive for our family schedules. At Chocachatti Elementary two VPK classrooms are available to families for the 3-hour VPK day and self-pay fee for the remaining hours of the school day.

There is a waiting list for VPK at all schools. VPK programs prepare students in foundational skills as well as overall ability to be successful for Kindergarten and beyond. Kindergarten and VPK teachers collaborate and vertically articulate the Kindergarten expectations. Conversations around where students need to be

academically, behaviorally, and socially are also discussed with the families.

The culture of Early Learning is spreading across all schools who offer VPK. Children are a part of the school a year before their Kindergarten year. Early Intervention offers the opportunity for collaboration with problem solving teams to include support in areas of need. School based VPK Programs are enhanced through collaboration with speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists who support developmental milestones.

We have been encouraging our VPK teachers and assistants with classroom visits to support best practices. The Emergent Literacy Micro – Credential through the Lastinger Center at The University of Florida has been vital in bringing awareness to the skills and strategies needed for Early Learning success. Using Heggerty in the VPK classrooms yields a solid foundation for phonological awareness. The Heggerty Program is implemented in all of our primary elementary classrooms; therefore, Hernando VPK students are familiar with the protocol and build on those familiar foundational skills.

To help with teacher vacancies you have invested in an Associate Teacher Substitute (ATS) program. How is this working in your district?

The ATS program has been more successful than we envisioned. We were hoping for five to ten participants this year and we are currently at 29 with over 100 on the waitlist. The program's success is because we have been able to remove the two largest barriers preventing many with an AA degree from completing their bachelor's degree; money and time.

We offer substitutes with an AA degree a good wage (Money) and partner them with a mentor. Preferably it's a co-teach position, but if not, we ensure they are in adjoining or adjacent rooms. The beauty of this program is that the ATS teachers do not have to attend classes outside of their teaching day. We've partnered with BloomBoard and are able to offer an accredited bachelor's degree for competency-based portfolios (Time). This program helps to fill immediate vacancies and creates a long-term solution. Upon completion of their degree, ATS teachers have signed a four-year commitment to teach in Hernando County. By the time they have finished their commitment they will have been in the classroom and FRS for six years, which hopefully increases the chance of retention. The program continues to excel as we started our second cohort in January!

What do you think is the most important skill for a superintendent to develop?

Listening. Everything begins with listening. Superintendents need to be great listeners who seek to understand first. It's not rocket science and certainly not new advice, but without this skill all other skills will fall short.

At the FADSS Spring Conference you will be presenting on your CEOLDP work in closing the achievement gap for Students with Disabilities (SWD). Describe the importance of this work in your district and any changes in focus for this school year.

In Hernando County Schools, closing the achievement gap for all subgroups, including our Students with Disabilities (SWD) has been a focus area. When this project first began, only 21% of our schools were meeting the minimum benchmark of the 41% Federal Index and our district average was a "D" for this subgroup. Our district's

Achievement Gap committee with school board members, district and school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members taking part, decided to form task force teams to address the systems in our district for our SWDs. These task force teams analyzed data, elicited feedback from stakeholders, observed classroom instruction, and visited other districts to collaborate about their processes for this subgroup. The results are the center of this project and the bulk of the efforts of the Achievement Gap committee.

The work that was done the last couple years has resulted in pilot schools for an innovative inclusion model, professional learning for General Ed and ESE teachers, and brand-new positions to support SWDs through MTSS coordinators and ESE Specialists. The collaboration from all departments and the board made this a cohesive and fluid process.

The change this year is the effort to build capacity at the teacher level by identifying teacher leaders at each school. In the beginning, much of the professional learning was at the administrator level through principals' and assistant principals' meetings. While this was effective at bringing about mindset changes, the technical knowledge that teachers needed was not adequate. By having teacher leaders at each school, they receive professional learning and bring it back to their school in a train the trainer model. This has given opportunities for aspiring leaders and has expanded buy-in for the work of the Achievement Gap. Another way we are building capacity is the new Leadership Labs that began last year. Assistant Principals attend targeted collaboration sessions for areas that they are responsible for, and the sessions are of adequate length to be able to dive deeply into one topic. The commitment of building capacity at each level is the next step for this project and for closing the gaps for our students.

Are there any other innovative/impactful initiatives in your school district that you are proud of during your tenure with HSD?

We are in our third year of our Superintendent's Citizens Academy. The academy is open to all stakeholders and it's our opportunity to invite them in for a "behind the scenes" look into the district. We offer rotating topics such as finance, facilities, safety, transportation and instruction. The academy is six to seven weeks and culminates with a graduation ceremony at the June board meeting. The sessions are designed to be interactive and allow for a deep dive into the topic. We also allow time at each session for the stakeholders to discuss any topic they may have questions about. We believe the learning is two way and encourage questions asked and concerns expressed. Joining the academy also places the stakeholder on our Key Communicator Network which (KCN) is an email network directly from the superintendent's office. Each participant is asked to serve as an ambassador of the district and to disseminate accurate information from the KCN. We ask that they keep us informed as well. The academy has grown each year and we now have to cut it off at 40 participants.

Outside of being a superintendent, what is something that your colleagues may not know about you that you would like to share.

It is my goal for my wife and I to retire in Europe, at least for a period of time.

Individual you admire most for their positive impact on public education:

My high school microbiology teacher Adrian Davis. Mr. Davis taught so many

students the love of learning through inquiry. I have never forgotten how engaging his classes were and how he created an atmosphere where students were hungry for knowledge.

Favorite quote:

“Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.” -Ambrose Bierce

Book you are currently or recently finished reading:

I find myself returning to Simon Sinek’s “Leaders Eat Last”



Just a glimpse of Superintendent Stratton actively engaging with his teachers, administrators and the community including New Teacher Orientation, reception celebrating 100% success rate of the first semester of the Associate Teacher Substitute program, presenting the Veteran of the Month award, and recognizing the Teacher of the Year!

