



Leaders to Follow: Dr. Jonathan Crossley

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Dr. Jonathan Crossley, Superintendent of Hope (Arkansas) Public Schools, is passionate about creating equitable pathways to success for the next generation. Elevating the student experience and breaking down barriers that hinder students from thriving in the classroom – and college or the workforce beyond graduation – drives Dr. Crossley and the district he leads forward.

This motivation is not one that Dr. Crossley came upon by chance: in fact, it's quite the contrary.

A Leader Forged in a Small Town

Growing up, Jonathan had excellent teachers, chief among them: his parents. From early on, his father instilled the importance of work ethic into Jonathan, while his mother demonstrated a love for people that shaped the way he views and serves others even today. The integrity and leadership they embodied deeply impacted Crossley's development and future successes.

As a young student, Crossley was bright and hardworking; however, he never envisioned a life beyond his hometown. Then, in the 10th grade, Mr. Billy Pennington began encouraging Crossley to consider the impact he could make in the greater world around him. That's when the wheels really began "turning" for Jonathan, who started envisioning a brighter future for himself and those around him.

Upon graduation from high school, Crossley considered pursuing a career in law and earned a Bachelor of Political Science degree from the University of South Carolina. His family beamed on graduation day as Crossley was the first among them to earn a four-year degree. (Little did they know, it would be his first of many.)

Following graduation, it became clear to Crossley that his calling was to help shape the minds and lives of young learners, so he transitioned to the field of education and began teaching and coaching in rural Palestine, AR. During Crossley's time at Palestine-Wheatley School District, Crossley became deeply invested in student literacy, serving as not only the 11th and 12th grade English and Oral Communication teacher but also the literacy coach for grades 6-12. As a result of his efforts, the district's literacy rates went from 36% to 92%, an impressive accomplishment that marked the most dramatic literacy improvement across the state of Arkansas.

The same year, Crossley was awarded the Arkansas Teacher of the Year honor (2014). As that year's honored recipient, he was also able to serve on the Arkansas School Board. He then went on to complete his Master of Education and an Ed.S and Ed.D from Arkansas Tech shortly thereafter.

In 2015, Dr. Crossley began his career in Administration: first as a Principal in Little Rock (AR) and then as Assistant Superintendent in Pine Bluff (AR). In 2021, Dr. Crossley was chosen to lead Hope (AR) Public Schools, and he has made short work of launching innovative initiatives that will further students' educational trajectory within the district.

New Hope for Hope Public Schools

When you walk into Hope Public Schools today, you'll probably feel an air of excitement and expectation: norms within the district are changing, and Dr. Crossley? He's leading the charge.

"Students deserve robust, high-quality services and education," Dr. Crossley said when he sat down with us recently. "That requires Superintendents - and anyone in a leadership or teaching capacity - to think creatively and seek opportunities to innovate so they can help students transcend barriers."

Three of these opportunities were recently rolled out in the school district, and a measurable impact is already being made. The first initiative is the Bobcats Work program, which allows high school students to participate in paid internships that yield invaluable experience and credentialing toward future jobs. The second is the Hope Education Foundation, which will serve as a scholarship vessel to help Hope graduates pursue higher education and already has over \$250,000 in scholarship pledges within its first year. The third major initiative to launch in the last year was the Star Academy program. This comprehensive, hands-on acceleration program helps reengage students in the classroom and catch up while infusing vital success skills into each day's lessons.

"As educators, it is our job and life's work to help students not only graduate but envision successful lives for themselves post-graduation," Dr. Crossley said. "Our team is passionate about helping students ramp up for and live successful lives, which is why we're always looking for ways to help students leverage their learning into character and career-building experiences."

A "Game Changer" For Hope Students & The Entire District

In 2022, Dr. Crossley and his team decided to pursue an unconventional method to capture additional resources for their students: seeking to capture funding via the US Department of Education's Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant. The arduous qualification process (which included a nearly 350-page application) is no simple task, and it's also highly competitive, with scores of schools across the nation applying each year.

Thankfully, the Hope Schools team's efforts paid off: in the summer of 2022, it was announced that Hope Public Schools was one of the 19 applicants whose proposals would be funded. And Hope's innovative proposal? It was amongst the most highly-funded awards bestowed this period, with a grand total of \$14,999,987 pledged to the district over the next five years.

"The funds being made available via the Magnet Grant will be a game-changer for Hope students and the District as a whole," said Dr. Crossley. "The initiative, which we've dubbed the HPS Pathways to Hope project, will allow all students to have STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) and public service-focused learning environments, as well as specialized campuses that include focuses such as STEAM, the Arts, STEM, Public Service, and Media Literacy."

Once implemented, the initiative (which includes additional focuses as well) should significantly raise levels of achievement for all students and reduce the isolation and challenges minority students may face during their academic careers. And the end goal of these enhancements? Ensuring that each Hope graduate has the opportunities they deserve to arrive to college or the workforce prepared to thrive.

"I hope that this grant not only alters students' educational trajectories but that it demonstrates that thinking outside the box can do not just for ourselves, but for those around us," Dr. Crossley said.

Why Dr. Crossley is a Leader to Follow

Dr. Crossley has only been in the field of education for 13 years; however, the impact he has made across the districts he has served will stand the test of time. He doesn't shy away from digging deep into challenges. He works diligently and dynamically to develop solutions that uplift students, staff, and community - even when it is difficult - and keeps his eyes on the horizon.

"An adage I try to remind myself of often is that true excellence is rarely understood because the cost to reach it is so often hidden," Dr. Crossley said. "People rarely see the struggle and toil required of leadership as they strive to reach new heights for those they lead. But that doesn't mean the effort isn't worthwhile: Keep pushing forward. Your efforts will pay off in the end."