

Steve Cochrane was appointed superintendent of the Princeton Public Schools on January 1, 2014. He has been working as an educator for more than 30 years, serving as an assistant superintendent for curriculum, a principal, and an elementary school teacher. Before making the move to public education, Steve was an admissions officer and an assistant dean of students at Princeton University. A Princeton University graduate, with a Masters in Education from Harvard, Steve lives with his wife in Princeton.

You grew up in Seattle. What was it like moving to Princeton at age 17?

I was shy and more than a bit intimidated when I arrived at Princeton University as a freshman in the fall of 1977. Fortunately, I eventually figured out that behind the institution's academic power and Ivy League prestige was a community of people who cared. I am grateful to the professors, preceptors, and families in town who helped a quiet kid from Seattle find his voice. I continue to be touched by the level of care in this community, and I am grateful now for the opportunity to give back.

What's the best advice anyone has ever given you?

My father was a bishop in the Episcopal Church. He had a great sense of humor and a good deal of wisdom. His advice: Never be afraid to say "I'm sorry." Never be afraid to say "I love you." Never be afraid to make decisions.

You taught elementary school after serving as a dean at Princeton University. What was that first year of teaching like for you?

Hard, humbling, exhilarating. I was given a fourth and fifth grade multi-age classroom. "How hard can it be to teach 9- and 10-year-olds?" I thought. I pictured children sitting calmly at their desks, hands neatly folded, eyes riveted on their teacher as he dazzled them with his ideas and activities. What I found instead was a new teacher nearly undone by simple management tasks such as collecting lunch money and figuring out when to have children sharpen their pencils. How wrong I was. I struggled in that first year to figure out what to teach and how to engage students with a wide

variety of interests, backgrounds, and abilities.

But in the midst of my struggles, I connected with the kids. We learned and grew together. Every day we laughed, and every day I got a little better at my craft. My colleagues came to my rescue, helping me plan lessons, sharing with me their classroom procedures, and cheering me on at the end of the day. I also studied instructional theory, attending workshops, reading articles, and talking with mentors about the best ways of teaching reading, writing, math and science to elementary-aged children.

My biggest takeaway for that first year: Being a mediocre teacher is not that hard; being a great teacher is the hardest job in the world – and the most rewarding.

What are some of the greatest challenges that public school teachers face today?

Both teachers and administrators are facing a perfect storm – particularly in New Jersey. They have to implement rigorous new standards; prepare students for a brand new, computer-based test aligned to those standards; and, finally, teachers are evaluated based on the results of that test. The key is to do what good sailors do: hold our course while adjusting to the inevitable winds of change. We have to continue to focus on preparing our students to think critically and creatively. Public schools may be sailing through stormy waters, but I am proud of the work we are doing in Princeton, and I see us becoming a flagship for others to follow.

Some people feel that the new Core Curriculum standards will detract from creativity and stress kids out. Do you agree?

No. I don't. The Common Core is a set of standards that defines what students should be able to do; it's not a program or methodology that defines how students should be taught. Teachers have the freedom to address the standards in ways that make sense to them, to their students, and to their subjects.

To be sure, the Common Core standards are rigorous, but I think that rigor can be used to challenge and engage our students rather

than to stress them out. The fine art of teaching lies in taking challenging expectations and making them accessible to students. I believe the Common Core asks our students to think, write, read and solve problems at a very high level. I also believe, however, that the standards progress logically from grade to grade and that our teachers have the expertise – and the enthusiasm – to make those standards come alive for students.

What makes you most excited about getting up in the morning and beginning a new day at PPS?

I get excited each day about connecting with people. My day may begin with a greeting from a bus driver and then flow into meetings or conversations with teachers, parents, principals, coaches, custodians, or partners in our community. The conversations may be about solving problems or exploring possibilities, but they are always about making a difference in some way for kids.

And with the excitement about people comes an excitement about potential. I am inspired every day by a vision of what I believe this district can do not only for the children of Princeton but for the field of education and for children all over.

What's your greatest aspiration for the children who attend PPS?

I want them to lead lives of joy and purpose. I want them to find and follow their passions. I want them, quite simply, to change the world. Our work goes far beyond preparing students to do well on tests or getting into the best college. It's about preparing them to make a difference in the world – whether that be through art or science, technological innovation or a commitment to social justice.
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Some of the middle school kids think it it's really cool that you drive a Mini Cooper. Why did you pick that as your ride of choice?

Full disclosure: anything cool I drive or wear is attributable to my wife. We liked the Mini because it looks good, drives great, and saves gas. Hey, sustainability can be fun!

Everybody has a guilty pleasure, such as dark chocolate or bad reality TV. What's yours?

I vacillate between *Shark Tank* and back-to-back episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*! I mean, who can resist Sheldon's predictability? "Penny. Penny. Penny."