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00:19 Hi, everybody. Welcome back to our returning listeners and welcome. If this is your first time listening, we're so happy to have you all with us today. Thank you for joining us for season two, episode nine of the Lion Pridecast, a podcast created by the Lansing Unified School District 469 located in Lansing, Kansas.

00:34 The purpose of this podcast is to inform our Lansing stakeholders being our community members, students, and staff about all things education. We are your hosts. I am Miles Azzeh, Director of Teaching and Learning in Lansing USD 469. And I am Sharon Burns, the Director of Communications and Marketing. And so today's episode, we are super excited to invite Ascendra Donald back, who is now our Director of Student Services. So thank you, Asendra, for being here today again. Yes. Thank you for having me back. I'm so excited. I was so excited once I got the invite to return.

01:04 Yes. Yeah. Sorry it took us so long to get you back. We are happy to have you on here. So Sharon kind of alluded to it that you were on the episode before. You were the director of special education last time when you were on the podcast, and now you have a new role. So can you tell us about the new role and what it entails? Sure. So now, as Sharon said, I am the Director of Student Services. And what that means now is that I have the opportunity to touch more student lives and try my best to help their experience be more positive.

01:36 So I oversee special education still. And what we've added are supports for students with 504s, and that is for students that have disabilities, but they don't quite need special education services of teacher therapies and other things like that, but they need accommodations to help them to make progress. And then students that are in foster care, making sure that we have everything that they need to enter our district and be successful. And lastly, our students who are experiencing homelessness.

02:06 So what do they need as they, again, enter a new district, possibly, the supports that they need to just help them feel okay, become a part of the lion pride, essentially. What do they need to be successful? And on top of that, taking care of their mental health as well for all. Yeah. That's amazing. I can't get over everything you just said there about how, A, that's so much, but man, talk about impactful work as you kept talking about that special ending with the mental health and students. So wow.

02:36 Yeah. Yeah. We talked about this when we sat down and went over your new job description and how much was added to your plate, and it was impressive. So I think you're one of the most important people here in the district. So thank you. Oh, no. No, for sure. It takes all of us. Yeah. And you're always so positive and you look like nothing phases you. So the way you manage things is very interesting. If I had all that on my plate, I mean, I'd be yelling at people all the time. Good morning. What's good about it? It had to be me. I had that role.

03:07 I'd just be buried away and bad. No, I'm serious. We're very lucky to have you. Amazing. Yeah. So what impact do you think you're having compared to your previous

position? Obviously, a much bigger one. So can you talk about that? Yeah. Yeah. It's just now I have kind of a reach that does touch more students. So with that, the impact that I think that I have, but like I said, it's not just me. I have a great team behind me and supporting me to expand resources. So it just kind of makes the reach broader.

- 03:39 And we want to increase the level of supports that we have for each, make sure that every student that has just a unique circumstance that could be long-term, it could be lifelong, or it could be just in this moment that they're having this experience, having this need. And also creating kind of consistent systems. I think before we had somebody kind of overseeing all of it, you may have received one experience in one building or another. So we're ensuring that regardless of what building you're in, we are consistent across the board, that everybody receives the same type of support.
- 04:11 Yeah. That's part of our strategic plan, too. So systems all the way down. So you've done a beautiful job with that. Yeah. So obviously, we've talked about sounds like a lot that you have on your plate. How do you manage to not get overwhelmed or really go crazy? You said I'm not overwhelmed. Okay, there it is. There it is. You got a very good facade. Exactly. I just don't look overwhelmed. So how do you manage to handle being overwhelmed? No, I think I said I do have a great team.
- 04:40 A part of this when I came into this role was to kind of start to develop different systems. And one thing that we have been able to put in place is that kind of alongside me, we have special education coordinators who are in the buildings and supporting the staff kind of immediately right away. They have kind of they're able to touch the support that they need, get a question answered right away. And I meet with them weekly to just kind of talk about, okay, what are the needs we have that have come up and what do we need to do to kind of get it that way.
- 05:13 So that's essentially it. I have a team of people that are supporting this work. Couldn't do it by myself. Overwhelmed at times for sure. But I have started to kind of put a lot of different things in place to just kind of do some self-care type of things here or there. One of them kind of being that separating home and life, home and work life, some things. So just kind of prioritizing it, trying to. Trying to.
- 05:43 It's always a work in progress. I know you and I had a conversation about the four walls idea. Can you talk about that? Because I love this idea. And you've talked about it, I think, at the admin meeting too. Sure. I loved it. So one of the things that we do in special education, but I think it does touch every avenue of things is there are times where we have students that are struggling behaviorally. And just a part of a school system and program, you have to have something referred to as ESI.
- 06:16 And what it stands for just left my brain. Emergency safety intervention. Sorry about that. We live in a world of acronyms. And so what that means is that if a student were to be having a tough time and were to become unsafe, harming themselves or someone else, then we learn how to, as staff, interact, intervene to support them, to resume safety for all.
- 06:46 And so within that, I am a certified trainer in our ESI system, which is called MANT. That is a family's last name, so that is not an acronym. But through the training, everybody that works with students kind of gets this training. And one thing that as a part of it really stuck out to me, and it's a really brief moment within the training, but it refers to overall health being more than just your physical health.
- 07:15 So I imagine if I had asked either of you kind of, "Okay, how do you know you're healthy?" You would tell me I went to the doctor and they said, "This, this, or that, or I

feel good." But they talk about how many indigenous tribes refer to health as overall, which includes your mental health, your physical health, your spiritual health, and I'm missing one. What am I missing? Your family health. And so we know physical things. We need to eat right.

- 07:45 We need to take care of you know all of the components that could come up medically. We all talk about our mental health too. We know we need to have our emotional IQs together and kind of maintaining if we do have some emotional challenges, kind of regulating that and all the things that go into it. But you may not think about your family health. And that just doesn't mean it does include your immediate family, but it also includes anybody that is important to your life, anybody that you spend time with.
- 08:15 And then the last thing is spiritual health. Again, that's not just your relationship to a higher power, if that's your thing or not, but it's just kind of your connection to the universe and how you relate to others. And so for some reason, that stuck to me, stuck with me. And yes, I have a job that can be overwhelming at times. There's a lot of things to do, a lot of kids to take care of. But this stuck out to me, and I just kind of took it as, "Okay.
- 08:41 I'm going to prioritize my overall health and focus on all of them." So I kind of make it a choice, make a conscious effort to do something across all four walls of the house every day. And so whether that's making sure I talk to a family member or talk to a friend, that's okay. I'm supporting my connection to others in that way. Let me work out today so that I can do something for my physical health, spiritual health. That could look like a variety of things.
- 09:11 Right now, I've kind of taken on meditation a bit. Let's do that today so that we can just check in, get our bodies calm, and mental health. Some of them kind of go hand-in-hand. One activity could go across all of them. Overlap. Yeah, overlap quite a bit. But just doing something to support overall health is I don't know why that stuck out to me. No, I love it. Yeah. Well, actually you brought up to me, I read about it, and it did resonate with me too, so. You've kind of been talking about meditation a little bit, like at least just being more present in the moment.
- 09:43 Don't worry too much about what's to come. Don't regret what's behind us, but just be in the moment. And it helps. Can I ask a question? Breathwork is a good one too. A part of it. But yes. No, well, I was just going to where do you think an idea of practicing gratitude? That's one thing that I always try to get better at. You know This role, any role, life in general, you're always going to get thrown a curveball and people aren't always the way that you want to interact with them, whatever it may be. And so a lot of times when I get kind of down about that stuff, I try to practice gratitude.
- 10:12 Where do you think that would fall in the forward? I mean, like you said, it probably hits multiple because it brightens my spirit in the sense of like I feel better mentally, so I imagine it's a little mental health thing. But what else do you think? I would say mental and maybe a little spiritual. Yeah yeah And a lot of times I'll think of family and stuff like what I have. So I guess that one too. I love it because it encompasses almost anything that could be. All right. Well, oh, Sharon is directing me toward the paper, so she's like Well, he was looking at me like I was supposed to ask a question.
- 10:43 I was looking at you like, "Well, that question came off the cuff, and I thought it was pretty good," or that connection, but apparently that's not how it works. Back to the script. All right, so we're going to shift back towards the district. Thank you very much, though, for explaining that so well. Oh, sure. Even though Sharon doesn't want

me to talk about it, you made an impact right there on me and I made what we like to call a Texas self-connection. Apparently it's not allowed on this podcast. All right, so how do you feel we've talked many times actually a recent episode was about the strategic plan.

- 11:13 How do you feel we are doing, essentially, with the strategic plan in terms of making progress, specifically with our new superintendent, Marty Cobza at the helm? Yeah, it's been exciting to watch. I think that in a short period of time, we can already see that we're making a lot of progress on the things that we set forth even before he joined us. And so he just picked the ball up and started rolling with it. And so it has been exciting to watch.
- 11:38 I know that we're headed in the right direction because I can see that he is similar to me, like systems, wanting to have things in place to address all the things. And that's what we're doing across the board. Specifically, one of the areas that kind of encompasses my student services role related to our strategic plan is our whole child approach.
- 12:03 And he and I have had conversations about, "Okay, how do we ensure that all means all?" And so we're engaging in those conversations, working through our plan for the next few years with our strategic plan. And and I'm excited to see what's to come. Yeah. Yeah, everything you've brought up today, I mean, even with the four walls, it is that whole child thing or even the whole person approach. So yeah, that does tie in really well. Yeah. Love it. So when you were here last time, we asked about how you grow as a professional and continue being a learner.
- 12:34 Do you have any new resources now that you've taken on this new role? I still do similar to last time. So I think last time I said that I'm a big, like a tender of the different conferences and PD opportunities that are out there, and it's still the same. With the new role, I've added on some. So we are connected with Green Bush. I'm not sure if you guys have talked about that on the podcast, but they provide a lot of consultation services for our staff to kind of just grow professionally.
- 13:05 They have a lot of organization tools. Like They really have all the things. But I have added to myself I just attended, I want to say a couple of days ago, 504 training. This is what we were just emailing about yesterday because the teacher was asking about this. Yes, so because this is new to me, it is similar to special education, but it does have its own nuances. And so I'm just let me learn as much as I can. They offered it. We're a part of it. I will be there.
- 13:32 And they have a lot of things related to special education specifically, director stuff specifically. They have a early leaders one that I go to. They have just one for all leaders, special education leaders. So whatever they offer, I go. The one that I'm really excited about is about budget. People talk about the special education budget a lot. It is a hot topic, understandably. So I'm attending those to make sure that we are doing everything that we possibly can for our students in that area too.
- 14:04 And I'm going to go off the script a little bit, sorry. What? You led a session at the was it the women's conference? Can you talk about that? We didn't add that to that, but I think that would be something cool. Yes. Well, actually, I'm sorry, we don't add questions as we go apparently. So we'll invite you next time. All right, so then no, no, absolutely not. We saw her reaction last time that this happened. No, go. I want to hear this. I'm sorry we didn't put it in. It is exactly about the four walls of the house. So I did have an opportunity. For the first time, I submitted a proposal to a conference.

- 14:35 It was a Women in Leadership Conference, and it was accepted. I was like, "Oh, okay. I didn't know it would be, but here we go." And so I did. And it was about kind of self-care for leaders, women who are in leadership and how to do that. I'm trying to think of the topic of the conference, but it was something about illuminating your leadership potential, something like that. That wasn't quite it. And so we tied it into so it was all about overall health.
- 15:03 I kind of created a presentation about prioritizing it. I actually wrote a journal where you can do this for 30 days, take a challenge, personal self-challenge. So I explained to them about kind of the four walls of the house, briefly how I did to you guys. And then we had them create a plan to lead into next school year. So what has worked well for you? What hasn't? What are your strengths? We're not talking about your weaknesses because nobody in here is weak. We're all doing different things. So it was wonderful.
- 15:34 Everybody was engaged and left with some tools and strategies to take with them because wellness is lifelong, right? It's something that we have to do all the time. And when you don't, your body tells you, "Okay, get it together." Do something now. Address it now. But yeah, that was a great opportunity. You know I think that would be we all serve on the district leadership team, and I think that would be a great thing for a DLT not to add anything to your plate, but maybe like in our first meeting in August, we can think about that because that group would probably love to hear that and they'll need that going into the year.
- 16:08 Maybe we can do it toward the end of this year. So that's wonderful that you had an opportunity to do that. Yeah, it was so fun. Yeah. Way to go, way to go. Well, we have talked about a lot of valuable information, extremely important information. And I would say the topic I'm going to shift us to is equally as important. Have you been listening to the podcast recently? I haven't recently. Have we ever had anybody that's answered positively or yes to that? I think there's been lots of times I'm like, you listen to the episode. You know what we do now, right? People are like awkwardly looking at each other in the floor.
- 16:39 And I know it's amazing. You know what? That's the best answer ever. I'd rather have that than be I listen every week. That's fine. So this is very important. We need to shift gears just for a moment to Rocky and Back to the Future. Yes, Miles added this question. I did add this question and not on the cuff. That's why it's allowed. It was literally in the script. So I don't like the facial expression you're making. That's not a good facial expression. What? At this point, I can still delete. Say again? Ask your question.
- 17:08 Well, I want to hear first. Like I'm a little nervous. Have you seen the Rocky movies? Maybe one, maybe years ago. I'll take it. Do you know which one? No. It's okay just to describe everything about it. We're connoisseurs, especially me. She's a connoisseur, the worst one, the second worst one, but I'm a connoisseur of all. I don't know. Well, who was he fighting? No clue. Oh, come on. Okay, all right. All right. No clue. Are you sure he wasn't fighting a really tall Russian USSR? Does that sound the Soviet Union?
- 17:38 Nope. Nope. All right, well, let's move on to Back to the Future. How are we doing on that? No, et cetera. Et cetera. We gave you these questions earlier. You could have easily done your homework or you could have said like, take that out. Time to watch movies. I know there are several Rocky movies, right? I just want you to know that there are like you could go to YouTube and do recaps of things. You could have watched something. No, I'm just kidding. Okay, so I would say that you need could

there be like the fifth wall, which is like the ceiling and the ceiling being, "You got to watch some movies, the good ones." I watch terrible reality TV.

- 18:15 No. I don't disagree with that. I know a lot of people that do that, and it's like, "Don't have to think, don't have to make decisions." I like it. I would say that's me with probably, I watch a lot of sports. I'm a big Office fan. Yeah, exactly. So, okay. All right. Well, I will let that go. We will allow this episode to still be aired. But I am going to bother you. I'm going to bother you. It hasn't worked with Marty. I keep talking about "Back to the Future." Yeah, he won't watch it now. Yeah, now he just stares at me.
- 18:44 He's like, "You think I watched it?" I'm like, "Did you watch "Back to the Future? What do you think?" I'm like, "All right, see you later." No, in all seriousness. Watch the movies. No, but seriously, you're amazed. Even without that, I still love it. No, I'm constantly singing Ascender's praises. We talked about it yesterday. I was talking to Barbara Green Bush. I'm like, "Oh, you've got to send her the best." So we're very lucky to have you. I mean, I mean it from the bottom of my heart. Oh, just happened to be a part of the team. We're all doing this thing to the best of our abilities for our students to be successful.
- 19:16 That's what it's for. Yeah. I love it. I think we wrap it up. Yeah, yay. Thank you so much. Before we wrap up the episode, just a quick shout out. We've been doing this every time. We want to thank LEF again for the grant for our wonderful equipment that we have here. Our sound quality is amazing. So thank you very much for that. And as always, for more updates and stories on LansingUSD 469, you can visit us at www.usd469.net. And if you don't already have it, download the freelancing USD 469 mobile app on Apple and Android. That app allows you to be the first things to know about all the fantastic things happening in the district.
- 19:48 And if you like our content and want to stay up to date on the latest episodes, please follow us wherever you're listening and leave a review to help others find us and learn more about our wonderful district. We are available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio, Castbox, Stitcher, and Pocket Cast. And if you'd like to be a guest on the podcast, please send us an email at sharing.burns@USD469.net. And that's a wrap on episode nine of season two. And as always.
- 20:18 And thank you, Ascendra, for coming. Thanks for having me. Yay. Thank you, everyone. Woo! Bye, everybody.