

## **Ep. 29 Interim Superintendent Cintia Johnson**

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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Welcome to season three of the what's up aps podcast. I'm your host Frank Bellavia from School and community relations. We're getting ready to start the 2019 20 school year and we have some big changes coming our way with the addition of new schools and new programs. One of the biggest changes we'll see is that we have a new interim superintendent for the school year and that's Cintia Johnson who's been with Arlington schools for a number of years. So I thought we'd get a chance to talk to her and get to know her. So I want to welcome Cintia Johnson to the podcast. Thanks for joining us.

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So I had the good fortune to grow up in a military family. I was actually born in California and Fort Beale Air Force Base. We had an opportunity to live in a number of different bases Islam. We started in California and moved to Texas from there moved to Georgia North Carolina in the last space. My father was stationed at was actually Fort Dix in New Jersey. I think those experiences were wonderful experiences for me primarily because of the opportunity to live in different locations and also to be able to create a sense of community because the military lifestyle has that within the base.

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So most of the places I lived were was actually in the United States. But we did live outside of the United States in Panama and we spent as a short period of time in Cuba where my mother was born. My father is actually from the islands. And my father lived and worked outside of the United States quite a bit and he actually was quite

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quite the talent for language. So he spoke multiple languages. I had the good fortune to grow up in a home that was bilingual. And so in our home we did hear both English and Spanish.

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How did growing up in a military background how does that help you now as an educator. Does it help you.

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I think it is a tremendous help for a number of reasons. I think that the opportunity to live on bases creates the environment that I I feel is designed to create a sense of communities. So like many of the traditional communities we have in Arlington the bases create that. You have the sense of family a sense of family is extended beyond beyond your immediate family with other individuals taking care of yourself taking care of you and taking care of others.

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So that was a really strong feeling. Were neighbors watching out for each other. I enjoyed that immensely and I have the memories of that as well. I also really appreciate the diverse types of experiences that I've had in living in different places and I think that has truly enriched my life in a way that's been beneficial to the experiences that I've had beyond. So that's been another benefit I think of the military lifestyle and I actually attribute the ability to be very flexible and open minded and receptive to embracing what people bring to the table.

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Also being as a result of my military upbringing sounds like it's a big part of who you are today. It is a very big part of who I am today with our elected public schools for quite a while. Being a principal at a couple of schools talk about your professional background and in how you started in Arlington.

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Well my my actual educational career started before I came to Arlington. I did go to Rutgers University in New Jersey and I was one of those individuals who knew that she wanted to be a teacher. I think early on I always enjoyed being around young people. I did it early on as a babysitter as a candy striper in hospitals so that pleasure and that enjoyment has been a big part of my life all along. So I went to school for education started Armin in New Brunswick New Jersey and actually taught in four different states before coming to Arlington.

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And so those experiences also were part of my educational journey but I've been in Arlington for over 35 years. It's been a phenomenal experience in so many different ways. Started as a classroom teacher at Patrick Henry Elementary and then went over to Thomas Jefferson as a middle school teacher when the concept of middle school was first being developed and that was a great experience because of the developmental stages of middle school students and then from there went on to be an assistant principal at Randolph Elementary before being principal at Patrick Henry and opening the second immersion program at Claremont spread around the area all along.

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When you look back on your career what's with some of your fondest memories of being in the classroom I just believe that the ability to see the successes of students has probably been the most rewarding and I believe that those successes manifest themselves in a lot of different ways. So see to see a child happy learning in an environment is actually exhilarating. It motivates you to want to do more for that scene to be successful. It's also great to see the growth that occurs.

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I think not just in terms of their overall academic performance but how you see them mature and how you see them develop in terms of the social interactions or how they become more independent in terms of you know their confidence in what they do. So there's so many ways to look at the successes of students and I think that's really inspiring to teachers in a way that helps you to continue to do the work.

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What were your thoughts and feelings when the board approached you about being the interim superintendent and help transitioning the school system to a new superintendent.

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So initially it was why and you know giving some thought to you know wanting the system to be in a place where they were able to where we are able to continue to do the great work that is already in place. I believe that there is such talent in high levels of expertise and being able to provide leadership around that made me ask myself that question of why me and it was important to be able to keep that momentum.

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And then after asking that question I think the next question was why not. And really thinking about the longevity I have in the school system I think to a large degree how I have operated as an individual over the years in this school system I think is an indication of

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the value that you place on the individuals and what they each bring to the organization. And I think that's been very much a part of my belief in the work that I've done. So every individual in the organization has a level of expertise and is a valued individual that I think contributes to the overall success. So whether you're the classroom teacher or the individual who helps to maintain the facilities or transport our students from one location to another or help our students to be you know healthy whether it's physical activities or eating the right each and every one of those individuals is important to the success of an organization.

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You mentioned you've been around to public schools for over 35 years and you just talked about a little more of your time here. What are some of the changes you've seen in the school system over the years.

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One of the changes I've seen is the growth of care. I was smiling not too long ago thinking about 2009. And at that time we were probably a school system of about 19000 students I believe to a school system now of more than 26000. I was also reflecting on when I first became principal schools were at the elementary level might be anywhere from three hundred to 600. I don't think we have any elementary schools that's under 500 at this time.

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So I mean that's been a significant change and it's one that I think is going to continue to be reflected in in our school system. In that growth really basically means that we have to perhaps look at doing things in a different fashion so that we are more efficient and effective in our work.

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So there are really three societal factors that played a critical role in the development of who I am today and they have provided me with the opportunities to do and be who I am. So they have been very important in those three societal factors have really been the civil rights the women's movement and Title 9 and I talk about those three with tremendous pride and also a belief that I have a responsibility to really continue to contribute in a very positive fashion.

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The three are really not mutually exclusive of each other because they open doors and they created tremendous opportunities for individuals like myself and I tried to then take advantage of those opportunities and do it with integrity. So I think about individuals like Barbara Jordan. She was the first African-American woman and lawyer and she was the first to be elected to the United States House of Representative. I think about individuals like Sandra Day O'Connor who was the first woman to be to serve on the Supreme Court.

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made available as a result of their journey. But they were also very inspiring and I have a belief that extra curricular activities whether it's sports or whether it's music or whether it's the arts or whether it's some other areas of interest they tend to build confidence. They tend to build the kind of

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decision making skill sets that one needs. They tend to create this collective mindset. The concept of being a team they inspire individuals they give hope they create possibilities. The list is endless but those individuals I think pave the way and have served as great examples and there are many many more but I try to keep that in mind as I live my life.

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It does. It's in part because you lead by example. I also think that they provide an opportunity to open doors for others. And so I think in my journey it's about believing in yourself. And there are others who help you to get to that destination of believing in yourself. So I believe that all individuals who have had degrees of success have had tremendous mentors and supports along the way. And you know my life is an example of that. Whether it was my parents or whether it was the life experiences that I had or my colleagues who have been part of the mentoring or the individuals I mentioned earlier I believe that's important to your life. And

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You talked about when I asked about the changes you've seen over the years you talked about enrollment as a change but there's also a challenge that we're facing as a school system. What are some of the other challenges you see us as facing as we move forward.

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So I know that we're really focusing on continuing to ensure that we have excellence for each and every student. So I believe that that continues to be a challenge. We still have subgroups that are not performing as well as we'd like them to. But the work continues and the commitment is there and the care is there and we're seeing progress. So I think that's one area.

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Safety and Security continues to change and requires attention and a very different way. So I think that's another area of challenge that again Arlington Public School is continuing to address and make adjustments based on the changing climate. So I think we have to continue that work as well. We continue to have challenges around you know the overall well-being of students. I know one of the areas we're hearing a lot about is mental health our ability to provide the right supports for students so that they are not only performing well academically but they're also performing well in terms of the social and emotional well-being is a critical part of the work that we do so we have tremendous resources that are available within our schools.

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We have our counselors and I go back to the connection I made earlier about the value of extra curricular activities that I also think helps young people to stay healthy in more than one ways they are physically healthy but you're also socially healthy and you're emotionally healthy as a result of those supports and those opportunities that are outside of the academics.

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So I think that's another area we have to continue to give attention to and that happens to be one of the areas of school was focused on this year is the mental health of students whether it's what the results come back from your voice matter survey or the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and even how many kids in a building does a student know that they can go to to talk to the challenge them and encourage them. So that's a big focus.

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We've talked about this before and I've heard you mentioned this before about allowing individuals to do what they're supposed to do. What else do you see as your management style working. What can teachers and bus drivers and custodians in the central office staff see from you this year as interim superintendent.

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So I have a strong belief in the fact that people have gone to school received their training to develop their skill sets their knowledge their level of expertise and trusting that is a key piece to I think any organization being successful. It really is something that has worked for me over the years and it's something that I feel is important in terms of building capacity so the way that you do build capacity is by taking that talent that expertise those skill sets and allowing those individuals to not only do their work but also to empower them to actually be a resource for others to have perhaps provide leadership in an area that helps to build capacity as a school system.

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I know one of the things you mentioned earlier was about some of the challenges. Another area that's a challenge for us and that we want to continue to work for and work on is on engaging workforce in the way that you do that is that you create systems that allow for growth opportunities for those individuals who are interested in having those growth opportunities. So having the pipeline for that to occur regardless of the scale regardless of the type of work that somebody does you know we want to continue to help them to grow professionally and I think that's one of the things that is important to a successful organization and is very important to the work that the leaders do in the school system.

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One of the things that you've done in the last couple of years of the year and in the administrative services and focus on is creating a cohort of leaders from within. And you recently won an award for your work in that. How important is that to grow leaders from within.

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One of the things that you've done in the last couple of years of the year and in the administrative services and focus on is creating a cohort of leaders from within. And you recently won an award for your work in that. How important is that to grow leaders from within.

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Oh it's very important. It's it's it demonstrates that you have a tremendous faith and value the employees that you have. So I think that that sends a message. It also creates opportunities and opens doors. And so when those stores are open people will enter. And so you create the pathway for them to be able to learn more in their profession so that they can move on to the next step. So the spike in leaders is one component of it.

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*00:18:33:26 - 00:19:12:12*

I couldn't do it without my colleagues who provide information about individuals who may want to explore those possibilities. So again extending an invitation to them for them to take advantage of professional learning opportunities is one way of doing it. Another is giving people an opportunity to self identify. So you put information out there that says if you're interested just come in learn and gather information. We also have partnerships that I think are phenomenal in terms of those growth opportunities at least from the standpoint of leadership with what we've done with some of our neighboring universities.

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*00:19:12:14 - 00:19:49:15*

So creating multiple pathways is the way to go about developing the staff that you want. It's not limited to people having to attend work sessions there are lots of ways for them to receive that you know. And I think it's important to create those multiple pathways not just for the adults but actually for our students as well. So more proud of that. And we also have taken a look at what our needs are in when we have done that we've tailored it to that need. And so recently we started a Latino leadership group that I think has been well received and we want to continue that work as well.

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*00:19:56:18 - 00:20:04:27*

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*00:20:05:16 - 00:20:48:14*

I think that's important. For individuals to see people like them I think it's equally important for people to see what the journey is in. I'm an example of somebody who started out as a classroom teacher. So I think in some ways that also demonstrates what the possibilities and the paths are that could be there for anyone. But again I think it's important to recognize that doors are open and you have to enter those doors. I also think that you have to recognize that there are supports along the way that help you to take that journey. So yes having individuals that look like you female you know a minority representation is critical but I also think that you have to take advantage of opportunities when they're there for you.

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*00:20:58:22 - 00:21:09:02*

You recently went to China on an educational trip at the last school year and you've been a cop as a cop. A couple of places. Talk about those experiences China and other places that you've been.

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*00:21:09:27 - 00:21:52:25*

Yes I think it's one of those things that has made me smile. I think there are a lot of professions where you have the opportunity to travel a lot. Education is not necessarily one of those. But I've had the good fortune to be able to make some travel outside of the country. There have been educational trips and I've gone to Bolivia to Spain to Japan and then most recently China. I think what those are or what those trips do is they allow you to see the country both from through a different lens and help to further increase your awareness and to create opportunities.

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*00:21:52:25 - 00:22:36:15*

I think just to learn a lot about the country so my most recent trip was to China. I went with the Georgia race through George Mason University and had an opportunity to travel to Beijing Shi On in Shanghai. And while we're there we are actually visiting schools and having an opportunity to see how the educational institution works there. And you know there's a lot of things that one can speak to in terms of similarities and differences but I think the one thing I've seen in all my travels is really that parents are parents the same around the world they genuinely care about their child and they want what's best for their child and they'll make the investment to try to make that happen.

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So that's always rewarding to see and as a parent I understand that and I appreciate it. And I have great sensitivities too. But you also learn a lot about the country. So it's absolutely fantastic to be able to travel that other places and learn about the history and the culture and how much.

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It's another example of a partnership that creates I think growth opportunities that are more on the global scale conversation we've talked a lot about some of the things we want to focus on this year we talked about mental health and opportunity gaps.

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What is your vision for the school year as you take the helm to a large degree it's to stay the course and to build on you know the talent and expertise that we already have within our school system. And I think it's important to continue to explore you know multiple pathways to success for student learning. I think a lot

of those things are in place and so we want to continue that work. It's very important that when we've been able to identify systems that are designed to help individuals arrive at a particular destination that is aimed towards excellence or success that we give ourselves the time to do the work that leads to that success.

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So I think we have a year that allows us to deepen our understanding our commitment and to develop the talents around the work that we know is important for student success and ultimately also important to our staff. So I see that as an important investment this year.

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*00:24:26:28 - 00:24:31:26*

Is there anything you're specifically looking forward to as a superintendent.

*00:24:31:26 - 00:24:31:26*

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*00:24:34:12 - 00:24:45:07*

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*00:24:45:23 - 00:25:03:15*

I think the one of the great things I saw in the last couple weeks into that administrative conference are reading the drum line through Wakefield High School. There's pictures on social media there's a video on Instagram of you doing that. And there was this highlight but I think everybody is still talking about it is you're doing that.

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*00:25:03:15 - 00:25:03:21*

So

*00:25:03:21 - 00:25:03:21*

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*00:25:05:27 - 00:25:13:26*

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*00:25:13:26 - 00:25:13:26*

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*00:25:13:29 - 00:25:47:18*

I want to thank you for sitting down and talking with us and for our viewers or listeners to get to to get to know you a little bit and look forward to spending the year working with you as superintendent. Thanks for joining us. Thank you for the opportunity and give it my best. Thank you very much. And thank you for tuning into this episode of The what's up podcast. You can find us on tune in stitcher Apple podcasts wherever you get your podcast. If you have any thoughts of feature topics or you want to hear some more about something. Send us an e-mail email at APEC news as we age out U.S.

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*00:25:48:10 - 00:25:56:21*

or is up on social media and let us know what you're looking for. Thanks again. And we look forward to seeing our kids back for the 2019 20 school year