

## Agency for Change Podcast: Dr. Paul Gausman, Superintendent, Lincoln Public Schools

- Connect with Paul on LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/in/paulgausman/>
- Learn more about Lincoln Public Schools - <https://www.lps.org/>

### **Paul Gausman**

Today's problems came from yesterday's solutions.

### **Announcer:**

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

We've talked to a lot of CEOs on the podcast, but today you're going to hear from a different kind of CEO, one who not only has to create unique, effective solutions for their employees, balance a massive budget and fulfill obligations to stakeholders, but they also make sure every person who comes through their doors leaves as an educated critical thinker, ready to take on the challenges of today's society.

I'm talking about school superintendents, the CEOs of the public education world. Today we're talking with the superintendent of the second largest school district in the state of Nebraska. Stick with us until the end of the episode as we dive into topics like how technology is transforming the classroom and how schools are preparing students for the ever-changing future.

Hi everyone, this is Kelley Peterson, chief creative officer at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest, Dr. Paul Gausman, superintendent at Lincoln Public Schools, has a longstanding tradition of educational excellence and rigorous academic achievement. Paul, I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact you are making on the world.

### **Paul Gausman:**

Thank you very much. It's good to be here.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

For people who aren't familiar with Lincoln Public Schools can you talk a bit about the organization? Specifically, I'm thinking of things like how many schools are in the community, how many students, demographics, things like that.

### **Paul Gausman:**

Certainly. I'm very excited and a real champion of the Lincoln Public Schools and have been for a lot of my life actually. Even though I'm new here and just started in July, this last July, I have paid attention to the Lincoln Public Schools my whole career. I went to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and obviously did some things with the Lincoln Public Schools at that time.

I'm a musician, and so I did some things with the band programs in the district, student taught in this district. I have been a teacher in this district at one time, so certainly as I prepared for my interview to become superintendent of schools. I did a lot of study of this district.

When you look at buildings and programs right now, we have 40 elementary schools, we have 12 middle schools, and we have seven comprehensive high schools and an eighth one under construction right now which will open next August, so we will have eight comprehensive high schools next August.

But in addition to that we have a number of alternative sites in the community. We have our focus programs that we can talk more about later if you'd like, and our career academy, which is done in partnership with businesses, and the Chamber, and the Southeast Community College.

So I'm on a tour of all of our buildings and facilities and programs right now, and when you add them all together I will have ended up attending what appears to be about 75 different locations that are part of the school district. It's a big district, with 42,000 students in it. Over the last decade or so it has grown significantly, some years almost as much as 1,000 students a year.

If you think about kind of an average size elementary school being 500 students and growing by 1,000 students a year, that's adding two elementaries a year, so it really has changed over time. We're not growing quite as rapidly now, most specifically because of the pandemic, but I do look forward to a time when Lincoln starts showing its growth again.

We're different as a school district than most in the nation. If you look right next to us you'll see Omaha Public Schools, a great school district, but Omaha has the national model, where you have the urban center and you have a bunch of suburbs that are around the urban center.

In the Omaha area, as many know, it would be Millard and Papillion and Bellevue and Ralston and Elkhorn and Gretna and so on. But here in Lincoln, as Lincoln annexes more area to become part of the Lincoln community it continues through state law to become a part of the Lincoln Public Schools, so we have this opportunity to continue to grow and grow and grow. I'm very happy with that decision that was many, many, many years ago, because I think it's good for that.

Demographically we have 135 home languages spoken in this district. We are a district that is between 40 and 50% students in poverty because we still have that urban core. We have some really incredible programs for students, whether that be the special education services, gifted education services, focus programs and different focused areas that our middle schools and elementaries engage in.

So I'm very proud of this district, and if anyone were to ask me the secret to success of this district it's really the staff working with this great community that supports their local public schools. Whether they have kids in school or not, Lincoln supports their public schools, and I celebrate that.

**Kelley Peterson:**

So true. First, I want to start off by saying welcome back.

**Paul Gausman:**

Thank you.

**Kelley Peterson:**

That is great. I love that part of your story, that you have Lincoln, Nebraska history and teaching history right here in this district. Superintendent shoes, those are big ones. What does a day in the shoes of a superintendent look like?

**Paul Gausman:**

It's really hard to pinpoint it because every day is so different. I think that's what I like the most about the position. I love coming to work every day, but I never know what I'm going to be doing each day. That sounds like I'm not focusing enough on my own calendar or something like that, but there's this blend as the superintendent of schools of things that are proactive that you get to prepare for and work toward, and there are things that just happen as a part of your day, where you must stop all other things and react and deal with situations and crises as they arise.

So it's really difficult for me to outline for you what a standard day was, with the exception of certain days, where there will be times where no matter who you are you always have a boss, and my boss happens to be the school board, the locally elected seven member board of education.

There are days where we have board committee meetings, regular board meetings that are done in public, and all of those meetings are so public, that those days are pretty well orchestrated, unless a crisis arises.

But separate from that, each day is different. In a district the size of Lincoln there's a lot of community speaking events, a lot of partnership events with Southeast Community College, the University, Wesleyan, a lot of local agencies, United Way, Chamber... I don't want to miss anybody, but collective of different cultures in this community. Really every day has a little bit of a different feel to it, and to me that's what makes it so fun.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Absolutely. When you described no day is the same and it may not end up like how you planned, that sounds like the life of a marketer, so I understand 100%. I think that though I didn't consider education in my career path, that is one of the things that appealed to me doing marketing communications, was that every day is something different, and a different problem to solve and celebrate, so I like the sound of that very much.

**Paul Gausman:**

Stay focused on what's best for students and the community.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Yeah.

**Paul Gausman:**

We ask ourselves that question a lot just to make certain that we're making good decisions as we go forward while things fly by us at a very rapid speed. When you're in your first year as superintendent of schools in this district it's not like drinking from a fire hose. It's like drinking from Niagara Falls. It is going by so quickly right now. I can't believe it's October at the time we're having this conversation, but it is an exciting time.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Very exciting time. Prior to Lincoln Public Schools you were the superintendent of the Sioux City Community School District for 14 years. How did that role help prepare you for LPS?

**Paul Gausman:**

I think there were a lot of things I've done earlier in my career that helped me prepare to apply and interview and to be successful as the selection as the next LPS superintendent, but probably nothing more significant than my work in Sioux City.

Sioux City is not as large as Lincoln. It's about a third the size of Lincoln, so where we've got 42,000 students in Lincoln, in Sioux City I had 15,000 students. Still a pretty good size district, still an urban characteristic district. What I mean by urban characteristic, sometimes when I use the word urban people think I'm referring to size, and I'm not.

Urban districts typically have a higher percentage of students than the national average in poverty. Urban districts typically have a higher percentage of students than the national average who are learning the English language and they speak some other home language.

Urban districts very commonly have a higher percentage of students that they're serving who have a disability or special needs, not because there's a higher percentage of kids in that town with special needs or a disability, but because they offer these programs that people come from all over the region to receive, and all three of those metrics are true in Lincoln.

We are somewhere between 40 and 50% poverty, as I mentioned. We've got a little over 10% of our students learning the English language. We've got 135... We're diverse in our diversity. We've got 135 languages spoken, and we have the greatest special education services for students, and as a result we have 16% of our population receiving those services, when the national average is about 9 or 10%.

When I look back to my time in Sioux City, Sioux City went through an extraordinary change during the 15 years that I was there, not the district per se or something that was driven by the district, just the community changed because of new businesses that were coming to town. Sioux City's population in poverty unfortunately grew significantly while I was there, from 37% to 70%.

Lincoln is showing that growth in poverty right now. That's not something to celebrate, but it's something to know and understand. It's also not something to hide away, because it takes different strategies to be successful with students who are in poverty, so I learned a lot about that in Sioux City.

Sioux City didn't have 135 languages like Lincoln does. It had about 47 when I left there, but it had a much greater percentage of its population that was learning the English language. About 34% of the students in Sioux City did not speak English as their home language, where it's just a little bit over 10% here. So I certainly learned those kinds of things while I was there.

Also in Sioux City they have a penny sales tax in the state of Iowa which allows you to build new schools. It can't be used really for anything else but infrastructure. So without having to do bond issues they can build new school facilities there. We weren't building them in Sioux City for growth like in Lincoln does. But while in Sioux City I engaged in 20 construction projects.

As you know, there's a great many construction projects that have happened in Lincoln and that will need to happen in the future, so I think all of those things made me well poised. There were other good candidates, I want to be very clear about that. I watched the interviews of the other candidates and respect each of them for their expertise as well. I'm sure they could have done a great job, but I think some of those unique things that I just mentioned made me well poised to become the superintendent today and make me excited to be here and be part of the team.

**Kelley Peterson:**

When you talked about those issues per se about the Lincoln community and how it's changing and becoming diverse, I did want to mention KidGlov has been involved for many years with the project of Lincoln Vital Signs. First, I want to thank Lincoln Public Schools for helping with some of the data that helps inform the community about what's going on, and you said yourself there are things to celebrate

within Lincoln Vital Signs, but there's a lot of something to know, and for everyone within the community to know about how the community is changing, and especially in your mention of poverty.

I think that that's incredibly important, because we may live in particular areas within the community and not realize the true level, and it does in fact have an impact on our young people for sure-

**Paul Gausman:**

It sure does.

**Kelley Peterson:**

... and for families.

**Paul Gausman:**

Yeah. Education is the great equalizer, and the strength of America, in my opinion, has been the backbone that it has that was built on the public schools. I am not one who's against private, parochial schooling, homeschooling, whatever. All of those things are fine, but we all need our public schools to be strong in order for our community to be strong, whether we have kids there or not.

Poverty likely is one of the largest civil rights issues that we're facing right now. I'm not disparaging any other civil rights issues we have, and we have things as the American experiment that we need to still work on with race, and ethnicity, and culture, and all kinds of things, but if we can find ways in the educational system to equalize the challenges of poverty, then education can become the great equalizer for opportunity for students to become our neighbors, our future teachers, our future caretakers and caregivers. You can tell I'm really passionate about this.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I love your passion. You can just feel it in the sound of your voice. That is just wonderful, and who we need as a leader and superintendent of our public schools for sure.

You talked about that equalizer. I think one of those things is that many districts are adopting a one-to-one device policy, where each student is issued a laptop or tablet to use in the classroom. In your opinion, does this access to technology help or hurt students?

**Paul Gausman:**

It depends how we use it I suppose. More often than not, having the tool available provides assistance. It's a help. But there are other components of that that I think we overlook. There are those out there that say if we can just give everybody a device, we may not need school buildings anymore. Maybe we don't talk about snow days anymore, because when there's a snowstorm out there everybody can just learn from home. Well, it's far more complex than that.

When you're talking about 42,000 students in some 60 to 70 buildings, and devices... As I make my way around this community, and I'll bet others that are listening will think of this as they travel around, have you ever been driving around in this community... A great community and I love everything about it, but have you ever been driving around, and you lost cellphone connection? I have.

Have you ever been around in different places and you need to hop onto your wifi or your device or something and you just can't get the connectivity? Connectivity is the first great equalizer that must be there before we can talk about devices becoming an equalizer.

We don't have connectivity everywhere, and we're working on that right now with a number of different companies and agencies. Obviously with most things in life you need money and you need time to get things done, and the challenges of money and time are not absent when you're talking about citywide connectivity. I'm not sharing on this podcast any announcement of anything that's coming, because I don't have anything that's necessarily set up with that kind of detail yet, but it's discussions that we're always having because it is so important to do that.

But I do want to be clear that Lincoln Public Schools have more devices than students. Everybody has their own device when they need their own device in this school district, and that was an investment this district made in recent years. I'm glad that they did, because sometimes those devices are that great equalizer.

We're not a district where students can bring their own device from home and as a result some kids have the most incredible gaming device in their hand and other ones don't have anything in their hand. Lincoln is really about equitable education for all. I know we can always get better at that and we've got room to improve, but we provide those devices.

In our secondary schools, mostly our high schools, students take those devices with them when they go away from the school. In the middle schools that happens a little, but not much. In the elementaries it doesn't happen much at all. I don't see us getting to the point any time in the near future where we replace in person instruction with remote or virtual instruction, and I'm personally thankful for that.

We had this incredible worldwide event called the pandemic that gave us the opportunity to try that, and what we learned was yeah, we can do some things that way, but we can't do our core mission and our business the way we do it best when it's all done in a virtual setting. Our students learn best when they're in the room with an effective educator who is bringing them between they currently are and the achievement that they want to strive to achieve.

That's I think something we've learned through the pandemic, but we do need devices and connectivity to make certain that we are a well-rounded district, and preparing them for the world that they will exist in after they graduate with a diploma and a plan for their future.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Yes. Both of those things, a diploma and a plan for the future.

**Paul Gausman:**

It's very important.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I have two seniors in college, and I hope for the same thing, the diploma and a plan for the future.

**Paul Gausman:**

We all understand that we make plans, and those plans don't stay the same. You got to have one to start with so that you have one you can amend as life happens to you.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Everyone needs that baseline or that guide to then go off of that guide, be innovative and creative and all of those things, but that base sure is important. You've mentioned the pandemic, and I don't want to go too down that rabbit hole either, but boy, did I wish that you could have called a snow day for the

adults. I remember we had a lot of those days that I needed a mental break and it being called a snow day, as if it was in my childhood. I long for those snow days.

**Paul Gausman:**

That's another reason that I don't think we'll replace snow days with virtual days entirely. You have to think about the fact that with 42,000 kids many of them are going to forget to take their device home, or it won't be charged, or they don't have connectivity, like we talked about.

But there's something about living in the upper central part of the United States where snow days are a right of passage, and we all kind of look toward them. I know they create burdens for others and that sort of thing, and I'm not quick to offer snow days, and I know that's going to cause some frustration too, because I always think about the number of kids that don't get fed nutritionally if we don't have school.

That's really what's on my mind. There are thousands of kids who may not have a healthy meal if we don't have school. But there's a safety issue as well that must be considered. Student safety is very paramount of course, but it is kind of a right of passage in this part of the country, and I think that's something we all can appreciate.

**Kelley Peterson:**

It is a right of passage and has a certain nostalgia, that you just want to have one every once in a while. So we chatted already about the overall demographics of the city of Lincoln changing, but how does LPS plan to meet the needs of a more diverse student population and the community at large?

**Paul Gausman:**

I'll mention three things here. The one that strikes me first and foremost is work that the board and the previous superintendent and administrative team and the staff and community have done before I got here. It actually was completed right before I got here, and it's referred to as the All Means All Equity Plan.

When you take a look at data about the school district, Lincoln Public Schools performs very well and I'm very proud of what they do, but like a lot of districts we have disproportionality in certain areas. I'm talking about disproportionality not necessarily with race and ethnicity, although that's there, but also with students and socioeconomic status and so on.

As an example, if you look at the number of students in the district who are identified as gifted, which in Nebraska is a very specific term on a very specific thing, because I would tell you my opinion is every human being is gifted in some things, but we measure it on math and reading, so that obviously starts to collate a certain part of the population, but it's disproportionate when you look at students who are middle class and above and students who are less than that socioeconomically.

Racial groups are different percentages of students who are identified that way. That's true of student registrations in the Career Academy, AP classes, advanced placement classes, honors classes. We've got to do a better job of making certain that we have equal access for all in those sorts of programs, so that's one thing there.

The second thing that's in this plan is that our staff doesn't mirror the student population just even when you look at it with the naked eye. The student population is quite diverse. Our staff isn't so much. Over the years, as we move forward into the future, we're going to need to do more to see to it that we can create a staff that better represents the student population that we serve, because research shows that that makes a difference.

Graduation rates are different based on different ethnicities and races and socioeconomic status. Part of the reason I think that happens is the last thing that I'll mention, which is consequences and discipline that is handed out, like suspensions or those sorts of things from school, those are disproportionate as well. So we have work to do in that particular area.

I'm proud of our district for stepping forward and saying we're going to fix this, we're going to find ways to really change these things, because when this district fixes that they will be one of the first in the nation to really create huge change in all of those areas together, so it's a lot of heavy lifting.

I would also indicate to you, however, that as this community changes we're going to need to do more with early childhood education. I'm talking about preschool, more than just childcare. And I'm not critical with those who provide childcare, we need that, but we've got to do more to help families get students ready for kindergarten and first grade so that they can be successful as soon as possible within school so that they will learn how to read, so that they can read to learn. That's really important.

Then I think we also owe it to the community and certainly our students to take a look at our high school programs and offerings that are there. I love what we're doing in this district with focus programs and the Career Academy. We've got to package it probably and define it a little bit better.

We have to think about the number of students... Out of 43,000 we have whatever it would be, 3,000 graduates a year. What percentage of those really should and need to go on to a four-year school? It's a good percentage, a four-year college, because so many go and don't achieve a diploma but have a lot of debt, and don't really have that plan that we mentioned before for their future.

So we really want people when they're devising their diploma and their plan for the future to consider... I believe all students need some kind of training after high school, but it could be the military. It could be a two year school. It could be an apprenticeship or an internship somewhere.

So we've got to do a better job of designing and articulating for our families those workforce processes, because we know that everywhere you go right now you're hearing about workforce challenge, and workforce is the biggest issue in the United States of America right now. The solution is right under our nose, and I think we forget to pay attention to that.

The workforce challenges will be solved with today's third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth graders. We've got to find ways to connect them with the opportunities that are available, because they're going to become our neighbors. People who live in Lincoln know people who live in Lincoln stay in Lincoln, or go away and come back to Lincoln because it's such a great place. We know that many of our students are going to be here later. Let's make sure that we're preparing them to be good workers and good neighbors.

**Kelley Peterson:**

So in speaking of those neighbors and early childhood development, I walk every morning with a para educator that's in the preschool program, so I get firsthand stories of how important that education is, and I would love to see that grow. Early childhood is so important, again as those connections we learned about early childhood and graduation rates and all of those things again in Lincoln Vital Signs, and hearing from colleagues at Lincoln Littles about early childhood development.

**Paul Gausman:**

I met with them this week, the team from Lincoln Littles, and when I interviewed for the superintendent's position here last, I think it was February. One of the questions I was asked was what would you do to bring about a heightened graduation rate? I answered several pieces of formula, but



one of those pieces was early childhood. You don't think about graduation rate and preschool as the same thing, but they are.

Studies have just show it over and over and over again, you've got to get students ready for school so that they can be successful in school, because that's how they graduate.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Early brain development and the studies about that is phenomenal. It is just there.

**Paul Gausman:**

And we've got a great preschool program in the district and good childcare in town. I mean not to disparage anyone, but when you look at just the number of four-year-olds in town, 3,200, 3,100, something like that, and the number of them who are receiving early childhood education, it's really low compared to some other communities. And when you see the number who would like to receive but can't get there or can't afford it it's staggering. It's a way that we can make a difference in this community together.

**Kelley Peterson:**

It sure is. It sure is. So, Paul, I'm inspired, being the marketer that I am, by motivational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

**Paul Gausman:**

Yeah. You were kind enough to give me some thoughts ahead of time to be thinking about on certain things. The one that just popped out to me because I see it happening all the time, especially when you're brand new to an organization... I don't know how inspirational it is other than just it's an awareness quote.

Today's problems came from yesterday's solutions. To me that says a whole lot of what we're trying to deal with, because as I'm new here I have so many people are sharing with me the things they think should be better, here's what we need to do to make the district better, and they're right, we do need to do those things.

But when I really dig into whatever it is they're sharing with me, I realize that the challenge they're outlining is actually the result of somebody trying to do something helpful several years ago. They put in an initiative or a program and it had this unintended consequence. I think we've got to be really careful as we put in new initiatives and new programs to think through what might be those unintended consequences so that we don't accidentally damage something.

We're dealing with people's money, and more importantly their children. We have a heavy responsibility here and we've got to be very thoughtful of using best practices and research and data in making our decisions. That's kind of a second inspirational quote in the sense that I would take that notion that we can accidentally make a mistake.

We had better root our decision making in the business of making certain it's sound, because when you deal with people's money and their children you're also dealing with an extraordinary amount of emotion and drama. We just had it, whether we want it or not. We have it everywhere.

Emotion and drama are really good for a lot of things and I use them a lot in my work, but we have to set it aside when we're making operational decisions to serve students for multiple years in a row. We've got to make certain we're rooted in that.

Then I guess I would just also say in answer to that that I'm a longtime Husker fan. My dad was an All-Big 8 high-jumper, All-Big6, I think originally, back in the days when they didn't even have Big 8. He's no longer with us. He was always such an influence on my life, and he always had me looking up to a great coach that he adored and admired, Dr. Tom Osborne, who I've spent a little time with since I've been in town.

I'm sitting here talking with you today, I know we're not on camera, but with a water cup that's got a quote from Dr. Osborne on it, "Work hard, stay focused, and surround yourself with good people." I think if I can do those things, I'm going to find my way to being successful here.

The fortunate thing for me is that the good people were here before I got here, so I'm surrounded with good people already. In time we'll have to replace some, as they go to retirement or other things, but working hard and staying focused is the part that I'm going to need to work really diligently upon, but I'm going to do that.

**Kelley Peterson:**

You've just hit so many of my, I call them not hot buttons, but my heart buttons, so I have to share while I can, because of course Tom Osborne is such an influence in this community and in this state.

But your dad being a high-jumper, I'm going to do one backwards. I am the mother of a pole vaulter, who is the product of Lincoln Public Schools, and his sports were so a big, big deal of his life. He was such a good pole vaulter, he ended up being state champion for Class A and all of those things.

And those experiences that were through Lincoln Public Schools in a program with such a niche sport, that Lincoln Public Schools was able to accommodate and have this amazing team of pole vaulters. But not only was the equipment there, but the teacher and the coach of this team of all Lincoln Public Schools that came together at Lincoln High to pole vault in those facilities was phenomenal, so I have to put a plug for that, and just that when you said those fourth and those fifth graders are going to be our leaders, I look at those experiences that my children have been able to have, whether that's through sports, or dance, or an auto CAD class, who is now an interior designer at an architecture firm in Omaha, Nebraska, so of course I get to be a brag mom.

It's all of those relationships and it's the people that surrounded them for them to be able to have that foundation of success, so hats off.

**Paul Gausman:**

I agree with you. I think coaching is everything. I considered myself as a coach as a band director, even though a lot of people don't put those words together. I grew up in Fremont. I think I mentioned that earlier in our conversation. Fremont, when I was there, had such a dynasty in track and it was a big sport for that district, and I think they're still quite good, although I haven't been back to Fremont in quite a while, and I want to be clear, the dynasty had nothing to do with me. I was on the track team, but it was just so good, it was fun to be around winners.

I did some jumping as well. It does make a difference, and I'm excited to be back in Nebraska, because I'm coming from a state that didn't allow pole vaulting, and I'm glad to be back where we are pole vaulting and doing some great things with that, because it is yet another opportunity for kids to shine.

Like I said earlier, all kids have gifts. I really believe that, and we have to find... I can't remember a whole lot about my math classes, but I can tell you all kinds of things about track and band. But I know I needed those math classes to be successful in Fremont Public Schools, and I know they did a great job with it. It just wasn't as engaging to me as some of the other things. So I mean not to discredit my math teachers.

They did a great job. But it's those other programs that help us keep kids engaged so they can do the things they've got to get done.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Absolutely. So those extracurricular activities made my children for sure better students, because you have to balance all of those things. But as you mentioned Fremont, I would say all the years that my son was pole vaulting, the rival that was a year ahead of him was from Fremont, and both of these boys head-to-head, head-to-head, one was a champion one year, the other one next, but then jumped at the University of Nebraska together on the same team, so that was quite fun, very, very fun.

So, Paul, it's already evident you are very multi-talented, but can you also tell us about your side gig as a performing artist?

**Paul Gausman:**

Sure. Yes. I still today am a percussionist. I'm a drummer and a percussionist, and just absolutely love that which the musical arts have taught me in my life. Obviously, I used percussion as a vehicle to become an educator and become a band director. I think music is so important because I think that music is that one subject that kind of brings all other subjects together.

I realize it's not for everybody when they first think about it, but it is for everybody. What I mean by that is everybody can consume music. Everybody has music they like to listen to, even if they don't produce music, and that's okay. But music is that subject that is mathematical, historical, scientific, it's a language. It really blends all of these other things that we teach together in such a way that for certain students it helps them really achieve, and it did for me.

I wanted to start playing drums when I was seven, because I saw Ernie and Bert on Sesame Street. Ernie was playing the drum set, and you can imagine the skit on Sesame Street back when it was on Public Television, before it was on HBO. Ernie was playing drums and Bert was annoyed because he couldn't sleep.

Ernie played the drums and Bert would be annoyed, and I just thought that was the coolest thing. I'm not sure I understood that it was a Muppet or a puppet. So I went to my band director at seven years old, I was in second grade, and said, "Hey, I'd really like to play the drums." Most band directors would have said, "Yeah. That's nice. Come back in fifth grade, because that's when we start band."

But that's not what Bob Olson did. Bob Olson is still alive and doing great things in Fremont, Nebraska. Bob Olson said... Instead of saying wait until fifth grade, "Let me see if I can find a drum for you," and he did. I had this drum that was probably a piece of junk, but I thought it was the most valuable thing in the world. I'd carry it back and forth to school, because I lived close to the school building.

I was really worried about the older kids beating up on my drum or stealing it or something, and so I had a great custodian there. His first name was Myron. Bob Olson started giving me drum lessons after school in second grade, and I kept going all the way through high school, and he stayed with me all the way through.

I've actually talked to him since then, and he's become a friend, although he's Mr. Olson still. It was through percussion that I found my path to success. My dad's path to success was high jumping. My mom's was medicine and nursing. Everybody's got their own path that they can find success. I'm most worried about those who can't find that path. I guess that's back to the quotes. That's back to the quotes.

I forgot about the quote, there's two most important days in your life, the day you're born and the day you find out why you were born. That's a great quote, because I found out early this can make music and

it makes percussion. I haven't even mentioned my wife, Susie, who's an incredible musician as well. Right now, she's working at Bryan Health as the director of compliance. It doesn't sound very musical.

But we've got so much music in the family, and even today I don't play percussion all the time, although I'm surrounded... You can't see it because we're not on camera, but I'm surrounded by percussion instruments right now, because I just like that as a part of my life. But that's my cardio and my stress relief, is I go into the garage and I sit down, and I turn on some music, and I play the drums, so it's something that's been important.

But as it relates to that, I not only became a band director, but I'm also a performing artist clinician with the Yamaha Corporation of America. That's the motorcycle company, but their music instrument division, and Yamaha makes some of the most incredible percussion instruments that are out there. I have more than one Yamaha drum set at home, and I use one in particular that I'm very proud of that's just part of my routine. It's not every day, but more days than not.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I have to step up and... When I read this great fact about your talent I thought I have to Google him on drums so I can learn, because that isn't something that I automatically thought of Yamaha for. So I too have got an education really quick, and I thought how neat is this? So I couldn't resist asking you a question about that.

**Paul Gausman:**

Yeah. Some of my favorite artists... You know, I'm not that level, where I'm playing with the Dave Matthews Band or that sort of thing, but some of my favorite artists are those that play Yamaha drums, and there are ones that play others as well, but they're just some of the finest instruments you can find out there, and I've always been happy to support them and endorse them as a part of my work.

**Kelley Peterson:**

That's so great. For our listeners who would like to learn more about you or LPS, how can they do that?

**Paul Gausman:**

Well, certainly Lincoln Public Schools, there's multiple ways, but certainly using the internet if you have connectivity, it's really important, but a good way to do so, [lps.org](http://lps.org). There's just so much information on that site.

For me, certainly you can find out a little bit more about me there. You can follow me on Twitter @PaulGausman if you wish. It may be one of the first places to find out whether we're going to have a snow day or not. I am somewhat judicious about who I friend on Facebook, and I don't use a whole lot of other social media because I just don't have time.

I think I can see the positives of social media in our society, but I think the negatives at times outweigh the positives, so I don't spend a ton of time there unless I'm posting something supportive or celebratory about students. I rarely spend time there complaining. So anyway, I would say that.

But if somebody doesn't have connectivity or wants additional information, I'm a pretty laid-back person and would love to visit with whomever when the schedule allows, and would do what I could to take a phone call or spend some time talking about our new initiative or something like that in our community.

I want to be clear, the Lincoln Public Schools, while I've talked about a great many of their success areas, they rarely have an area that has supreme success without it being a part of a partnership, an agency partnership, a foundation that's helped. I've mentioned numerous ones in this conversation today.

So I'm always looking for new partnerships that could help kids achieve, and certainly want to be open. A lot of times people think of their public school as a bureaucracy, and I don't like that. I think if we can break the bureaucracy, we're going to be more successful, so I want to do all I can to be as laid back as possible and approachable as possible.

**Kelley Peterson:**

As we wrap up our time together today, Paul, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

**Paul Gausman:**

Sure. I would say that today... You know, I'm new. I started July 1. Thanks to Steve Joel, the former superintendent, I was actually able to spend a number of days in the district before July 1, before I was employed here, but just learning and meeting, that sort of thing. He was a great leader. Well, he is a great leader, excuse me. He didn't pass away, he just retired. He is a great leader, so I thank him for that.

But it's been clear to me that the board has directed me to really do two primary things this first year, build relationships inside and outside of the district. Just meet people, listen, build relationships. And I'm doing that work as quickly as I can. I'm going to do as many different things in the community as I can.

The second thing they asked me to do is use what I learn there to inform the next version of our strategic plan for the district, because it's our time to write another strategic plan. We just completed one, it's time to do the next one. I mentioned the All Means All Equity Plan, but that's going to be blended into an overall strategic plan for the district.

So I'm going to do that work, and I'm learning a lot from people who are spending time chatting with me about... I'm really asking people kind of three questions. Number one, Lincoln performs pretty well today. What do you think the secret sauce is that helps it to be successful?

Number two, what are some of the challenges that are in the way so that we can get those out of the way to be more successful? Number three, what would you do if you were superintendent of schools? What are the first leadership actions you'd take other than meeting with people and listening?

I've been getting some interesting answers to that, and I'm going to put a qualitative study together so that I can put the data that I gain in themes and say to the board and the community in November sometime, "Here are the common themes I heard when I asked these questions, and these should help us determine whether our next strategic plan will focus on early childhood education, or high school career programming, or anything else, some things that we'll need to move out of our system, some things that we'll need to move into our system, whatever it might be."

That's the kind of work I'm doing this first year, and I just want everyone to know how honored I am to be a part of the Lincoln Public Schools team and part of the Lincoln community.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Paul, I want to thank you for being on this podcast and one of your building relationships, the community members initiatives. We are very thankful that you're doing this. I fully believe that the world needs more change makers like you. Thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

**Paul Gausman:**

Thank you for the opportunity.

**Kelley Peterson:**

You bet.

**Announcer:**

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.