(male announcer) Welcome to *Pima Community College Perspectives*, a look at how education enriches our community. Now, here’s our host, Nina Trasoff.

(Nina Trasoff) Hello and welcome to *Pima Community College Perspectives*. I am Nina Trasoff, and I am really delighted you could join us today. And it’s especially important because I think the topic is of such great importance. My guest today is Dr. John Pedicone, who is the new Superintendent of Tucson Unified School District, although he has an extensive background in education, having served more recently as the Flowing Wells School District Administrator, top man, Superintendent. So you retired, and then you got pulled back in again, didn’t you Dr. Pedicone?

(Dr. Pedicone) I did. You know, that’s it, I never thought it was anything that I would do again, but I’m grateful, sincerely, for the opportunity, especially in the city’s largest district.

(Trasoff) And there are many challenges. You are still relatively new on the job, less than two months on the job at this point.

(Dr. Pedicone) Mm-hmm.

(Trasoff) What are you finding?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, in fact, I think like all organizations, you have to have a system that’s supports the objectives that you’re attending to. It’s a reach, and I think over time, for a number of reasons, the system has eroded in TUSD to where we now have a lack of connectedness. And that is, like any system, there have to be levels that connect from one to the other. And there has to be a sense of common purpose. So, we really are going back to looking at what are the impediments to being able to move this system forward in a way that it needs to. So, that’s the first thing, I think. And then, what underpins all of that really is the culture that’s developed in the district over time.

I said that when I first applied for the position, and my interactions with TUSD over time has proven to me-- by the way, since I’ve been here in the district, it has been confirmed that there are some really, really good people that are working there. There’s no question about it. But, when you, you have to ask yourself when you have very good people doing the work, and yet it seems as though you are not successful, it seems as though there are not only errors that are made, but the entire reputation of the organization is not what you want it to be. You have to ask yourself why. And for me, it’s the same principle as the, as having played some sports like many people. If you’ve got really good players on a great team, you usually will always be great players on a poor team. So, our, part of our job is to get a culture where everybody understands that we’re working toward the same purpose, that we support the system itself. It has to support the objectives of the organization rather than the way people who
describe the organization as an environment where you work around the system. So, anyway, all of those things are clearly the fundamental foundation for where the work needs to be done.

(Trasoff) So, give me a thumbnail. What, what is and or should be the objective for Tucson Unified School District.

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, as we said to the Board in a recent retreat, anything that doesn’t lead toward academic achievement on the part of any staff member does not belong in this district. So, for me, it’s that everybody understands that the end line is that kids have got to be successful, and we need more kids to graduate from high school successfully. We have to get, we have to lower dropout rates. We have to begin that early on in the student’s academic experience. But as much as that is the case with, and it’s very clear to see in classrooms and across schools, everybody has to understand, whether you are the crossing guard, or the custodian, or the bus driver, that your role is critical to that achievement issue for all kids. So, if you keep that focus in mind, then maybe you look at the job differently. And that’s really important for all of us to be able to understand and to work toward.

(Trasoff) Well obviously this is Pima Community College Perspectives, and so the work that you’re just describing there is a natural segue, then, into getting these graduates from TUSD into either the U of A, Pima Community College, or some other continuing education.

(Dr. Pedicone) Mm-hmm.

(Trasoff) How is the linkage with Pima helping you in that? I know you had experience, you must have had the same experience in Flowing Wells, knowing that Pima is there as a partner to help and to try and strengthen exactly what you were just describing.

(Dr. Pedicone) Yeah. There’s no question that Pima Community College has had a great reputation with K-12 districts around the Valley. In fact, we have, actually, it’s through the University of Arizona, where there’s a P-20 Council that’s here locally. And Pima Community College is an extremely important partner in that. And really, the conversations that take place, it seems to me almost every time we meet, have to do with how are we, how are we creating this pipeline all the way into Pima Community College as well as into four-year institutions. Pima’s developed lots of creative programs with K-12 institutions over time that help to support that objective. And in fact, whether it’s a dual-credit-- our transition programs are unique for district-by-district-- to a number of different programs that Pima provides with K-12 support; there are a lot of things that are going on that help to advance that objective.

(Trasoff) What are the challenges that are different today than when we were kids?

(Dr. Pedicone) [chuckles] Wow, you know, where do you start? You know, we’re looking at, I think the way we were educated. We really had some fundamental education that got us into positions that were fairly understandable. You knew there were manufacturing jobs; there were jobs in industry; there were jobs in public service and so forth. And it seemed to me anyway that there was a simpler view. When I, I can remember my own perspective of what I wanted to do when I grew up. It was just very much simpler than it is today for kids who look at, you know, the statistics about how we’re actually educating
students for jobs that are not going to even exist yet. So it’s a highly technical environment. The level of competition that we experience today compared to the way it was when we were young is significant, significantly different.

You know, we’ve talked about this a little bit. When you look at the fact that the population of honor students in India is equal to the entire population of the United States, it goes without question that we are in a highly competitive global environment that we need to prepare students differently for. So it’s all of those things and more even specifically within the United States culture. We’re educating more students. They come from very, very diverse backgrounds. In the early days when I was going to school, there were a whole lot of students, unfortunately, who didn’t have access to school. So it’s a very, very different environment in public schools.

(Trasoff) You also have to deal not only with the student, but the student’s family, socioeconomic realities. All of these things are challenges; levels of violence, perhaps, in community. You have to put all of these things into a package and be able to help that child despite or because of whatever their history is make it through. How do you begin to get your arms around that?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, you know, for me, honestly, it has to be, first of all, I have to approach it as a leader, and I think everybody as a member of school organizations have to approach a position of a “no excuses” attitude. You know, quite honestly, I think sometimes we enable bad things to happen in schools by the best of intentions. You know, we look at the way, the way children come to us, the backgrounds that they have, and we say with great heart, “Well, we can’t expect so much from those students.” Because as soon as you make that statement, and you really believe that, you’ve helped to encourage failure for that student. And so for me, it’s insisting that in spite of all those things that students come to us with, when they get into the schoolhouse, and when they get into those schoolhouse doors, it’s different, and that we have to be committed to making the change.

Now, I say that, and I say that in an environment where there is retreating funds, where people seem to judge schools based on simple academic achievement instead of the other things that have to happen in order for the student to be successful. And so if I’m a school person, I’m a teacher in a classroom facing some of the daunting realities of what it’s like to have to educate today’s children, if there isn’t a sense of community support that encourages teachers to know that they are supported, then I don’t blame people for getting discouraged. And quite frankly, human behavior pretty much says, “You know what? I’m going to do what I’ve got to do here. But unless I’ve got support to do more, I may be inclined to say, in spite of my passion, I’m basically putting limits on how far I can go.” So there’s a whole lot of things that enter into whether there’s going to be success in public schools, not the least of which is focus and what we’re really about.

(Trasoff) But public schools, I think, personal opinion here, public school education as well as a free press seem to be two of the basic foundational elements in a successful democracy. And if our public schools are faltering, that raises some serious questions.

(Dr. Pedicone) I agree. No, honestly, it, I think we are as a nation, in trouble if we don’t. And I think people recognize that. There’s a lot of dialogue, a lot of rhetoric that goes around about the importance
of public education. We hear it in our state, and yet when you look at the way in which the state behaves in terms of supporting education... I’m a realist, believe me, and I understand the daunting budget issues that are taking place right now. It isn’t about everybody having to contribute to the solutions for that, but it’s the attitude that policymakers have about how they approach with a vision or not. What, how we get past this bump in the economic road that makes the difference between whether we are actually investing for the future or not. Now I get around to a lot of other states in a lot of the other work I’ve done, and I just see and feel and hear a different attitude about trying to face the obstacles that I see in the state. And we’ve simply got to accept the fact that if we don’t have policymakers and leadership, whether it be business, education, or politics, that really support the importance of public education in real ways, it’s just not going to happen. We’re going to be in trouble.

(Trasoff) Well based on that it would sound as if we are, because Pima is already facing, they had anticipated the 25 percent cut from state funding, and now it’s over 50 percent, 56 percent I believe is the figure. That means that they’re going to have to do a lot of cutbacks. And one of the greater challenges, I think, for you as a conduit into Pima, or whatever continuing higher education, is the fact that Pima is spending about $20 million a year on remedial education, on taking students who have graduated from high school but are absolutely unprepared academically to do, for the rigors of advanced education. How do you address that? I mean, how do you make Pima something more than the 13th grade for kids just coming out of 12th grade out of high school?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, again, I think it’s continuing to have conversations with Pima Community College about how we can actually address the unique needs of what we have as a changing population; we’re a very, very diverse population in Tucson Unified School District. That’s the strength of our district as far as I’m concerned; the very fact that the district was built on the idea of diversity. I mean, if you go back to the history of TUSD, it was formed as a result of, I think, very visionary community leaders realizing that we had to take care of our Mexican citizens, Mexican population, and what they described in the old history books as the American population, and bring public schools to be able to do everything from like communicate and educate students on language as well as culture.

So from the very foundation of the district, it’s always been about educating a diverse population. Today, we have about 75 percent of our students who are minority. So, there with that comes some very unique approaches to education. So the better that we can identify that, create programs and focus on those students, and then do the conduit that we need to do with higher education, the more successful we’ll be. For me, as the person coming into the district, we have to fundamentally create an environment that insists that we provide sound education for all students and with the intention of not only preparing them, but making available post-secondary opportunities. And Pima Community College is the perfect place for us to be working with because many of our students are going to be first-generation college students, and so Pima Community College provides a wonderful opportunity for us to do some cooperative work.

(Trasoff) And that is a really important transition. If a child can’t, has never, does not come from a family where college has ever been in the future, how do you in high school or back in elementary school instill in that child the belief that he or she can do that and needs to be the first to break that barrier?
(Dr. Pedicone) You know, some of the things that I think have been successful and we have working in our district, as there are in all districts across Tucson, is exposure to what it’s like at that level; so bringing students to Pima Community College, really, at the elementary level. I mean, somebody once said that when we were talking about some economic development things, that, you know, Michael Jordan didn’t learn to play basketball when he got to North Carolina, that you begin doing the things that you’ll be able to do it extremely well later on early in your life. And it’s a vision you create by making sure the students don’t feel intimidated by environments that they’re not familiar with. So all of those kinds of things I think are extremely important. And the more that we do, the better.

(Trasoff) That’s a wonderful analogy. I love that. I’m going to hang onto that one. We’re going to take a break, and we will be back in just a minute and a half with more conversation with Dr. John Pedicone, the new Superintendent of the Tucson Unified School District.

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(announcer) For more than 40 years, Pima Community College has helped prepare the citizens of Tucson and Pima County for good jobs and better lives for themselves and their families. We don’t do it alone. We appreciate your ongoing investment in education, especially during these extraordinarily tough times. Your tax dollars, combined with student tuition, make it possible for thousands of Southern Arizonans to get a jump-start before transferring to a university, to get the training they need to stay competitive at work, and to prepare for the jobs of tomorrow. Many of our students are seeking to restart their careers after losing their jobs, and some, their homes, during the recession. All of our students know, as you do, that the more you learn, the more you earn. We know that today’s students are often juggling work and family, as well as school. That’s why Pima offers classes at night and on weekends at six campuses, more than 180 other locations, and over the Internet. Our programs deliver education how you want it, and give you the opportunity to achieve your goals at your pace. Today’s Pima Community College students will be tomorrow’s firefighters, nurses, police, teachers, and small business owners, the backbone of a safe, healthy, prosperous Tucson and Pima County. Thank you for your support as we continue to help you and your family build a better tomorrow. For more information, contact us at 206-4500, or visit us on the Web, at pima.edu. Pima Community College, Developing our Community Through Learning.

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(Trasoff) Welcome back. I’m Nina Trasoff, and this is Pima Community College Perspectives. And my guest today is Dr. John Pedicone who is the Superintendent of the Tucson Unified School District. And Dr. Pedicone, before the break you used a wonderful analogy that Michael Jordan didn’t start playing basketball or learn how to play basketball when he entered North Carolina. That had to have begun a long time earlier. And in fact, a child’s educational possibilities, on some level, are almost made or broken in 4th grade, when, if the child isn’t reading at grade level, he or she has so much less of a chance of success making it through high school, let alone college.

(Dr. Pedicone) Mm-hmm.
(Trasoff) How do you begin to address that?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, you know, and you’re absolutely right. It’s the old saying that students learn, you know, in grades kindergarten, now it’s actually kindergarten through 3rd grade they learn to read, and then from 4th grade on, they read to learn. So if we do not prepare kids for what’s going to happen in intermediate elementary school and on, we simply fail. We also know that the research points to the fact that if they cannot read, and in fact, if they are retained, all the retention studies say the same thing, that’s not the answer for the majority of students anyway, in terms of being able to create the environment that they need to be successful. So that’s exactly where we’re focusing in TUSD. People need to be aware that we have a renewed effort to be sure that we’re looking at each of the strands.

You are aware that the district reorganized a couple of years ago to go from regional superintendency areas to lines where we have an Assistant Superintendent in charge of elementary, one in charge of middle, and one in charge of secondary. The key to that is both curriculum and staff development. For a number of budgetary reasons, those two areas were eliminated in the district in the past couple of years. So we actually had no unified curriculum effort that was taking place that drew the strings together from one level to another. And any effective organization knows that training is the key. So we are reinstituting that. We recently hired a new Deputy Superintendent which is extremely important to me. She is an individual who is an interim and has come-- she was a Superintendent in the Phoenix area and a good friend. So she’s remarkable in terms of her knowledge on how to mentor and how to, the staff development end of it as well as curriculum.

So we are looking primarily at the early elementary levels to increase, we call it “Diddles Testing.” It’s where you determine whether or not students are ready to move from one grade level to another. And there’s a renewed focus on reading. Quite honestly, that has to take place. That’s fundamental to everything else that a student will do. The other issue is to look at math and the extent to which students are prepared to do basic level math and then higher level math. When do we offer Algebra to students? When do we insist that they’re prepared to be able to access a college curriculum by preparing them at the 8th grade level to do that? So that’s exactly what needs to happen. That’s a continuous view of a child’s education, which quite frankly, has been absent in TUSD for awhile and that’s really important that we reinstitute.

(Trasoff) We’re talking about Pima as one of your primary partners in helping children, students succeed.

(Dr. Pedicone) Mm-hmm.

(Trasoff) But there are other partners. I know the Rotary Club of Tucson started a program called "Reading Seed..."

Dr. Pedicone) Mm-hmm.

(Trasoff) ...which has trained hundreds, actually more than a thousand reading mentors who go in one-on-one to help kids K-3 master their reading, so that when they enter 4th, they’re at grade level.
Southern Arizona Leadership Council, also, has really gotten behind education, because it’s fundamental if we’re going to succeed economically as a community. If you even forget the ethical and moral reasons, just look at economic development. We have to have it. What is the role business is playing in helping you and what more should business people be doing?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, first, I appreciate you mentioning the Rotary Club of Tucson, because they’ve been instrumental, especially in Tucson Unified in supporting the very things that we need to support. In Reading Seed, as you mentioned, is a great example of that. I mean, it’s just, it’s volunteers that come together, a jewel that people really don’t realize that exists in this community. But yeah, the Southern Arizona Leadership Council, obviously, you know I’ve had some experience with them over the past several years. And the business community understands that; they honestly get it. They know that if, and for a lot of reasons, if we don’t have a robust, powerful, and effective K-12 education system, it affects everything they do as well. It really is an economic issue. So SALC has become a great partner, I believe, over the years in K-12 education in this valley.

So it’s not just about providing resources to schools, because business-- and that’s one thing I did learn working with them is they are hit up by everyone to provide additional resources. People think that there’s a bottomless pit in the part of philanthropists in this community. Well, there’s an awful lot of giving that takes place. But it’s as much about the individual and unique things that can be done by business with resources. But also the greatest resource that they, I think, can impart is their support politically, influence-wise, to be sure that we’re getting to our legislators and our policy makers, the things that we need to communicate, the importance of education, and really P-20. We talk about that. We talk a lot about that. But putting it into practice means that we have to, again, as I said earlier, look at the decisions we make now in terms of how they’ll impact things later. And if we can do that, and if the business community can do what they’ve been doing most recently, and that’s support the right things in K-12 education, not simple solutions, but truly visionary solutions to things, then they’d provide us with a wonderful resource.

(Trasoff) All of this has to work together. All of this has to mesh together. And I think within TUSD or within this community, it’s not just within TUSD, we’re doing so much. Pima has the, there’s the federally-funded TRIO program, which is designed to help first-generation, low-income, middle-income high school students move on to higher education. There’s also J-TED which acknowledges that some students may not be going on to higher, post-secondary education, but they need to have skills that are relevant and needed in this community. Can you speak a little to that?

(Dr. Pedicone) Yeah, I think, it’s interesting you mentioned JTED, and you mentioned the likelihood when students take JTED courses that they may not being going into we call a “track” to the university. What we are finding is that students that are successful in many of the technical courses in the JTED program are really getting prepared for college as well. So it’s a really integrated approach to be able to make sure that we’re doing everything we can to inspire, instill, and encourage and prepare students to be able to access that kind of post-secondary opportunity. You know, I really appreciate Pima’s efforts to try to provide opportunities for students to be able to do that, but I’m a realist in terms of what we do at the K-12 level. We simply do not do as good a job as we need to with the very population that’s become
a predominant population in TUSD, and according to the demographics of this community, are indeed the fastest growing demographic in the Tucson region. If we do not take care of the families that are in this community, and that means a growing minority population who are going to be first college access experienced people, we are going to be in trouble. We simply have to look at unique approaches to educating students that are different in many ways from students from several years ago.

(Trasoff) You talk about unique approaches. Every child has his or her learning style. And I was fascinated by what you just said about JTED which was geared towards technical, but a lot of those students are finding something that is then moving them or giving them the impetus to move on to college or university. I know from my own experiences, my own children, you know, it took something to get one of my boys excited to start being able to achieve, and now it’s just gone through the roof with success. But if you don’t find that kernel that gets them excited, how, in a district of this size, can you address finding that spark in each child?

(Dr. Pedicone) Well, first Nina, when you mentioned size, I’ve heard that. And not to your comment, but from other people’s perceptions, size is this big impediment that gets in the way of us being able to do the job well. I disagree. You know, size is numbers. There’s no question about it. With it comes complexity, but it still comes down to the individual teacher in the classroom with that student. So, you know, for me, it’s people, everyone in the organization realizing that when that classroom of students comes through your doors, and when they come through our doors as an organization, we have this obligation, very clear obligation to be sure that we’re doing everything that we can to prepare that student on a very interactive and relational level.

So yeah, I think that it’s, we, as you know, we are building a new school on the south side of our district. The concept of that new school, and it’s still in the development stages, is a project-based environment where we’ll be able to integrate all aspects of their educational experience into the way we impart education to them and the curriculum for them. It’s a fairly unique approach that I think is going to be a very special school. It’s going to represent the things we believe about education in TUSD. It’s a K-8 environment which is a little different than what, you know, the models that have taken place in the past. But that’s the idea, I think, that we look for ways in which we can create an integrated approach to education that will inspire students to be able to not be intimidated by what they’re going to experience at the next level, that we make sure that we have strong connections with community itself. This is a community experience when we talk about educating kids. And if we do that correctly, no excuses by the way-- you know there’s a beating-the-odds study that talked about these schools that I guess people say shouldn’t be successful, and they are in spite of it. And they’re in spite of it for a number of important reasons. That’s the attitude we all have to have about what we do in schools.

(Trasoff) Academic achievement is one of the major, I mean, obviously that’s the core in all of this, and what we’re talking about is how we get to that point. A couple of weeks ago, you had a meeting where you were presenting academic achievement data to the Board. Is this new, not new information to them, but are you changing an approach on how the Board can and must be involved in this? Does this, is this a first clue to how you’re going to lead TUSD?
(Dr. Pedicone) Yeah, I hope so. I mean, I think that we've made it very clear that if it doesn’t deal and lead to academic achievement, it does not belong in TUSD. And that’s the way we’ve got to approach everything as I said earlier. So when we look at academic achievement data, and we see serious deficiencies at all levels across many of our schools, that’s the marching order, that’s the call to action, and we are going to do that.

(Trasoff) You have your work cut out for you. But I know you have dedicated Board members who care; you have amazing teachers with a passion for education and making a difference. We have a business community that I believe really understands that this is the foundation for our future. So I admire you for stepping up now and taking on this responsibility. I look forward to seeing what happens. And I know the liaison between Tucson Unified School District and Pima Community College is really going to be critical in the success of this.

(Dr. Pedicone) Yeah, I agree. Thanks Nina.

(Trasoff) Well I thank you, Dr. John Pedicone, for joining us today on *Pima Community College Perspectives*. This partnership is going to be interesting to watch as it evolves over the next few years. I thank you for joining us. I thank you all for listening, and next week I hope you’ll join us again for *Pima Community College Perspectives*. I’m Nina Trasoff. Bye-bye.

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(male announcer) K-J-L-L South Tucson.