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VOX

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021 • THE VOICE OF COLUMBIA

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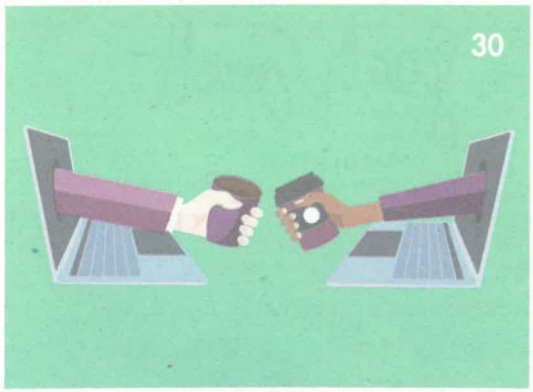

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School's out forever

CPS Superintendent Peter Stiepleman's impact on local schools can't be enumerated, but *Vox* tried anyway.

BY RASHI SHRIVASTAVA

For more than six years, Superintendent Peter Stiepleman has overseen the Columbia Public Schools system, which is comprised of 36 buildings, 19,000 students and 3,000 employees. It is the fifth largest school district in Missouri.

In late October 2020, Stiepleman announced he would retire at the end of this school year after more than 20 years as an educator.

Vox takes a look at this super senior's career by the numbers as he prepares to walk across the metaphorical graduation stage.

46. That's how old Stiepleman will be when he retires on June 30, 2021, which is also his birthday and the date of his wedding anniversary.

2004. Stiepleman started in CPS as a volunteer in a third-grade classroom in 2004 after leaving Oakland, California, where he was an assistant principal and teacher. In CPS, Stiepleman also served as assistant principal and principal at West Boulevard for four years and assistant superintendent for elementary education for four years.

2021. This is the year Stiepleman was named Missouri Superintendent of the Year by the Missouri Association of School Administrators. The accolade, awarded in September 2020, commends Stiepleman for his work, particularly with

Photography by **Erin Quinn/Archive**, **Gwendolyn Girsdansky/Archive**, **Pamela A. Houser/Archive**, courtesy of **Peter Stiepleman**, **WikiCommons** and **Maude Vintage**, collage by **Hope Johnson**

the district's COMOEd Grow Our Own Teacher Development Program, which he helped create in 2019. The program provides full-ride scholarships to local universities for at least six future educators of color each year. Recipients are then employed by the district as a teacher for four years.

One. The number of sick days Stiepleman took during his superintendency. That means he is eligible to receive $50,000 in accrued sick leave. He plans to donate the money back to the district.

Two. Stiepleman is part of the second generation of his family in the United States. He takes pride in his family history. His grandfather came to the U.S. from Odessa, Ukraine, when it was part of the U.S.S.R. Like his father, Stiepleman was born in New York City.

Three. Stiepleman and his wife, Elizabeth Chang, an MU English professor, have three sons: Isaac, Ezra and Jacob. His eldest, Isaac, will graduate from Hickman High School this year. Stiepleman promised Isaac he wouldn't leave before Isaac graduated from high school. "He's so connected to his peers and his school, and he's very involved in music, debate, math and Science Olympiad," Stiepleman says. The couple named their eldest after a student, who was a student of Stiepleman's in California and immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico.

One. The number of U.S. Supreme Court justices who are related to Stiepleman. His aunt, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, often video-chatted with CPS students thanks to Stiepleman. RBG even officiated his wedding.

34. The number of countries Stiepleman has traveled to outside of the U.S. He and his family have been to Iceland, Turkey and Argentina, to name a few. Stiepleman spent a year working for the U.S. Embassy in Madrid in 1996. He is bilingual in Spanish and English.

160. This is how many students are enrolled in an early college program at Moberly Area Community College, which Stiepleman helped create and launch in 2020. The program allows high school juniors and seniors to attend the community college and complete an associate degree and high school diploma at the same time. "We pay for it all, we pay for their tuition, we pay for their books, and then the children can then enroll in any state school, having had two years of all their prerequisites done," Stiepleman says. "They can just go right into their major, debt-free."

32. That's how many years Columbia has been a sister city with Hakusan, Japan. In 2019, Stiepleman helped create a deal between the district and Hakusan's International College of Technology to send students to study abroad for two weeks every summer. Students work on science, technology, engineering and math projects through the program.

Two. The number of equity trainings CPS requires faculty members to take each year. Working toward diversity, equity and inclusion became a focus of the district under Stiepleman's superintendency. "That's for us as a school district to really try to dismantle systemic racism, and institutionalized racism," he says.

20. The district's Montessori program, a public-private partnership Stiepleman helped create, enrolls this many preschoolers. The Montessori program at Grant Elementary School is one of 27 preschool programs within the school district. Stiepleman's children are a product of Montessori schooling, he says. "I still have one who can't put the shoes on correctly because, you know, they don't intervene. And so, he's just quite happy to have them on the wrong feet."

45. The number of minutes in the special morning block at Jefferson STEAM Middle School, a middle school that transitioned to a science, technology, engineering, arts and math school in 2019 — and idea that Stiepleman introduced. The morning time allows Jefferson students to enroll in enrichment courses. Students choose from 14 different electives, including classes such as mural painting, beekeeping, candle making and post-apocalyptic survival.

Three. As he prepares to sign off from his post as superintendent, Stiepleman says the school system continues to tackle three major obstacles: a growing student population, safety and security against a backdrop of school shootings across the U.S., and building accessibility for students and family members with disabilities. When he became the superintendent, the schools lacked cohesion and a centralized system to ensure consistency across classrooms in terms of material students studied, Stiepleman says.

"I love this community, and I think one should leave when they've left things in good places, not when they've maybe overstayed their welcome."

CPS HISTORY

As the fifth largest school district in the state, Columbia Public Schools includes 27 preschool programs, 21 elementary schools, seven middle schools, four high schools and the Columbia Area Career Center. The district started with just one building when the city voted to establish a city school on Dec. 22, 1872. The district has had 29 superintendents total, including Superintendent Peter Stiepleman. Curiously, two of them each served less than 20 days, Stiepleman says.

CPS Superintendent Peter Stiepleman talks with Jan Mees and Christine King, former school board members, in 2014. Stiepleman has been with the district since 2004.

Photography by **Chris Jasper/Archive**