

Superintendent Lori Rhodes will still cheer Redlands Unified from the ‘sidelines’

By Kristina Hernandez, Redlands Daily Facts

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REDLANDS, Ca – Lori Rhodes never planned to go into teaching, even though she comes from a family of educators.

But working at the University of Redlands allowed Rhodes to attend class as an employee, and she took advantage of the benefit.

“I just had my daughter, this new little baby at home, and I decided to take a class on how to teach reading,” Rhodes recalled. “I was hooked within the first hour.”

Course after course followed, and it was while trying to share what she learned from those classes that her husband made a remark that struck a chord.

“He said to me, ‘You clearly love this, why don’t you become a teacher?’” she said.

And the rest is history.

Friday marks Rhodes’ last day as superintendent of the Redlands Unified School District — a position she held for almost a decade.

Rhodes made the announcement in April, she said, after much thought and consideration. She knew “it was time,” she said.

Over the years, Rhodes said, the job has had many ups and downs.

She managed the district through a down economy, celebrated improvements in graduation rates and other marks of student achievement, and weathered a sex scandal involving a former high school teacher.

“This is a 24/7 job and I’ll just say the armor and weight I wear for this job is a lot,” she said.

Still, it wasn’t until her family members shared their feelings that she began to think about retirement.

“Last summer, when my husband and I went on our first vacation in years, my family started saying, ‘Let’s look at this. We are kind of tired of having our mom, wife and loved one being at this level of responsibility. It’s been a long haul. We think we’re done, and think you should be done, too,’” she said. “So that planted the seed in my head and I made the decision pretty quickly.”

Rhodes, 55, began her career in public education in 1988 as an elementary school teacher in Fontana before moving on to administrative roles for that district. In 2002, she moved to Redlands Unified as its assistant superintendent and was later promoted to deputy superintendent in 2007.

Just as she'd never planned to become a teacher, Rhodes said never thought she would become RUSD's superintendent, a role she's held since January 2008. She is the first woman in the district's history to serve as superintendent.

"I was scared to death when I applied," Rhodes said, "and even more scared when I got the job."

She and her team took on many challenges, however, implementing programs focused on student success, such the [Redlands Ready Commitment](#), a recently launched initiative that looks to open doors to opportunities leading to college and career achievement.

"It's the happiest thing I've ever done," Rhodes said.

Contributing to the district's success is a team effort. And Rhodes said she couldn't have done it without the support of the people she has come across, both at Fontana Unified and RUSD.

"I have been able to have some tremendously talented and dedicated staff on board," she said. "To me, as superintendent our goal is to make sure we are making the right decisions, things that made the most sense. We have to be thinking about developing the best solutions we can do to make the job better."

Rhodes has no solid plans in place after she retires. But she does hope to travel and play golf more, and will be cheering on Redlands Unified from the "sidelines," as she calls it. Rhodes also plans to become more active in the Rotary Club of Redlands, because while she has been a longtime member, she said she has never been able to participate physically and help contribute in the fight against polio.

"I am so pleased that is something Rotary is a part of," she said.

Since announcing her retirement, the Board of Education and others have thanked Rhodes for her service.

The school board recognized her at its last general meeting on May 23 by presenting her with flowers and a memento highlighting her tenure.

"It's a sad day for me to bid farewell to Lori. She has been an outstanding superintendent," board President Donna West said by email. "It is because of her energy, devotion, leadership and unswerving commitment to excellence that our Redlands Unified School District has excelled.

"She and her talented staff have implemented programs that have benefitted every child in our district," West added. "I have seen her work through years of Common Core implementation,

fiscal uncertainties that require budget reductions and pressures for constant improvement with grace and foresight. She has surely earned her retirement.”

Miki Inbody, assistant superintendent of educational services, agreed.

“Lori’s success in the Redlands USD over the past 15 years is nothing short of impressive. It has been a privilege to work with her to increase student achievement across the board,” she said.

“Lori will be greatly missed, but her legacy will long be lived as Redlands USD continues to thrive. Her silent cheers will be felt as the district continues to excel.”

A search process is underway to replace Rhodes. The school board hired [Long Beach-based firm Dave Long & Associates](#) to conduct the search but in the meantime the board named [Juan Lopez its interim superintendent](#). Lopez will serve until a permanent superintendent is found. [An announcement on who that will be could come as early as August](#).