

Harbron seeks better philosophical fit

Written by Mark Jaeger

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NORTHERN OZAUKEE SCHOOL Supt. Bill Harbron has seen many changes while at the helm of the Fredonia school district. He plans to step down at the end of the current school year.

Photo by Mark Jaeger **Superintendent**
says his priorities no longer align with School Board

When Schools Supt. Bill Harbron submitted his letter of resignation to the Northern Ozaukee School Board last week, it was clearly with mixed emotions.

The resignation will be effective at the end of the current school year.

Harbron's letter of resignation, which he said was submitted "with regret," cited a growing philosophical split between himself and the board.

"Unfortunately, we have reached that part of our relationship where the goals, aspirations and governance of the board and superintendent no longer align," he said.

Harbron said it was no single issue that spurred the decision to step down from the district's top spot, although he was clearly at odds with the majority of the board in a recent decision not to pursue a policy that would prevent school events from being held in venues that served alcohol.

Rather than finding fault with that or other board actions, he said his decision was more of an evolutionary process.

Harbron was hired in fall of 2002 as an interim superintendent when Jack Roller suddenly resigned. That interim qualifier was eventually dropped.

"When you look at the composition of the board today, only three current members were

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involved in hiring me — Francis Kleckner, Kendall Thistle and Tom Hoffmann,” he said.

Harbron was superintendent of the Denmark School District in Brown County for two years, and served as a consultant with CESA District 7 prior to taking the superintendent job in Fredonia.

Harbron turned 60 last week, and said that milestone caused him to reflect on whether his educational views are shared with the board.

“We have created a progressive district committed to continual improvement,” he said. “I will always value the work we have done together.”

Harbron’s tenure in the district will forever be remembered for the emergence of the local virtual school, now known as Wisconsin Virtual Learning.

He said the idea of creating a virtual school was pursued as a revenue source for the district as shrinking enrollment in the brick-and-mortar schools caused state student aid to plummet.

He said the aid received from teaching virtual students from around the state covers the costs of the on-line charter school, as well as allowing the district to share staff and curriculum with its traditional students.

“After starting the virtual program with K-12, we went through growing pains when we took the program over last year,” Harbron said. “We are at the point now where all that is needed is tweaking, and I would certainly hope the virtual program continues.”

Behind the scenes, Harbron said, a greater accomplishment of his administration has been a gradual change in the “educational culture” of the district’s staff.

Concepts like balanced literacy and performance-based grading were adopted by the staff, as well as combined classes at the elementary school level and trimester scheduling at the high school.

Some of the moves have not been warmly embraced by the community, but Harbron said they reflect the changing world of education.

“I think we need to better prepare parents for the idea that education is an area that undergoes constant change. Learning is a continual process, especially in the digital age,” he said. “We have to realize we are preparing our children for careers that might not even exist today.”

Harbron said he regrets not having found the way to better engage the community in the learning process.

Harbron said the superintendent’s job has come at some personal cost, noting that his wife Marilyn continues to teach kindergarten and live in Appleton to meet that district’s residency requirement.

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School Board President Paul Krause said the board voted unanimously to accept Harbron's resignation.

"We have been very, very fortunate to have Bill on our staff for nine years. He really cares about kids and works extremely hard. Accepting his resignation shouldn't be seen as an anti-Bill vote in any way," Krause said.