

School officials define expectations from firm that could be hired in wake of departure of administrators

As members of the Northern Ozaukee School Board discussed the possibility of contracting for administrative services during a special meeting last week, it was clear to the two dozen people in the audience that many questions about privatization remain.

Consideration of the unorthodox move was spurred by the pending departure of several key personnel.

Supt. Bill Harbron and High School Principal Kevin Parker have announced they are not returning next school year, and middle school Principal Pam Warner is retiring. In addition, on Monday the board accepted the resignation of Mike Skurek, the district's information technology specialist.

Citing declining enrollment and related state revenue, the board is exploring what cost savings are possible by working with a private firm that specializes in running education programs instead of hiring new people to fill each of the pending vacancies.

Last week's meeting was held to finalize the wording of a request for proposals from private administrative companies, but board members struggled to identify duties to be covered instead of creating job descriptions.

"The thought is we might be able to get the same amount of work done with fewer positions," board member Kendall Thistle told the curious audience.

Board member Stacie Stark added, "Because of our budget problems, we can't have as many people.

"Maybe the best approach is not to list the positions we need to fill, but what needs to be done. A vendor may have a better idea of how to get these jobs accomplished."

One hypothetical division of duties distributed at this week's board meeting suggested one person serving as superintendent and high school principal, Elementary School Principal Cindy Dallman adding the middle school to her responsibilities and creating a position of dean of students.

Regardless of how the duties are divided, Board President Paul Krause said, one of the key criteria would be that the firm have an administrator in the district.

"This is not going to be a virtual superintendent," Krause assured the audience. "What we are trying to do is find out how many people they would send us and at what cost."

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Written by Mark Jaeger

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Although officials said the advantage of contracting for administrative services is that an outside firm can be given specific goals to meet, the tentative one-year contract might make meeting those targets difficult.

“With a one-year agreement, it is going to be difficult to set too many goals,” Thistle said.

The board settled on several general goals, such as stemming the flow of open-enrollment students out of the district, continuing staff development, keeping an emphasis on academic achievement and maintaining a balanced budget.

Officials said the first year of the privatization agreement could be considered a trial run, but several board members said any agreement should include an alternate bid for additional years.

“There might be considerable savings after that first year. It would take a year for them to get to know what we are doing,” board member Rick Hamm said.

Krause said even if the administrative services contract is only for one year, it would give the district needed time to fill the vacancies.

“Executing a search for a superintendent is seldom short,” he said.

Executive search firms also charge more than \$12,000, officials said.

The idea of turning over administration of the district to an outside firm for just one year didn't sit well with several residents in the audience.

“I see this as a good thing. I've had issues with the district in the past,” said Bill Hamm, former village president.

“I am energized by the opportunity for change this brings to the district,” said another parent.

Board members were expected to begin interviewing prospective management firms during a closed session this week.

If a compatible provider can be found, Krause said “stakeholders” — parents and staff — will be given ample time to offer input on how the process should work.

“We are at Step .5 in what is at least a 10-step process,” he said.

Taking a cue from residents about the appearance of unrest in the district as the state's open enrollment period approaches, the board also agreed to forward an open letter to the community.

“While these are obviously substantial changes in the leadership of the district, your student's

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teacher is not affected by this action and everyone in the district is working hard to ensure that the day-to-day operations of the district are not affected as we work through these changes," the letter said.

The board is touting a previously scheduled Jan. 27 board and conversation gathering as an opportunity for residents to raise questions about the privatization option.

The gathering is at 6:30 p.m. in the high school commons. Reservations should be made by Tuesday, Jan. 25, by calling 692-2489, ext. 410.