

Interim superintendent in no hurry to leave

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Gassert says he is willing to stick around until School Board finds a suitable full-time administrator

Details on the inner workings of the Northern Ozaukee School District may not seem like appetizing dinner talk, but more than a dozen residents and staff members were lured by the promise of being able to pick the brains of officials during Thursday's "Board Dinner & Conversation" meeting.

The transitional status of the school district administration was the key topic of informal discussion.

Interim Supt. Joe Gassert used the session to put to rest the suggestion that he is anxious to be replaced by a full-time superintendent, but added he is not bothered by the temporary status of his position.

"I don't want to stand in the way of the district getting a great candidate. But I don't want time to be an issue, either," Gassert said.

"I am willing and prepared to continue on as long as necessary. I am not looking to step out the door. I am very willing to continue as long as I am needed."

Gassert, the former administrator for the Random Lake School District, began his open-ended assignment as interim superintendent on Aug. 1.

He replaced Bill Harbron, who resigned at the end of the last school year as a sign of diverging philosophies.

After 38 years in education, Gassert said he likes to say he is "re-purposing" himself, instead being retired. He has been an administrative mentor for Alverno College in Milwaukee, working with new administrators in the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Gassert is also an ad hoc instructor at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, leading graduate-level courses in special-education law and educational leadership.

He agreed to put those college commitments on hold while tackling the interim superintendent duties.

The district has had a difficult time finding a superintendent candidate who officials felt would be a good fit.

An initial batch of hopefuls was rejected earlier this summer, and the vacancy was re-posted,

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with applications due in August. The initial screening is being handled by a professional placement firm.

School Board President Paul Krause said four candidates have expressed interest in the post, with the screening process expected to take until some time in December.

If a superintendent choice is found in that group, Krause said a final selection would not likely be made until mid-January.

“There aren’t a lot of applicants at this point, because this is not considered prime time for a career change,” he said.

“Still, I am sure Joe is anxious to get back to his re-purposing.”

Although Jeff Sauer, the district’s new high-school/middle-school principal was unable to attend the dinner meeting, Gassert said he supports what has been characterized as a crackdown on the dress code.

“It is clearly everybody’s responsibility to enforce these standards, and students have been sent home to change. When we know about it, we do something about it,” Gassert said.

He said research has shown that academic performance improves when clothing distractions are eliminated in schools.

Krause said he, too, has heard about the dress code controversy from parents.

“It has been a bit of a culture change,” he said. “Our staff will be very aggressive in enforcing these standards, but a student’s failure to dress appropriately for school is not the fault of the staff. It is a failure by the student.”