

Pulaski school chief gets Grafton job

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Longtime public-school administrator hired by board as district's next superintendent

Mel Lightner will be the next super-intendent of the Grafton School District.

The hiring of Lightner, who has served as the superintendent of the Pulaski Community School District since 2008, was approved Monday by the Grafton School Board, which agreed to offer him a two-year contract.

Lightner was chosen from two finalists for the position being vacated by Jeff Pechura, who will retire at the end of the current school year. The other finalist was Keith Hilts, a former Grafton school administrator.

"I can tell you, I'm excited, enthusiastic and eager to come to Grafton," Lightner said Tuesday between visits with district administrators, teachers and students.

"I can see there are some outstanding schools with great teachers here. The students have been extremely cordial. I have been very impressed."

Lightner, who will be paid \$156,250 annually, was chosen from an initial field of 36 applicants. After Pechura announced in January that he would step down, the district hired a consulting firm, BWP & Associates, to narrow the pool to six candidates.



Late last month, the board interviewed the six and pared the field to Lightner and Hilts. The finalists were interviewed again last week before Monday's decision.

Board President Terry Ziegler said Lightner's passion and experience in public education, including 20 years as a superintendent in three Wisconsin school districts, impressed board members.

"He's got a real good track record of leadership," Ziegler said. "He's had to make changes in several districts. We have some changes we have to make here, so we feel Mel is the right person for the job."

In Pulaski, Lightner oversaw a district that includes parts of Shawano, Brown and Oconto counties and has one high school, a middle school, five elementary schools and an online charter school. Before Pulaski, he was the superintendent of the Kimberly Area School District for 13 years.

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Lightner taught high school social studies and was an assistant high school principal and principal before starting his career as a superintendent in the Colby School District. He has coached several sports, including time as a head football coach.

Lightner is an adjunct professor with Concordia University Wisconsin, teaching prospective school administrators.

“Although I was not actively seeking another position, the possibility of being the next superintendent of the Grafton School District was too good to pass up,” Lightner said.

“I look forward to working with students, parents, staff and community members to ensure that great things happen in the Grafton School District.”

Lightner and his wife Kelly, a Spanish teacher, have been married for 25 years. They have two adult children — Brock, 22, and Paige, 18.

Lightner said he has had family members who lived in Grafton and Saukville and is familiar with the area.

“I’ve seen the transformation of Grafton as a community the last 10 to 15 years,” he said. “I know what a great place this can be to live.”

Like other school districts throughout the state, Grafton is tackling the challenge of maintaining high educational standards in the face of budget constraints. This spring, residents in the Pulaski district narrowly approved a \$4.4 million bond referendum for maintenance and remodeling projects.

“I realize the financial challenges facing school districts,” he said. “It’s my job to make sure that taxpayers’ money is spent wisely and efficiently.”

Lightner said he and his family are looking for housing in the Grafton area. He plans to spend several days in the Grafton School District this spring before officially beginning his new job July 1.

Hilts, who currently serves as superintendent of the Ashland School District, was associate principal of Grafton High School from 2000 and 2005.

Pechura has been Grafton’s superintendent the past 10 years. In announcing his retirement, he cited job stress and family and health concerns.

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Image Information: MEL LIGHTNER, newly hired superintendent of the Grafton School District, received a warm welcome from teacher Karrie Suhr's third-grade class during a visit to Grafton Elementary School on Tuesday. Lightner, who has been the superintendent of the Pulaski Community School District since 2008, will begin work in Grafton on July 1. Photo by SamArendt