

New School District Superintendent Plans to Focus on Technology

Effective communication is top priority

By Daira Cline, Concord Monitor

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In hiring Mark MacLean to be the new superintendent of the Merrimack Valley and Andover school districts yesterday, members of the committee charged with choosing the new leader of the 2,800-student district have said they are making the advancement of technology one of their foremost priorities.

MacLean, assistant superintendent of the Kearsarge Regional School District, was one of three finalists the 15-member selection committee considered. He will replace Mike Martin, who has led the district since 1999, when he retires at the end of the school year.

MacLean started his career as a teacher in Merrimack Valley schools. He left in 2007 to become the dean of academics at Alvirne High School in Hudson before becoming an assistant superintendent for Kearsarge.

“The candidates were all excellent, and they all had different skills,” said Lorrie Carey, chairwoman of the search committee and a member of the Merrimack Valley School Board. “I think what Mark brought was a real strong background in business and technology. One of our focuses at Merrimack Valley is technology – providing it for our students and using it

more effectively.”

MacLean, who is 44 and lives in Tilton, said he was excited about returning to Merrimack Valley and leading the district into a stronger technological future. MacLean said he prides himself on being available to the students and staff he serves.

“I’m letting people know that I am not going to be holed up in my office all day,” MacLean said. “It’s about kids. So if you’re not connected to the kids, but you’re making decisions for the kids, how are you going to know what it looks like from their end?”

The two other candidates for superintendent were Michael Jette, principal of Merrimack Valley High School, and Elaine Arbour, assistant superintendent of the Claremont School District.

Jette could not be reached for comment. Arbour said she wished MacLean well, and said she would continue her own search for a superintendent position.

“If their focus is on technology, then I think he will be a good fit for them,” Arbour said of MacLean. “Certainly, I’m very disappointed. I liked Merrimack Valley, but it’s important for it to be a good fit for both parties.”

Martin said he did not know MacLean and had no comment on his potential as a leader.

“I think we’re excited that the process is behind us,” Martin said. “They worked very, very hard to try and find

the right person for the job. They’ve taken this job very seriously.”

The superintendent search began last summer with national advertising that resulted in 15 original applicants. The search committee hired a consultant, interviewed school board members, held public forums and conducted repeat interviews with candidates.

MacLean had ideas for improving the school district’s use of technology at his interviews, Carey said, and he has a record of success in the Kearsarge district.

“I was taking notes during the interview in case he wasn’t chosen,” Carey said. “He’d already worked in a large, rural district and clearly he had worked through the planning and implementation of ideas, like “blizzard bags” – we were really impressed with that one.”

Blizzard bags, which MacLean helped implement in Kearsarge, is the term used to describe the use of online technology to allow students to complete a day of school from home on what otherwise would be a snow day. This way students need not attend school as long into the summer.

“If school is closed, does it need to be closed? We can connect with students using technology and continue learning,” MacLean said.

MacLean said many students leaving high school do not have enough technical knowledge of multimedia, cloud-based technologies, computer graphics – of computers in general – to be successful job candidates and college applicants. He said he wants to teach students to use social media responsibly, so that their online postings of today do not hinder their successes of tomorrow.

“They need to learn to respect their digital footprint,” MacLean said. “It never goes away.”

MacLean’s salary is yet to be determined, Carey said. She said the average salary for a New Hampshire superintendent is between \$111,000 and \$135,000. She said Martin currently works part time and on an hourly rate, so his salary would not be an accurate indicator of MacLean’s.

“It won’t be \$135,000,” Carey said, laughing. “But we describe the superintendent of schools to be like a CEO. He is in charge of a \$37 million dollar budget.”

MacLean’s business knowledge and his experience at the superintendent level in a large school district helped to make him the final choice, Carey said. She said superintendents, in addition to having to know how to supervise teachers and staff, have to understand state and federal mandates, and deal with the budget, which she said is always a challenge.

“And the superintendent’s job is very political,” Carey said. “A lot of people don’t want to be superintendent because of the politics involved.”

MacLean said he can handle the politics.

“I’m a personable guy,” he said. “I like establishing effective relationships. Effective communication is probably the No. 1 priority – communications with the employees, communications with the community and communications with the parents.”

There is also the challenge of trying to advance technology in a largely rural school district where some towns do not have internet connectivity capabilities at present, Carey said.

MacLean said he is not concerned. “There’s not a challenge that scares me,” he said.

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nalist interviews, and three were moved forward as finalists. Community forums were held at the schools of all of the towns of the district to collect public feedback. All school board members were surveyed regarding qualities and



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qualifications. Finalists were chosen in December.

The finalists visited all of the SAU schools in Boscawen, Webster, Salisbury, Andover, Loudon, and Penacook and met the public at a community forum in January. The SAU board then collected feedback from all of the schools and the community forum. Visits were made by representatives of each school board to the finalist schools.

The board members felt all three candidates could bring valuable skills to SAU #46 and were impressed by the quality of all of the candidates destined to be future superintendents of schools in New Hampshire. After two and a half hours of discussions, the SAU board voted unanimously to select Mark MacLean, citing technology and business skills, candidate responses to interview questions, and central office experience. The SAU will begin planning meetings with district employees and the community to meet the new superintendent when his contract begins on July 1.