



'No referendum' for now in Dist. 15

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It was back to school Thursday for the nearly 12,500 students and 900 full-time teachers in Palatine Township Elementary District 15.

Among the new faces is Superintendent Dan Lukich, who took the helm this summer following Robert McKanna's retirement in June after five years.

Lukich, 61, spent the past 11 years leading Orange Schools, a relatively wealthy suburban Cleveland school district with 2,300 students. He began his career in the classroom, teaching history for three years to middle-schoolers.

According to his three-year contract with District 15, Lukich will earn \$202,000 in annual salary and about \$50,000 in perks and benefits. He sat down recently with the Daily Herald.

Q. What kind of leader are you?

A. This is my 24th year as superintendent and my fifth district in three states. What I've learned over the years is that you have to build a sense of collaboration and team building. There needs to be a sense of trust and a sense of system among key administrators. That'd be my cabinet (department heads), principals and the board of education. It's a people business. You survive with great people around you and fail when people are either not supportive or incompetent.

Q. What are the challenges of coming to a district more than five times the size of your old one?

A. A bigger school district just magnifies the problems, whether they be transportation, the number of teachers, etc. Bigger districts don't create different problems, just bigger ones. And probably many more phone calls.

Q. How will you deal with a frequently divisive board?

A. I don't know whether they bicker or disagree or what they do, but few boards have total consensus. I think my role is to work with and find commonalities between board members who may agree to permanently disagree. I think they're genuinely interested in fixing and improving faults in the system.

Q. In what kind of financial shape is District 15?

A. I came from a very wealthy district with tremendous support from taxpayers. There wasn't a failed operational referendum dating back over 30 years and a lot of money per student. Three years ago here there was a failed referendum and (District 15) went through many cuts. I think now we're beginning to rebound from some of those cuts and putting back some key staff.

One of the goals I have is to work with the board and business manager to work toward an overall better fiscal position.

Q. Is District 15 looking at a referendum?

A. Not in the near future. At least in the next year there's no referendum. So much of it is based on state

government and state funding, so some of the things the governor is doing may cause district to re-evaluate its finances.

Q. Busing problems, especially long routes, have been plentiful the last few years. Have they been fixed?

A. Generally we're ready, but it won't be flawless. Enough measures were taken throughout the school year, so it was working pretty well by the end. We have a new transportation coordinator, new assistant transportation coordinator and a new business manager. Our routes have been reviewed and we think we'll meet most time frames. No one wants to see kids on buses for more than 40 minutes. The board wants to hear a report in November.

Q. Finding capital improvement project funds for aging buildings has proven difficult. What's being done?

A. On the minds of a lot of people is the architecture study. A couple buildings are older than me, and I'm 61. There are some obvious needs, and some are life-safety needs. The architectural firm the board hired a year ago has been interviewing principals and looking at 20 buildings in and out to develop a baseline understanding. They're gathering information about everything that makes a school building work from basic infrastructure to parent pick up and drop off. This fall once we settle in there'll be facilities analysis.

Q. What else is happening this year?

A. We're ramping up to bargaining with the (Classroom Teachers Council, which represents all the teachers and certified staff members), and later on four spots on the board are up at election time, which we know is huge in the complexion of the district.

Q. Where is the district headed longer-term?

A. We've begun a demographic study to see where District 15 has been, where it is now and more importantly where it might be 10 or more years out in terms of population, housing, number of students, where they're living and socioeconomics such as race, ethnic minorities and majorities. We'll look at whether we have to add buildings or pare down.

Q. Have you met with teachers?

A. Instead of one mega meeting or sending out a letter or giving a DVD introduction, we're going to spend 15 minutes at each building to introduce ourselves. We're trying to personalize the opening of school with staff. We have a lot of new people.

Q. Just how many new faces are there?

A. Essentially there's a new cabinet. Four of six are new. There are four new principals, a new interim principal, approximately 50 new teachers and a new special education coordinator. And of course the new heads of transportation.

Q. Your predecessor Robert McKanna was 60 when he took over in 2003. You're 61. How long do you plan on sticking around?

A. I could retire now but I choose not to. My health is good and I think I'm a very vibrant and energetic person. Quite frankly I enjoy doing this and the day I don't will probably be my last day of work. I enjoy the people, the process. I see myself doing this for a number of more years.