

Cluster of school leaders heads for door

By Elizabeth Ganga • *The Journal News* • April 26, 2010

The superintendents of eight Westchester districts have announced that they are leaving their posts either this year or next, continuing a trend in the highly paid downstate districts in the past five years that is resulting in a wholesale turnover of top school leadership.

Five of the eight are retiring, from Pleasantville, Somers, Lakeland, Valhalla and Briarcliff Manor, with Chappaqua's David Fleishman leaving for a job in Newton, Mass., closer to his family. Paul Fried of Mamaroneck plans to leave to take a job in New Jersey and he will be replaced by Robert Shaps of the Hastings-on-Hudson school district.

More than 36% of superintendents in four downstate counties, including Westchester, were expected to retire from 2009–2011 and 64% by 2013, according to a survey by the Council of School Superintendents. In the 18 districts that make up Putnam-Northern Westchester Board of Cooperative Educational Services, more than half of the superintendents have retired in the past five or six years, said James Langlois, the BOCES superintendent.

"It's kind of sad," said Eastchester Superintendent Marilyn Terranova, the lead author of the Council of School Superintendents study. "I'm looking at this great labor pool and saying here are the best and brightest."

While each superintendent has his own personal reasons for leaving, those who work in the field of school leadership see larger forces at work. A major one is demographics. Superintendents from the baby boom generation are hitting retirement age. And downstate, superintendents tend to be older and more experienced when they start their jobs, accelerating the trend. But the job is also becoming more demanding and stressful, shortening the tenure of superintendents.

Lakeland's Kenneth Connolly, Chappaqua's Fleishman, Fried from Mamaroneck and Diane Ramos-Kelly from Valhalla are all leaving after five years on the job. Shaps worked in Hastings for four years and Joanne Marien in Somers for eight years. Frances Wills of Briarcliff will have 17 years on the job when she retires next year and Donald Antonecchia of Pleasantville has been superintendent for 15 years.

These days five years is a pretty standard tenure for a superintendent, Langlois said.

"There's a lot of different political pressures on superintendents that sort of add up over time," Langlois said.

Charles Fowler, the president of School Leadership LLC, which is helping Chappaqua and Somers with their superintendent searches, was surprised, given the difficult budget climate that more superintendents weren't leaving this year. Most districts would like superintendents to stay seven to 10 years, but five is more typical, he said.

That's due to "so much controversy and pressure and not all of it constructive," Fowler said.

After five years or so, many superintendents also feel they have accomplished what they needed to accomplish, Fowler said.

Briarcliff Superintendent Wills, 67, said she has loved every minute of her more than 40-year career, but she wants to leave some quality time for retirement, to spend time with her family and to write.

"I think the job is pretty intense, but it always has been" she said. "I think the economy over the last couple of years has been such a rapid reversal of what we have seen. It's astonishing."

Some of the things districts have been doing are not sustainable, she said, and they will have to take a fresh look.

"Everyone has been stopped short as we see that our approach to economics is not working for the long term," said Wills, who has frozen her salary at \$276,204 for the past three years.

As districts look to replace their retiring superintendents they are finding a smaller pool of candidates. Ten years ago, they used to get 100 to 125 résumés for an opening, said Fowler of School Leadership LLC. Now they might get 50 to 80. The pool is smaller in part because superintendents take the job later in life.

"The number of people interested in the superintendency is down as well," Fowler said.

The main reason for the drop in interest is the changing nature of the job. Where before instruction and teacher development were the biggest part of the job, superintendents now have to spend a lot of time on budgets, collective bargaining and other functions on the business side. Districts are also looking for superintendents more familiar with special education law.

Patti Hart, who is on the PTA executive committee in Chappaqua, which has been invited to help develop criteria for a new

superintendent, said she has been happy with Fleishman and is a little disconcerted that he's leaving. She wants the district to do a thorough search for a replacement, looking for a visionary who is focused on education and is a great communicator and consensus builder.

"I'm just hoping that they listen to the community, which is what they're doing," said Hart, who has three kids in the Chappaqua schools.

The difficulty recruiting is leading more districts to look for candidates from within the district. But it's still not easy.

"We know that people who are in our business recognize how difficult the superintendent position is," said Sandra Simpson, the deputy district superintendent of Southern Westchester BOCES.

The smaller applicant pool and large number of openings is pushing up salaries, said the Council of School Superintendents, though the poor economy has slowed the increase. The average salary of superintendents in the downstate suburbs is almost \$230,000 compared with \$141,000 in the rest of the state.

Though attracting talent is a concern, some taxpayers are tired of hearing about the large packages of salaries and benefits used to lure and retain superintendents. Victor Coster, a school board member in Lakeland in the mid-1990s who came in with the Lakeland Taxpayers Coalition, said all superintendents are overpaid. But he liked that the new Lakeland superintendent, George Stone, will make \$20,000 less than Connolly's \$270,000 salary and hopes it's a trend.

"That's as it should be," he said. "Why should it be higher?"

Regardless, the financial incentive is not always enough to keep people tied to the job.

"The idea of staying a long time," Fowler said, "it's not reality, that's not happening."