

Departing schools chief bids Newington a fond farewell

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@drzewieckinh

NEWINGTON - After announcing his resignation last week, School Superintendent William Collins has left the town in which he said he invested more than he did his own.

Superintendent for the last nine years and a district employee the last 18, Collins left willingly, but with fond memories of Newington.

“I’ve been thinking about it for awhile,” he said Tuesday. “It was time to turn the reins over to somebody else.”

Collins had two years remaining on his three-year contract. Board of Education members unanimously approved an agreement putting him on paid leave July 1 through Aug. 31, using sick time.

He will be reimbursed for 35 accrued vacation days and will continue receiving health benefits until he is eligible for Medicare or has secured other employment.

Deputy Superintendent Pamela Muraca was appointed interim superintendent.

Collins dismissed rumors circulating about his reasons for leaving, including tension with the BOE.

“There were no disagreements with the board; it was a mutual thing,” he explained. “I’ve had a very good relationship with the board over the years and I wanted the change. I figured it was time to move on.”

Over the last six months Collins has been embroiled in several controversies involving the district. The first followed the fuel spill at the school bus garage, which cost the town several million dollars and could have been prevented by school officials, according to environmental experts.

Then in late spring, the Town Council accused Collins of refusing to pursue grant funding for school offices in the Town Hall renovation. He claimed that no grant had been prepared and presented for his signing. The board has since created education specifications for their needs and filled out an application, signed by Collins and delivered to the state.

“They were part of a growing number of things, you just realize it’s time,” Collins said.



Erica Drzewiecki | Staff School Superintendent Bill Collins, left, celebrates groundbreaking for the biomedical sciences academy in 2014 with then-BOE Chairman Marc Finkelstein and then-Town Manager John Salomone.

Board Chairman Joshua Shulman credited Collins with leading the district through some groundbreaking initiatives.

“The whole board wants to thank him for his service to the students of Newington,” Shulman said. “We have made great strides and transformed the way we educated our students. A big portion of that is due to the efforts of Dr. Collins.”

Residents who came to the special meeting at which the resignation took place praised Collins for his hard work over the years, some questioning why he would choose to step down. Joe Duggan called the superintendent “a visionary.” John Bachand criticized the board for not sharing details with the public at the time.

When he was promoted from Newington High School principal to superintendent, Collins remembers handing his long list of goals to the Board of Education.

“I had all accomplished but two,” he said this week. “Those last two, I thought my chances of getting them done before I retired were slim to none.”

During his tenure Collins led the opening of half a dozen focused-study academies at the middle and high school level. The Martin Kellogg Academy of Biomedical Sciences and the John Wallace Academy of Aerospace and Engineering are set to enroll 100 students this coming school year.

Over the last decade the district has made giant technology advances, including training teachers to use Google Classroom. The one-to-one device initiative has put Chromebooks in the hands of every student in grades three and above.

“I had a lot of ideas and I had a staff that really made them happen for me,” Collins said.

Among other accomplishments, he is also proud of starting the college credit initiative, which allows NHS students to pursue side-by-side learning at Central Connecticut State University.

“Some of our students can practically graduate from high school with an associate’s degree,” he pointed out.

That pride also extends to bus drivers and janitors, who keep schools running in a different way than faculty.

“We have third-generation drivers who work for us,” Collins explained. “I’m proud of our custodial department. Our buildings are phenomenal.”

The search for a new school chief will likely kick off this summer, according to Shulman.

“We will begin as soon as we can,” he said. “We’ll definitely include the public throughout the process.”

The specifics have yet to be ironed out, but there could be citizen input sessions as early as the fall.

As far as his successor goes, Collins said, “I have set a very high bar for expectations,” he said. “Our staff has come through; they’ve met and exceeded my expectations every single time. I hope the new person will respect that, understand the staff and always put the kids first. My filter I used every day to make every decision was: How is it going to affect the kids?”

Newington has had only three school superintendents since 1970. William Ward served until 1993 and Ernest Perlini until 2009, when Collins took over. The three meet in Florida every spring to share laughs, memories and brainstorm ways to move Newington schools into the future.

“I hope that the next person is kid-centered and supports the staff and is fully committed to the community,” Collins said. “Bill Ward, Ernie Perlini and I will be watching.”

He plans on taking some time off and getting work done around his home in New Haven. He said he may or may not pursue another position.

The two things Collins left his successor to accomplish? Renovating Anna Reynolds School and starting an early childhood program to fill the need for preschool in town.

“I hope the new person is in it for the long haul,” he said.

Erica Drzewiecki can be reached at [860-801-5097](tel:860-801-5097) or edrzewiecki@centralctcommunications.com.