

## Residents sound off on superintendent search

By Hillary Gavan hgavan@beloitdailynews.com | Posted: Friday, March 20, 2015 4:00 pm

Business leaders said they hope the next School District of Beloit superintendent will be a good leader, build consensus in the community and continue strong career and technical education.

Those in education spoke more about the leader's commitment to Beloit, although some had differing opinions about the process of selecting a superintendent.

The Board of Education offered listening sessions Thursday evening at the Beloit Public Library so the public could weigh in on what it's looking for in the next school executive.

Superintendent Steve McNeal announced his retirement in December and left the district on Jan. 30. Retired administrator Pam Kiefert and former Assistant Superintendent of Operations Tom Johnson are acting together as co-interim superintendents.

During Thursday's listening sessions, several teachers from the school district advocated for hiring Johnson.

"He knows our kids and that's vitally important because he was one (in Beloit). He understands the complexity of our community because he's lived in our community. He has proven himself as a leader," said Beloit Memorial High School teacher Judy London.

"Past performance is the best indicator of future performance," said Beloit Memorial High School teacher Mary Kaye Richardson.

Richardson said Johnson transformed the high school into one with high expectations, multiple and new course offerings and technical education, and is willing to listen to ideas from staff and students.

However, Dorothy Harrell, speaking on behalf of the NAACP, said the hiring process should be open and fair, not pre-determined and "rubber stamped" by the board.

"People should be open minded. Those who are the best candidates will rise to the top no matter where they are from," she said.

She said no one should be told beforehand this job is theirs, and that they have a job before a decision is made.

"We have to guard against the appearance of impropriety," she said. "We cannot be rubber stamping decisions made by previous administration."

Harrell said the district should not make an exception for hiring the highest instructional leader the district will have.

“There needs to be an independent search done,” she said.

BMHS teacher Deb Prowse said she’s been teaching 24 years, besides many others who grew roots in Beloit.

“Staff that have been here a long time have a commitment to Beloit and its children that I haven’t seen anywhere else. I want someone who is going to grow roots here and be here for the long haul. I don’t want someone to come in with a brand new agenda, and then two years down the road go somewhere else for a better offer. I want someone with the same commitment that I have,” Prowse said.

Dave Luebke said the future superintendent should have a personal commitment to the community, willing to have a “communion” with the people at dinners, churches and various events. He said Beloit has lost some staff because they were using Beloit as a stepping stone before moving on in their careers elsewhere.

Other issues raised by those in education included someone committed to addressing mental health issues, reaching out to the Hispanic community, making BMHS more comfortable with LGBT students, supporting arts and music and being a political advocate for schools and funding in Madison.

Jason Dotson, vice president of the clinic division of Beloit Health System, said he hopes the next superintendent will continue community partnerships and be willing to take some risks. Dotson said he wants the superintendent to be involved in the local community. He noted that co-interim superintendent Tom Johnson has been involved and responsive to needs during the transition.

Dotson said the ideal superintendent will be a good listener, level headed and not reactionary. The person would help keep new students engaged the first weeks they come in and find ways to connect with parents through social media.

Kim Bliss, the director of community development from Hendricks Holding Co., said she hopes businesses will continue to be involved in developing curriculum in career and technical education programming.

She said it’s also important to have a very strong leader that’s able to handle all the spotlight of being a superintendent, although the community must be careful it allows the superintendent to be a leader.

“We must provide an atmosphere for him or her to want to come here,” she said.

Tom Finley of Finley Dencker Buick Pontiac GMC, said the superintendent must get along with all the staff, and build morale. If someone is overly “onerous,” he said there could be trouble. The ideal superintendent would be good at consensus making and would be a good cheerleader of the schools.

Finley praised the career and technical education program and its director Ryan Rewey.

“Rewey’s doing a wonderful job with that path and he gets support he needs. It’s innovative and something we must do a good job at keeping it going,” Finley said. “We need someone very forward thinking and willing to make changes.”

Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation Business/Education Partnership Committee Co-chair Rick Barder said Beloit is full of volunteers and thought should be given to utilizing them in light of budget cuts. He cited Beloit Health System as an example of an entity using more than 200 unpaid volunteers to help.

He also suggested having the Beloit Public Library stay open on Sundays so students could study there with churches and community groups. He said there are countless community partnerships that need to be capitalized on as the district moves forward with less money available to it.