

McCann to retire after 35 years

Friday, March 23, 2007

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HAMBURG — When the students moved to the Hamburg Public School's newly-built wing three years ago, Superintendent Robert McCann had his office moved to the same wing.

He wanted to be among the kids, just as he was during his 30 years of teaching at the Hamburg school, before becoming superintendent.

"I wasn't where I was supposed to be," McCann, 60, said of his old office. "I was out of touch, isolated from the students. I don't want to say it was lonely, but it was. I spent my whole life with kids, that's what it's all about.

McCann will be retiring in July after 35 years at the Hamburg Public School, nine years of which as superintendent. It is the only school he has ever worked for.

During his time as superintendent, the school has seen a new 20,000 square foot addition, new special needs classes, a new pre-school class for students with learning disabilities and an ambitious program to remove asbestos from the hallways and classroom tiles.

But McCann, a Clifton-resident originally from Wantage, accepts credit for practically none of these accomplishments, and instead cites the support of the teachers, staff and fellow administrators around him.

"I've had everybody's backing and support, that's why I've been able to do anything I've been able to accomplish," he said. "It's not any special talent of my own."

McCann earned a junior high school curriculum degree from Patterson State College in 1968, and joined the U.S. Air Force immediately upon graduating.

He spent four years in the service, but felt out of place being away from school. His family had always vigorously stressed the importance of education; his aunt was a teacher, and his grandfather was the Wayne Board of Education secretary.

"When I was doing something away from school, it felt like something was missing, and I felt that way until I got back," McCann said. "It was an awkward feeling."

Upon his return, before even looking for a job, McCann married his wife, Stefanie — herself now a fifth grade teacher for 37 years at Clifton.

"I didn't know I had a job when I got married," he said. "I got a call when I got back from my honeymoon and found out I had a job."

McCann started teaching sixth grade math and science at Hamburg in 1972. He switched to seventh and eighth grade in 1975, where he stayed for 23 years before taking on the superintendent position.

James Kane, former Hamburg superintendent and McCann's mentor, encouraged him to start taking on more administrative responsibilities, and to seek his master's degrees in student counseling and school administration from William Patterson College in Wayne.

Kane, who retired in 1998 after 24 years as superintendent, chose McCann to replace him.

But looking back on his career, most of his memories are of his time as teacher, like sharing the remote-controlled airplanes he built with the students, or encouraging one student — who became a teacher herself — not to get too stressed out about an algebra test.

"I most enjoyed watching the lights go on when the students realize that they know the math," McCann said. "I had fun in the classroom every day, and I didn't know if I'd have fun in the (superintendent's) office every day."

Indeed, McCann now found he had to deal with yearly struggles in finances — this year was the first that the district received an increase in state aid since he started the job, he said.

McCann also had to contend with state tests, in which his students have generally improved each year in science and language arts, while traditionally dropping in mathematics.

This year, the Hamburg Borough School District earned the county's highest eighth grade assessment test for language arts, with 96.1 percent of students rating proficient or better. For that same test, the borough earned a 57.7 percent for math, a county low.

McCann said the district has responded to these results but hiring a new math teacher and setting gradual improvement goals for the students, but he said he does not feel test results are an accurate portrayal of a school.

"It puts a lot of stress on the kids, it puts a lot of stress on the faculty and it puts a lot of stress on the system," he said. "I don't take the test lightly, don't get me wrong, but I don't see any test as an indicator of a school's performance."

McCann said he believed in creating a "family-like" atmosphere of learning for the students, which Hamburg Principal Steve Engravalle describes as "the Hamburg Effect."

"We have the ability here to take a difficult student and change them. We have that ability," Engravalle said. "That's the Hamburg Effect. That's the atmosphere here (and) for 35 years Robert McCann has cultivated that."

McCann said negotiations are currently underway with a new superintendent candidate.

As for himself, McCann said he would not venture far from education.

Aside from riding his Harley Davidson, McCann is considering accepting a position with Seraph, a school safety and security company, and plans on taking some history courses — this time as a student.

"I'll stop learning when it's time for the dirt nap," McCann said. "I'm never happier than when I'm learning something. It's who I am."