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Easthampton school chief candidate outlines vision, priorities

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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EASTHAMPTON - At the end of her job interview for superintendent of schools Monday, Elizabeth Zielinski turned to the School Committee with her own questions.

Zielinski, 43, of Ludlow asked about the School Committee's relationship with the City Council and what members believed the incoming superintendent should know about the community.

"My expectation is the superintendent would attend some of those (City Council) meetings," said Zielinski, who is currently the assistant superintendent of Quaboag Regional School district in Warren. She said each city department has its own "turf," but she believes it is the superintendent's job to understand and work with department heads for the school district's "bite of the elephant," or share of the city's budget.

"You have to make sure you're doing what's best for the kids," Zielinski said.

Zielinski said she believes the superintendent should go out into the community to discuss the budget process as it begins in July and August. She added she is a "firm believer" in being transparent.

"There's too many surprises in life as it is," Zielinski said. "The budget should not be one."

The superintendent's role is also to identify priorities, Zielinski said, which depend on student needs.

"For you to assign a teacher to teach three AP students doesn't make fiscal sense," Zielinski said. However, she suggested, virtual high school classes or electives might fit that need for those three students, without taking a teacher away from the needs of a larger classroom.

A singer and actress, Zielinski said she believes extracurricular activities should not be cut from the budget, but in tough economic times the district should consider fees and how booster clubs, private schools and the parks and recreation department can help.

In terms of curriculum, Zielinski suggests a vertical team leader identify where the district is aligned and where there are gaps. She said the district's strategic plan should be used to unify schools and guide superintendent and teacher evaluations. Discussions around the reorganization of the city's elementary schools, Zielinski added, should be carried out in community forums.

Zielinski noted her proudest accomplishment was starting Horizon Academy in 1996, an alternative education school in Chicopee where she was teaching principal for 10 students. The schoolchildren



JERREY ROBERTS

Elizabeth Zielinski, candidate for Easthampton School Superintendent, speaks during her interview Monday.



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recited oral histories with local seniors, created holiday baskets with the local Kiwanis and Rotary Club, and designed 20-by-40-foot murals to contribute to downtown Chicopee's revitalization.

"I learned more from those kids about what it means to be an educator than I have teaching at the graduate level," Zielinski said.

Zielinski defined her leadership style as collaborative yet instructional; her biggest weakness as not responding as quickly as she would like to largely because she said she is spread thin and she wears "many hats," and her greatest strength as a communicator who always does make a point to respond to people.

Tonight, Nancy Follansbee, director of curriculum in Easthampton, will be interviewed for the superintendent position at 5:30 in the city building. She is the last to be interviewed out of four finalists under consideration by the School Committee. Last week, members interview Williamsburg elementary schools principal Alfred Venne and Brenda Needham, former superintendent of schools in Windsor, Vt.

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