

Reflecting just before retirement

Schools chief recalls challenges of position

By CATHERINE BAUM
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WESTHAMPTON - Hampshire Regional Schools Superintendent Barbara Ripa said working with six schools has been the most challenging yet also the most rewarding part of her job over the past four years.

Ripa announced recently her plan to retire in June from a job with myriad responsibilities in five Hilltowns. Among her duties: overseeing New Hingham Regional Elementary School, which serves Goshen and Chesterfield; William E. Norris Elementary School in Southampton, Westhampton Elementary School in Westhampton, Helen E. James and Anne T. Dunphy Elementary schools in Williamsburg and Hampshire Regional Middle-High School in Westhampton. She has worked with administrators and teachers in coordinating curriculum, improving technology and strengthening teacher evaluations. Efforts became successes because they were so collaborative, Ripa said.

"People here really care about the kids," she said. "There's a wonderful energy in the people and a real commitment to doing their jobs well."

In addition to school administrators, Ripa has worked with five school committees, five finance boards and five selectboards in overseeing budgets which total \$20.5 million this year. That time commitment is demanding but worth it, she said.

"Each community is unique, each board is unique, and getting to know those people to build a trust level took time," she said. "It is enjoyable to work with so many people ... challenging but enjoyable."

Her decision to retire stemmed from her desire to spend more time with her husband, Jim Ripa - they live in South Hadley - and their four grown children and five grandchildren. Next summer she will go to England and Ireland with her oldest grandchild.

"It's time to spend more time with my family," said Ripa, 60, whose husband retired six years ago. "When one of my youngsters has a pageant or special game at school I can be with grandpa and attend. I will enjoy doing that."

Ripa's salary is \$115,000.

She succeeded William Erickson as superintendent here in August 2005. Before that she was principal at Ellington Middle School in Ellington, Conn., for 13 years. She was also an assistant principal in Southwick, a middle school principal in Hampden and a teacher in Chicopee, West



Barbara Ripa



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Since she came on board, she has hired principals Michael Fredette at New Hingham Regional Elementary School and Patricia Clem at Hampshire Regional Middle-High School, as well as Laurie Farkas, director of pupil services, and Regina Pool, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, both of whom serve all the Hampshire Regional schools.

The "sense of unity" that Barbara Ripa encouraged over her tenure has been good for the district, said Farkas, who works alongside her in the district's central office in Westhampton.

"Barbara is always extremely supportive and positive and understands special education and students at risk," said Farkas. "We worked together as partners. I highly respect Barbara, and she will be missed."

Ripa worked with others to create Pool's job after the director of early childhood stepped down. Rather than replace that position, Ripa, with her administrative team, created a position to address the stronger need to coordinate curricula, instruction and assessment for each of the four elementary districts and the secondary district. The consistency in curricula gives students a smoother transition to Hampshire Regional Middle-High School and provides a positive direction for the districts, she said.

In terms of teacher evaluation, Ripa envisioned a plan designed to help teachers grow. The plan in place when she arrived consisted of one to three formal classroom visits followed by a report for the teacher to review the next year. The new plan, Professional Growth and Evaluation, consists of random, shorter, more frequent visits with immediate follow-up discussion.

"It produces powerful information for really examining how we teach, why we teach, what is helpful to students, and it allows administrators to have a much broader understanding of what teachers are doing in the classroom," Ripa said. "Ideally the conversation goes to strategies for how to make it even better. That is a very helpful growth tool."

Professional Growth and Evaluation is being piloted this year, with a "full-blown" pilot in place for all staff next year, she noted.

The South Hadley resident for 14 years intends to continue working for regional school districts, serving on the professional development and regionalization subcommittees of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools. In those roles, Ripa will assist superintendents new to regionalized districts in identifying differences and providing them with support, and she will partake in state-level discussions about regionalizing high schools.

"While I won't be the superintendent of districts, I will still be one of the people that makes sure the new superintendent has current information," Ripa said.

The post has been advertised in the search for Ripa's successor, with applications due May 1. A search team of teachers, administrators and community members is being formed to review applications next month. People interested in joining the team should contact Lisa LaCroix, administrative assistant in the superintendent's office, by calling at 527-7200 or emailing her at llacroix@hr-k12.org.

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