

Otter Valley names new principal

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BRANDON — Otter Valley Union High School has picked its next principal.

The Otter Valley School Board recently selected Michael Ruppel to replace outgoing principal Jim Avery, who is retiring after nearly a decade in the position and a total of 30 years at OV.

Ruppel is slated to take over on July 1.

For the past three years, Ruppel, 33, has served as assistant principal at Springfield High School, where he previously worked as a math teacher and instructional coach. Ruppel said he expects OV to be a good fit, stating, “I’m interested in working in socioeconomically diverse communities and in working in a place that really values the education of its students. ... My strong sense is that Otter Valley is a place that’s like that.”

He said that while he has worked in a variety of areas in education over the years, his wheelhouse is instructional practices.

Ruppel was named a Rowland Fellow in 2017 for his work on proficiency-based education.

Each year, the Rowland Foundation selects up to 10 Vermont secondary educators to fund project proposals aimed at enacting systemic change within their school communities.

Ruppel said he has applied that work during his time at Springfield, developing proficiency-based learning and flexible learning options for students.

He said he expects that experience will benefit him at OV, where PBL is being implemented.

“More importantly, though, being a Rowland Fellow taught me about the broader school change process and how to help create improvements in schools that are participatory, coherent and sustainable,” he said. “So I think those skill sets transfer well to whatever areas we will be working on at Otter Valley.”

Ruppel said he also brings a “strong collaborative approach,” explaining he always strives to work closely with teachers and cultivate leadership among their ranks.

“One of my anchoring ideas is that nothing happens in schools without teachers. Teachers are at the center of school improvement, and I think my work can hopefully empower teachers to improve their practice and do what’s best for kids,” he said.

Ruppel acknowledged that teacher burnout is a major issue in schools at the moment, adding he is interested in figuring out how to make the profession more fulfilling and manageable.

“Teachers are giving everything they can right now,” he said.

In addition to the pandemic, he pointed to the high levels of stress and conflict present across society.

“I think that those conflicts are playing out in classrooms across the state and at Otter Valley,” he said. “And I think that people are looking for schools to be a place where people can come together and talk about ideas and move society forward.”

Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins said Ruppel brings with him the skills and experience OV needs — including his knowledge of PBL.

“It’s really exciting to have somebody with that direct experience of already implementing it in other schools,” she said.

Collins called Ruppel a good listener who is focused on students’ needs.

She said his energy and ability to connect with students and staff made him stand out during the interview process.

In addition to completing the implementation of PBL, Collins said OV has several other areas that will require Ruppel's attention, including developing a more comprehensive intervention system for students who are not succeeding and looking at current disciplinary practices.

Specifically, Collins said more work needed to be done to improve the system for responding to bullying and harassment concerns, as well as an examination of the overall climate and culture of the school community.

It's a job Ruppel is ready to take on.

He said he plans to spend a lot of time during his first year listening and digging into data before launching new initiatives or programs.

That includes talking to stakeholders, like students, faculty, staff and community members.

"The goal would be that coming out of the first year, I have a really good sense of where the community's at and where the community wants to be, and then an action plan to help us move in that direction," said Ruppel.

To that end, he encouraged people to reach out to him at mruppel@nesu.org to share their thoughts.

"I want to hear from people in the community," he said.