

Michael Ruppel will take the helm at OVUHS

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MICHAEL RUPPEL

BRANDON — On July 1, 2022, Michael Ruppel, 33, will become OVUHS's new principal, replacing Principal James Avery, who after 30 years with the RNESU district — 27 of which he served as associate principal and principal — announced his retirement last November.

An aggressive search process got underway immediately, and among several applicants, Ruppel was picked for the position and has accepted.

Ruppel was born and raised in Dutchess County, N.Y., and graduated from Webutuck High School (a school smaller than OVUHS) in 2006, and then the University of Delaware in 2010. His degrees were in economics and international relations, he said, "but I decided to put my math minor to use and pursued an alternative route to a teaching certification in Providence, Rhode Island" by teaching at Central High School.

He got his MA in math at Providence College in 2014, and his administrative training was through the Upper Valley Educators' Institute in Lebanon, New Hampshire, completing that program in 2018. He has spent the past 8 years in Vermont, and the past three years as assistant principal at Springfield (Vt.) High School.

But that hardly describes this active, ambitious and fast-leaning education. "Outside of school," he says, "I like to do lots of outdoor things (hiking, trail running, occasionally kayaking and cross-country skiing) and also am pretty content at home," saying he is "really into cooking."

He's also excited to get out on the local trails for a run. "I've heard there are some pretty great trails near the OV campus, and I'm excited to try them out!"

In a question and answer format below, Ruppel answers our questions about OVUHS and his education and encourages all district residents to reach out to him via email between now and the start of the next school year with comments that might help him better understand the district communities and OVUHS.

Q: You've said your educational "wheelhouse" is instructional practices. Could you define that term and why you think that approach is successful? You've also been an instructional coach at Springfield High School. Could you elaborate on how that works and how teachers and students benefit?

A: Essentially, what I believe (and research shows it's true!) is that teachers and teaching are the biggest drivers of school improvement. This means that I need to spend most of my time focusing on the teaching and learning happening in the school. Sometimes that means directly observing teachers and giving feedback, but it also means making sure that our instructional systems (policies, schedules, expectations, supports) are helpful and promote good instruction.

As an instructional coach I worked closely with teachers to help them set goals for their teaching, provide them feedback, and work together on curriculum and instruction. Although it's harder to do this direct work with the daily "busyness" that the principal role has, it's something I always try to carve out time for because it brings a ton of meaning and groundedness for me.

Q: You were named a Rowland Fellow in 2017 for your work in proficiency-based learning (PBL). Could you define PBL, and why it's important in education today? What particular projects were you doing at the time that attracted the attention of the Rowland Foundation?

A: Proficiency-based learning, at its core, is teachers getting really tight on exactly what they want their students to learn, clearly communicating learning expectations to students, and making sure that assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, papers, etc.) are well-aligned to the skills that you are trying to teach.

It's important today because frankly, teachers can't teach everything that's in the standards. There's just too much. So when we try to cover too much, we end up teaching "a mile wide and an inch deep." Proficiency-based learning helps us narrow the playing field and give us the opportunities to promote deeper learning outcomes for our students.

It's also an equity strategy and, if we do it well, means that we honor kids for what they can do as they grow over time. I often use the metaphor of learning to parallel park. Failure is expected (the first few times) and we should treat that initial challenge as part of the learning process.

Q: OVUHS was in the process of implementing PBL. What stage is the school in, when will it be completed, and how do you imagine your past experience will help in moving it forward? What benefits in terms of performance outcomes will parents and students hopefully see?

A: I think it's probably not accurate to say that proficiency-based learning will ever be "completed" as it is a way of doing business and not a "program" or "initiative." My understanding is that OV was doing some good initial work in PBL, but that the pandemic slowed down the momentum. My hope is that I can work with the teacher leaders to get really clear on why they want to move to PBL and then spend time building curriculum, policies, and instructional practices that are grounded in that why.

The benefits are numerous if done well. It gives students, particularly students for whom school does not traditionally work well, the opportunity to find more engagement and meaning in their learning. Paradoxically, it also opens up some opportunities for students to take flexible pathways towards graduation that are as rigorous as traditional options. I also think that by getting clear on the essential learning in each course that we will see student readiness for post-secondary learning increase.

Q: What other benefits did you get from being a Rowland Fellow that will help you as principal of OVUHS?

A: I can't say enough about what the Rowland Foundation did for me as a leader. The program taught me to see schools as interconnected systems and how to engage all stakeholders in the change process. It built up a portfolio of leadership skills that I think will make a difference in any change effort that we take on at the high school. My biggest takeaways are:

- (a) nothing you do in school is as important as improving the teaching and learning process
- (b) teaching is complex work, so school change is hard, slow, and iterative.

Q: What conflicts do you see manifested in schools today, and how can schools help the larger community address those issues?

A: I'm so glad you asked this question. Schools mirror society and the conflicts in society necessarily penetrate the schoolhouse walls. The difference — and this is both a challenge and an opportunity — is that public schools are places of public accommodation and that we work with students from all different backgrounds. There are very few of these shared experiences in society right now, so conflict is maybe more pronounced and visible in schools.

For me, it is incumbent upon schools to tackle these issues head on. What we can do as schools is model the processes in our classrooms that we believe should be happening across society: reasoned and evidence-based discourse, careful analysis, respectful dialogue, and shared decision-making.

Students should experience a curriculum that allows them the opportunity to engage with the issues that lead to conflict in society, often in a historical perspective, using the processes I described above.

Q: Supt. Jeanne Collins has said that some of the ongoing problems at the school, like at most schools, is addressing some disciplinary practices and developing strategies for students who are not performing at class levels. Were there any particular practices at Springfield High School you thought were successful? Or, perhaps, are both issues the never-ending quandaries facing all school administrators and teachers?

A: Again, we'll never have a utopian school where nothing goes wrong. We need to use continuous improvement processes to be a little bit stronger at the core work tomorrow than we were yesterday.

At SHS, we've leaned heavily into restorative practices as our approach to building and sustaining strong communities. It doesn't mean that you get rid of a traditional approach to discipline. You start by making sure that students are included in the process of building the community, that they have connections to each other and the adults in the room, and that, when harm inevitably happens, you focus on making sure that student and adult needs are met (as opposed to just the consequence).

I'm intrigued by finding ways to combine the restorative practices work that I'm more familiar with, with the PBIS work already taking place at OV. I think they match up well.

In terms of supporting students who struggle, there are a number of things I think need to happen to improve learning for students who are not well served by the system.

A first is getting a number of supports in place during the school day, with supports delivered by highly skilled educators with knowledge of the core curriculum.

We also need to focus on our universal instructional practices.

Finally, expanding access to flexible pathways (like career and technical education, interdisciplinary learning, and online learning) has the opportunity for students to learn important content and skills in environments that are well suited to their particular learning needs.

Q: What attracted you to OVUHS, and why do you think it will be a good fit?

A: My sense is that Supt. Jeanne Collins has done a lot of excellent work in the supervisory union and has built a strong team to move the work forward. That became really clear in the interview process. The

other draw for me is that the staff at OVUHS seems really dialed in to working together to improve the school. Those, coupled with the socioeconomic diversity of the community, were real draws for me.

Q: What are your immediate goals, and more distant goals, as principal of OVUHS?

A; The short-term goals are to build relationships with a variety of stakeholders in the community; better understand the current status of the school (in terms of student learning data, student engagement, and teacher engagement); and to understand the vision of where those stakeholders want to go.

In the long-term, what I want to do is to help realize that vision.

Q: How can the school community help?

A: While I've been in Vermont for 8 years now, I haven't spent a lot of time in this part of the state. I'd love to have people stop by once I'm on the job in July to chat, tell me about the community, and what they need from their communities' high school. People should also feel free to reach out via email if they'd like to talk. Jeanne has set up an email for me at mruppel@rnesu.org.