

# RNESU chooses new superintendent

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BRANDON — The Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union has selected a new superintendent — if he wants the job.

The RNESU superintendent search committee chose Zach McLaughlin from a pool of six applicants Thursday evening, according to meeting minutes.

McLaughlin is currently superintendent of the Springfield School District.

Current RNESU Superintendent Jeanne Collins plans to retire at the end of June after eight years in the role, leaving a vacancy at the top of the six-school, eight-town supervisory union that includes two separate school districts, Otter Valley and Barstow.

The committee's selection came after a virtual community forum Thursday during which around 60 people had the opportunity to pose questions to the final two candidates.

The other finalist was Barbara Anne Komons-Montroll, superintendent of the Windham Southwest Supervisory Union.

A third candidate, Meagan Roy, current director of student support services in Chittenden County's Champlain Valley School District, withdrew her application earlier this week after being offered the superintendent's position at Washington Central Unified Union School District.

Speaking Friday, Laurie Bertrand, chair of the RNESU School Board confirmed the offer had been extended to McLaughlin. She said he was taking “a couple of days” to consider it.

McLaughlin, who has been superintendent at Springfield since 2013, was named Vermont Superintendent of the Year in 2021.

Prior to becoming superintendent, he worked in the district as assistant superintendent, director of curriculum and high school assistant principal.

He also taught social studies earlier in his career.

During the forum, McLaughlin said he was encouraged to apply for the position after talking to Collins.

“What she talked about was the strength of the board and the superintendent’s relationship, the good work that had been done in the system (and) the amount of community support that there is for the schools,” he said.

Rachel Valcour, a science teacher at Otter Valley Union High School, asked McLaughlin what accomplishments he was proud of achieving during his time as superintendent of Springfield.

McLaughlin pointed to fostering a better relationship between the school district and the community, noting a deep rift that had existed in the past.

He said that prior to his time on the job, school budgets rarely passed on the first vote. When McLaughlin came onboard, he said he worked to rebuild trust with the community by demonstrating “professional competence” and listening to what community members had to say.

As a result, he said, the district passed the next six consecutive budgets.

“I think it was because we worked really, really hard to talk to our community,” he said. “I think that’s a legacy that will be left in that community.”

In response to another question about addressing individual student needs within larger educational systems, McLaughlin said that while it’s important for a supervisory union to move forward with common goals and vision, each school’s needs must be taken into consideration.

“You need to leave space for each individual school to have its own flavor, its own unique approach to certain things so that it remains responsive to the kids and the families within that particular place,” he said. “We just

have to look at all these people inside of these schools, the adults and the kids, as human beings and have to think uniquely about what we can do to support these folks.”

Another individual asked McLaughlin how to address divisiveness and promote unity within RNESU schools.

He noted that school communities with students from a wide variety of backgrounds — socioeconomic, cultural etc. — can face challenges in meeting all those unique needs. He said it requires school leaders to thoughtfully “strip back” the effects of those differences and create an environment where everyone feels welcome.

“Then, when you walk in through our doors, you’re in a position where you have just as much of an opportunity as another student,” he said.

In a related question about dealing with challenges and pushback around issues of equity that are increasingly common in school communities, McLaughlin said he was “deeply committed” to ensuring schools are welcoming and supportive to all people.

“When it comes to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion that is not an add-on to what a district is trying to do, it is core and central to it,” he said.

He added it’s important to acknowledge the history and structures in place within society that can make it challenging for people to fully benefit from their community.

It was his commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, he said, that contributed to his departure from the Springfield School District.

McLaughlin said he and a majority of the board “disagreed about a core value that I thought was fundamental to the future of the school districts.”

In January 2021, the Springfield School Board voted 3 to 2 not to renew McLaughlin’s contract, which was set to expire in June 2021, according to a report from the Eagle Times. After strong community backlash, the board changed course, offering him a one-year contract, which expires this June.

“This is a really contentious time around those types of issues even in Vermont,” he said. “We thought, ‘Oh, we got all these things figured out?’ Well, we don’t quite have all those things figured out yet in Vermont and there’s a lot of work for us to do.”

McLaughlin could not immediately be reached for comment Friday.

