

MacDougall sees challenges, opportunities as Konocti Unified's new superintendent

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LOWER LAKE — When Superintendent Dr. Louise Nan announced earlier this year her intention to accept a new position and leave Lake County, the Konocti Unified School District faced the hard work of finding someone to take the district's helm at a time of mounting challenges.

Like other rural school districts, Konocti Unified is facing dropping enrollment, budget cuts and layoffs in the coming year due to the impact of a mounting state fiscal crisis.

It was Nan who suggested to her board that, rather than look outside of the district, they look within, that in their midst was a man to match the mountains they had to climb.

Taking her advice, on May 7 Konocti's board of trustees voted unanimously to name Dr. Bill MacDougall the district's new superintendent. The announcement resulted in a standing ovation from the students, staff and parents at the meeting.

MacDougall, 51, has been an administrator with the district for more than two decades, and is best known for his work as principal at Carlé High School. Under his leadership, Carlé has been named a Model Continuation High School three times, and been recognized as one of the state's top alternative schools in California.

He's also served as principal of Oak Hill Middle School, assistant principal of Lower Lake High School, and assistant principal of Burns Valley and Lower Lake Elementary schools.

Konocti Unified Board President Herb Gura said MacDougall's long history in the district, the fact that they knew and trusted him, and that he has shown strong leadership made him an excellent choice at a critical point.

With the district's tight budget, and the immediate need for leadership, choosing from within was the obvious best step, said Gura.

"We hope he's going to bring the district together," said Gura.

That will be no small feat. Konocti Unified is the county's largest school district, which had an enrollment of more than 3,000 students in the last school year, according to state data. It's facing a \$1 million budget cut next year, said Gura, and is at impasse with its teachers union.

The district also handed out layoff notices to teachers and a few administrators, and cuts are expected to programs and services, said Gura. "We try to keep our cuts as far away from the classroom as we can."

MacDougall said he was "flattered, humbled and surprised" by the board's offer, and said the choice to look within the district reaffirms his belief that the district's members — teachers, staff, students — have the knowledge and wisdom to make change happen.

He said he's been overwhelmed by offers of support from people throughout the community who want to offer support to him and the district.

MacDougall also is clear-eyed about the hard times that are ahead. His suggestion to dealing with hardship is for everyone to hang close together.

At the same time, he sees opportunity in the challenges, including building unity and creating a stronger district.

His contract as superintendent starts July 1, with Nan set to finish her tenure on June 20, at which time she'll leave for the Ripon Unified School District near Modesto.

When MacDougall starts work in the district office, he'll have a smaller staff, with the administration going "bare bones" in an effort to keep money where it will most benefit students.

Assistant Superintendent Cliff Lantz is retiring this year, and curriculum development specialist Monte Gregg is moving into another position. MacDougall said he'll assume the duties of both positions as well.

MacDougall said he has a plan for his first 100 days, and that will be to meet with everyone and listen to their ideas, concerns and solutions.

"I don't have all the answers, but I really believe all the answers are there and that the people within the Konocti Unified School District know those answers, and that has been proven to me over the last 20 years," he said.

Teachers still without a contract

A priority, he said, will be resolving the contract with the Konocti Educators Association. MacDougall said he's been "on both sides of the table" over the years, representing teachers in Humboldt County and acting as a district negotiator here in talks with classified employees.

Although he has not been privy to recent talks, he doesn't think the district's impasse with its teachers is insurmountable, and he said he wants to resolve it so teachers can leave behind worrying about contracts and focus their energy on the business of educating students.

John Lee, president of the Konocti Educators Association, said the union was unable to accept the district's final offer, which led to the impasse declaration last Dec. 4. The two sides are now in mediation, and set to meet May 22 one last time before moving to fact finding.

The union and district came close to reaching agreement on a three-year contract, said Lee, but they couldn't agree on health insurance provisions.

The contract called for the district to take money left over from this year and put it aside for a 2-percent pay increase that would be retroactive to Feb. 1 for the district's 180 teachers, said Lee. In return, the union agreed not to ask for a

pay increase in the second year, but did ask for increased health insurance benefits in years two and three.

Lee said the union was willing to go without a pay increase in year three in exchange for the health insurance change, but the district wanted to cap benefits.

The next step is fact finding, which will include representatives from both sides and an administrative law judge. If that fails, said Lee, a strike could result.

The last time district teachers held a strike was in 1986, when the union president was current school board member Carolyn Jarrett.

Gura said that, due to the drastic state budget cuts, the district lacks the ability to give the teachers the kind of compensation like they deserve and have the right to expect

About 36 people, teachers and some administrators, received layoff notices this spring, said Lee, although many of those have been rescinded.

At last count, there were 16 on the list, and a slightly better budget picture — thanks to the governor saying he won't suspend Proposition 98 funds — could take more names off the layoff list, he said. "That's going to be a big relief to a lot of school districts."

Lee said he believes that the superintendent's ability to make change will depend on the school board. He believes that, if it had been up to Nan, the contract would have been settled, but that the board's direction limited her.

"I don't know if Mr. MacDougall is going to be able to change that or not," he said.

What's ahead for Carlé

Gura said there are a few qualified administrators interested in following MacDougall as Carlé's new principal. Ultimately, he added, MacDougall will be allowed to choose his successor.

"Carlé has always selected its principal," said MacDougall.

A committee composed of teachers, students and parents will make its proposal to pick the right person, he said.

"I don't think there's ever been a place I've grown more as an individual than at Carlé," he said.

Carlé is a special place, a small community of kindness, growth and safety that MacDougall says need to be replicated not just districtwide but across the community.

MacDougall helped build the school's small community, and he's done it before in Humboldt County schools, and even has experience in creating a city's strategic plan. But taking on this larger task of guiding the district is, he admits, "a huge undertaking."

He added that succeeding "is going to take all of us."

The school's students have reacted both with happiness and some sadness as the announcement that MacDougall will move to the district office. The students, he added, believe in personal growth and see that this is a huge growth experience for him.

"Carlé is not made of one person," he said, adding that it was a fabulous school before he arrived, and will continue to be so after he takes his new job.

He said his students are exceptional young people who know that, ultimately, their job is to help each other. MacDougall said he'd like to see the community take the same attitude.

It's idealistic, he admits, but idealism may be just what is needed to address the challenges the district faces.

Invested in the community

MacDougall said he has a lot of faith in the district — its teachers, staff and students — and the larger community beyond.

"It is my community," he said. "It is the place I love and want to spend the rest of my life, so I'm definitely invested in this community."

He sees a lot of momentum right now to help youth. "The sign of a healthy community is when you're helping your young and your old."

Students are testing well and he pointed to Lower Lake High's recent recognition by US News and World Report. "Our students are capable of succeeding at the highest levels and have proven that."

The question that needs to be asked, he said, is are students being served the best they can be? And are they being prepared to move on to higher education — whether universities or career technical training — that will lead to fulfilling careers?

MacDougall said his goal is to prepare students for good jobs so as to avoid the "hamster wheel" of minimum wage.

In his 14 years on the board, Gura said he's helped hire three superintendents.

MacDougall's is a special hire, according to Gura. "When you have somebody within the district that is a strong leader and so well-respected and liked by staff, you can't really go wrong. You can't really do better."

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