Goodbye, Mr. Dobbs: How Twin Falls' new superintendent will affect your child's education

TWIN FALLS — Wiley Dobbs jots down reminders on a neon orange sticky note.

He’s keeping track of things to talk about with Brady Dickinson, who’s preparing to take over July 1 as the next Twin Falls School District superintendent.

“Every time I think of something, I write it down and we meet,” Dobbs said one mid-May afternoon in his office.

After 14 years as superintendent, Dobbs will retire Sept. 1. He made the announcement during a School Board meeting last September.

Dobbs’ departure will mean a major transition for south-central Idaho’s largest school district, with about 9,300 students and 16 schools. His successor’s goals — higher math scores and better career preparation, among them — will shape those students’ classrooms.

Dobbs, a 1976 Twin Falls High School alumnus, started his career as a teacher in 1983 and became superintendent of his hometown district in July 2003.

Dickinson is already an administrator in the Twin Falls School District — director of operations and educational technology — and won’t be learning the ropes from scratch. Also, his and Dobbs’ contracts will overlap by two months, an unusual situation.

“The transition is going to be easier,” Dobbs said.

The superintendent is an important community leader. Twin Falls students, on the other hand, will likely know there’s a new superintendent but not have much day-to-day interaction with him. They’ll be affected, though, by his decisions on topics such as curriculum and school program offerings.

A school district is “almost like a small city,” Dickinson said. “The superintendent is the person who’s making sure everything is running the way it’s supposed to.”

Beyond student achievement, the superintendent also oversees business operations such as food services and payroll.

When Dobbs was considering when to retire, he talked with School Board Chairman Bernie Jansen in August 2016.

“He thought the best time would be in September,” Dobbs said, because it would allow time for a nationwide search for a new superintendent.

Dobbs has thought about retirement since about the time voters in 2014 passed a nearly $74 million bond issue to open three new schools.
“I decided that I really wanted to see those school buildings through to completion,” he said.

Rock Creek and Pillar Falls elementary schools opened in summer 2016. The last new school paid for by the bond issue — South Hills Middle School — opens in August.

The School Board in April announced its decision to hire Dickinson. Dobbs is earning $137,501 in his final year, and Dickinson will start with a salary of $132,287.

The two have already worked closely together on projects like Canyon Ridge High School’s opening and school security updates.

“I have a lot of confidence in his abilities,” Dobbs said.

**The killer B’s**

The role of a superintendent used to focus largely on the killer B’s: buses, boilers, balls and budgets, said Heather Williams, program coordinator for the executive educational leadership program at Boise State University.

“They took care of the management of the district,” she said.

That role has evolved, she said, to include a larger focus on federal and state policy changes. “The superintendent’s job is really to implement those policies.”

Plus, “what has changed the most is our communities are more diverse, in terms of their perspectives,” said Williams, who was Gooding School District superintendent in 2008-14. “All of those issues of society come through the schoolhouse doors every day.”

A large part of a superintendent’s job is being a community leader, she said, calling Dobbs a “master at community relations.”

In this “landscape of choice,” she said, families’ educational options include public charter schools, private schools and homeschooling.

“How do you have a vision for your school system to be the system of choice?” Williams said. “That changes the dynamics of more of a management role to a leadership role.”

Superintendents also provide instructional leadership, such as striving to boost student achievement and test scores.

Ultimately, a superintendent works for the school board, Williams said. “They can’t just make decisions without following the process and policies that their board has adopted. Their individual strengths as a leader will come through, filtered through the board’s direction.”
‘I have loved every position’

If Dickinson’s name sounds familiar, it’s not surprising. He has spent his entire 22-year career in the Twin Falls School District.

He has taught hundreds of students, was the first principal at Canyon Ridge High and oversaw the construction of three schools.

Dickinson grew up north of Coeur d’Alene and graduated from high school in Rathdrum. After college, it was a challenge to find a teaching job. He landed in Twin Falls and didn’t think he’d stay long, but he put down roots.

Dickinson’s first job was teaching social studies from 1995 to 2007 at Robert Stuart Middle School. He was also associate principal at Robert Stuart Middle School in 2007-08, and athletic director in 2003-08.

Dickinson helped open Canyon Ridge High in 2009 as its principal. Since July 2013, he has been director of operations for the school district.

Dickinson didn’t have a long-term vision to become Twin Falls superintendent. Now he wants to be in that role until he retires.

“Throughout my career, I’ve never really aspired for the next position,” he said.

As a social studies teacher, Dickinson didn’t want to be a school administrator. But when the opportunity arose to be a middle school associate principal, he enjoyed it.

“I have loved every position,” he said.

Dickinson’s toughest move? “Leaving Canyon Ridge and coming here was the hardest decision of my career.”

‘I feel like I’ve been training’

By mid-May, Dobbs and Dickinson had already met several times to talk about the job transition. But because both already work in the school district office, they frequently have informal conversations.

Dickinson is starting to lead some administrative meetings. Dobbs is there to help if questions arise.

“Dr. Dobbs has been fantastic to work with,” Dickinson said, adding he expects Dobbs will continue to be his mentor. “I feel like I’ve been training and training for the last four years.”
This spring, Dickinson took the lead representing school district administrators during teacher contract negotiations with the Twin Falls Education Association. Negotiations were successful, Dobbs said, and wrapped up faster than usual after only a few sessions.

Dobbs passed along electronic files to Dickinson, including letters Dobbs wrote to employees and school administrators at the beginning of each school year.

In mid-June, Dobbs planned to move out of his first-floor corner office in the school district building. Then he was to head off to an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C., to receive a nationwide “Inspiration Award,” given to one adult volunteer each year who helps youth earn a Congressional Award.

While he’s gone, Dickinson has the chance to paint the superintendent office if he wants, Dobbs said, “because I hung a lot of stuff up.”

This summer, shortly before Dobbs’ contract ends and he turns over the reigns completely, Dobbs and Dickinson will both be part of the grand opening for South Hills Middle School.

‘We’re a growing community’

Dickinson wants to focus on these areas in his first couple of years as superintendent:

**Enrollment growth:** “We’re a growing community right now,” Dickinson said. He aims to be proactive in preparing for enrollment growth, despite its unpredictability. “We’re not sure how long we’ll sustain that growth.”

Dickinson plans to reconvene a long-range facilities planning committee. That’s the group that comes up with recommendations to address facility needs — such as new schools — in the school district.

The community has stepped up over the years, most recently approving the $74 million ballot measure to build Rock Creek and Pillar Falls elementaries and South Hills Middle School.

**Plant facilities levy:** School officials plan to go to voters in March 2018 seeking renewal of a 10-year plant facilities levy — money to maintain school buildings.

“We are able to use facilities for a very long time,” Dickinson said.

To prepare for the election, the district will reconvene its budget advisory committee to come up with a recommendation for the School Board about how much money to seek.

**Math achievement:** Another goal for Dickinson is boosting student math achievement — an issue not unique to Twin Falls. Many school districts across the country see students struggling with math, Dickinson said.
Twin Falls students will have new math materials to use next year: Bridges in Mathematics for elementary schools and Ready Mathematics for middle schools. The new materials align with the more rigorous Common Core Standards, which Idaho adopted in 2011.

It will be a major overhaul for the district. Twin Falls middle schools last adopted new math textbooks about 10 years ago, and it has been at least seven years for elementary schools.

Dickinson calls helping students improve in math “a passion of mine.” He completed his doctoral degree about whether the use of an online Khan Academy program raised math test scores.

**Teacher shortage:** With a teacher shortage in Idaho and many other states, school districts are pushing harder to attract quality teachers.

In Twin Falls, that includes advertising job positions much earlier — usually, in the spring — based on enrollment projections for the next school year, Dickinson said.

**A career focus:** Idaho educational leaders focus on “going on” to college and boosting the rate of students who pursue education beyond high school, Dickinson said. Only about 50 percent of Idaho’s high school graduates continue on, and state officials want to boost that rate to help meet work force needs.

Dickinson, on the other hand, wants to see a shift toward identifying which careers students are interested in, then helping them take steps to get there — anything from a technical certificate to an advanced college degree.

“I’d like to see us change the conversation a little,” he said.

**‘Where the road goes’**

In Dobbs’ final evaluation letter May 8 from the Twin Falls School Board, the board wrote it had “determined your unwavering dedication and continued leadership to the Twin Falls School District #411 is of the highest quality.”

It outlined Dobbs’ accomplishments as superintendent, including opening new schools, championing new initiatives, and garnering more than $189 million in community-supported ballot measures. And over his 33-year career with the district, he taught or oversaw the education of 132,800 students.

“It has been a pleasure to participate in a district that under your leadership, can only be described as the best in the state,” the board wrote.

What’s next for Dobbs? He’s not exactly “retiring.”
He plans to move to Boise to work full-time for the Idaho Digital Learning Academy as coordinator of a region that encompasses the Treasure Valley. He was also hired by the Idaho Principal Mentoring Project to help school principals in the Boise area.

“I feel like I want to continue working, at least for a little while,” Dobbs said. “I’m open to see where the road goes.”

Dobbs has an eye out for school administration jobs overseas, such as with U.S. Department of Defense and embassy schools.

This spring, he was among five finalists for an administration job at a private school in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, that prepares students to go to the U.S. for college.

In short, Dobbs has the travel bug.

He and his wife plan a three-week international trip in November, to include stops in Nuremberg, Germany; Budapest, Hungary; Rome; Abu Dhabi; Vienna; and Prague.

It was still a tough decision to announce his retirement. But Dobbs calls it a natural transition point.

“Brady is a strong leader,” he said, and his hometown school district is in good hands. “I feel good about my decision.”

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