Idaho education leaders worry as superintendents near retirement

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WENDELL — After 39 years as an Idaho educator, Greg Lowe has retirement on his mind. The Wendell School District superintendent plans to stick around next school year. Beyond that, he’s not sure how long.

Lowe, Wendell’s superintendent for 13 years, has already passed the “Rule of 90” under the Public Employee Retirement System of Idaho: An employee qualifies for retirement benefits when age plus years of experience equals 90.

“It has gone by so fast,” he said. “I never even used to think about this because it was never going to come.”

Lowe isn’t the only Idaho superintendent nearing retirement age.

Two-thirds of superintendents — 72 of 105 — are 50 or older, according to the Idaho Department of Education. With so many superintendents preparing for retirement, some Idaho education officials predict a shortage of administrators.

Across the Gem State, six to 10 school district superintendents are retiring this summer, said Karen Echeverria, executive director for the Idaho School Boards Association.

Here in south-central Idaho, Twin Falls’ Wiley Dobbs is the only superintendent retiring this year. But Cassia County School District superintendent Gaylen Smyer announced in April he’ll retire at the end of the 2017-18 school year.

Echeverria expects even more superintendent retirements within the next three years.

“We’re watching because we know there are others coming up,” she said.
There’s a lot of talk in Idaho about a teacher shortage, but “I think we need to start talking about administrators in all of that as well,” Echeverria said. “I think we’re going to begin to start seeing a shortage of superintendents.”

Though candidates are graduating from superintendent preparation programs — such as Boise State University’s — larger school districts such as Twin Falls generally aren’t going to hire them, Echeverria said; they’re looking for administrators with more experience.

Someone right out of a superintendent program often becomes an assistant superintendent, she said, or superintendent of a “very small school district” first.

The bigger question, Echeverria said, is whether enough superintendent candidates are coming out of university programs. “I don’t have a feel for whether that’s enough.”

Heather Williams, who coordinates the executive educational leadership program at BSU, said demand from students is strong, so the pipeline can fill vacancies as they arise.

Superintendents make up “just a sliver” of all educators in Idaho, said Williams, who was Gooding School District superintendent from 2008 to 2014.

Since BSU’s executive educational leadership program began in fall 2014, 60 percent of its graduates have taken jobs as school administrators or superintendents, Williams said. Others, such as Hagerman’s Mark Kress, are already superintendents but are earning certification.

Other Magic Valley school officials who’ve been through the program include Buhl High School principal Ryan Bowman — who starts in July as the Twin Falls School District’s operations director — as well as Castleford superintendent Lyle Bayley and Jerome School District curriculum director Janet Avery.

Back in Wendell, Lowe is paying attention to who’s completing superintendent programs in Idaho.

“There are good people out there,” he said. “I don’t know that there’s a huge number.”

Lowe has also thought about how to attract the next superintendent to the small town of Wendell, with fewer than 3,000 residents.

“I feel like there are some really quality people who are willing to do this here,” he said.

When Lowe interviewed for the Wendell job 13 years ago, the School Board expressed it was important for the superintendent to live in Wendell. Lowe agreed. He and his family — including two of his children — moved to Wendell, and his youngest children graduated from Wendell High School. He said it was important to him to be a member of the community, especially when a school levy or bond measure was up for election.

But even if a future Wendell superintendent candidate doesn’t want to live in town, “there definitely would be some that would be very qualified that may want to live within the (Magic Valley) area,” Lowe said.

Lowe’s future retirement shouldn’t come as a surprise to Wendell’s School Board.

“I feel like for a superintendent to be effective, they should have a good communication with the school board,” he said. “We’ve talked about (retirement) now that it’s getting closer.”
Most school boards have a heads-up that their superintendent is nearing retirement, Echeverria said. For example, a superintendent may indicate it’s the last three-year contract he or she is signing.

“For the most part, boards are aware their superintendent is going to retire or are semi-preparing for that,” she said.

The best-case scenario is to start a search for a new superintendent in December or January prior to a summer retirement, Echeverria said.

“Some districts want to hire within,” she said. “Some don’t even want to do a (superintendent) search. They want to move someone up the ranks.”

The ISBA recommends school districts — especially the size of Twin Falls — do their due diligence in a superintendent search.

“I think the community deserves to know they have the right person,” Echeverria said.

School districts have the option of reaching out to ISBA for help with the search. So far this year, the association has helped with about six.

In Cassia County, Smyer is already planning for the transition to a new superintendent, though he’s not leaving until next summer. He wants to put together good documentation “so we don’t lose anything between the cracks in transition.”

Smyer, born and raised in Declo, has deep ties to the community he serves. After two years of teaching in Utah, he spent 39 years as an educator in Cassia County, beginning as an agriculture teacher and FFA adviser.

Superintendent for 10 years, Smyer said announcing his retirement a year in advance allows the School Board to have access to a larger candidate pool.

“Partially, that was done to let the district know my intentions so they’d have plenty of notice so they’d be able to begin the process in a timely manner,” he said. He expects the position will be advertised in late July or early August — before a state administrators conference — but that’s the School Board’s decision.

Smyer said he plans to compile “careful notes” for the next superintendent. “There are a lot of things that operate in the background that aren’t apparent to a lot of people.”

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