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**Call visits district, hopes to return to Southwest Kansas**

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Round two of the USD No. 480 superintendent interviews began Wednesday with a tour around the district, lunch and a meet-and-greet reception for candidate Dr. Patrick Call and his wife, Karen, of Haven. Call currently serves as superintendent of schools for USD 312, north of Hutchinson. Though Haven is small, with a population about the same as the student body at Liberal High School, Call is unfazed by the challenges a larger district would present.



Working as a superintendent, he said, “is all about working with teams of people, focusing on how to make the most of their areas of expertise and building consensus.” The team approach is important to current assistant superintendent of schools for USD 480, Ranae Hickert. “My ideal candidate would be just like (current superintendent) Lance Stout,” she said, “but since we can’t clone him, what I hope to see is someone who’s willing to build on the programs we have in place, and get to know our team, be open minded. We’ve already spent a lot of time and money and training on these programs, so it’s important to continue.”

Hickert added that diplomacy is a key quality for a superintendent.

“You almost have to be an ambassador to the community,” she said. “It can be a great thing, but you’re also the magnet if something happens.”

Call is familiar with the task of bringing diverse groups together. In Haven, he said, “We have a cultural diversity, where Liberal has ethnic diversity. There are Amish Mennonites, a lot of poverty, people scattered throughout small, distinct towns.” The district has faced financial challenges, and the prospect of having to close an elementary school. Through a partnership with McPherson College, however, USD 312 was able to reopen the school as a charter operation, drawing in additional students from the area.

Finding creative solutions to complex problems is something Call relishes. He started an ESL (English as a Second Language) program in Haven, building on experience he gained as an elementary school principal in Hugoton, where he also set up ESL education. In Haven, working with Hutchinson Community College, he developed programs to encourage students to “take

the next step” after high school, “whether that means helping them graduate with a CNA or CMA certification, or ready to be skilled construction workers,” he said. “We want kids not only to graduate high school, we want them to go further. That might mean university, and it might mean a career right away. Making kids successful is what makes me excited.”

A Ulysses native, Call worked as superintendent at Hill City, and principal for K-5 schools in Hillsboro and Hugoton. In Haven, he also served as president of the Chamber of Commerce and worked to develop resources in the community and region served by the school district.

Though he said he’s never lived anywhere that he didn’t like the people, those in Southwest Kansas are special.

“Out here, people tell you what they’re thinking,” he said. “They may not like something you did or said, but you always know where they stand. That’s valuable, and I really appreciate it.”

Call and his wife, Karen, have worked as an educational duo throughout their marriage. As an FACS (Family and Consumer Sciences) teacher, Karen went back to school twice to earn master’s degrees in school leadership and gifted education.

“My life is in education,” Karen said. “I have always loved it. As time went on, I figured out that I had to continue my education to find ways to fit in and offer my best to the districts where we worked.” The couple has a 30-year-old son, who is currently completing veterinarian school in Massachusetts.

During the visit to Liberal, Call said, he sensed “a lot of opportunity as far as the growth of the district and the entire community is concerned. I’m familiar with the ESL issues, and I admire the programs Dr. Stout has started. There’s a lot going on that is interesting and challenging, and should be continued.”

For the school administrators, teachers and board members who attended the meet-and-greet, the event brought a sense of anticipation and excitement. Incoming board member Crystal Clemens said she’s thrilled to be part of the process.

“I think it’s great the current board invited us to sit in on the interviews,” she said. “I’m looking for a person who’s able to build our community relationships, build partnerships.”

As for South Middle School principal Gib Rito, the sense of anticipation was paired with optimism.

“We always look for the best for the district, and I’m sure that whoever they go with will share that goal,” he said. “I’m confident that the process will result in hiring someone who will benefit students, schools and the community.” Just like he says to his students, Rito noted, “we get what we expect.”

Candidate meetings wrap up this afternoon, with a 3:30- to 5 p.m. reception at the Hampton Inn, with Paul Larkin, current deputy superintendent at USD 480. The public is invited to attend.

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