Paul Larkin, left, visits with outgoing superintendent Lance Stout and other school board members and administrators Thursday evening during a meet-and-greet public reception. After the reception, the board went into executive session and returned announceing Larkin had been hired as the new superintendent of USD No. 480. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

By EARL WATT • Leader & Times Moments after the third and final candidate received a public reception, the USD No. 480 School Bord voted on its new superintendent, and it was a familiar face. Deputy Superintendent Paul Larkin received a 6-0 vote to become the next superintendent. Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott was absent attending her son's graduation from West Point.

Larkin has been in the district for three years, starting in human resources and public relations and advancing to the deputy superintendent.

According to board President Delving Kinser, incoming board members Crystal Clemens and Matt Friederich were on the selection committee, and both expressed their support for Larkin as well. "We felt as a board since those two folks are coming on in a month, it was good to get their insights," Kinser said. "Last night, they both expressed support for Larkin as well. I feel real good about it — the support Larkin has from the board. I am looking forward to moving forward."

Larkin has been a part of the administrative team that has led the district's initiatives over the

past three years that included a top seven ranking in the state for Liberal High School from US News and World Report, and a top 10 percent in the nation rating as well.

With that momentum, Kinser said moving forward in a consistent matter was a part of the decision-making process, but that any of the candidates would have been able to successfully lead the district.

“All three were qualified,” Kinser said. “The other men had a lot of experience and were more than capable to do the job. If the decision had gone another way, we would have been in good shape, but the thing that swung it for me personally, Mr. Larkin is truly excited about the future of USD 480. That excitement will translate into someone who will work extremely hard for the district to meet its goals, that every kid had a chance to get best education possible. Paul is an energetic person, he is a go getter. I felt we needed to lead us as we go forward in the next few years.”

The move was the pinnacle so far for Larkin who is a former high school principal and deputy superintendent now beginning his first superintendent position.

“Professionally it is a very positive move for me,” Larkin said. “It is very humbling from coming up the ranks over the past three years and getting the nod within that district. It is humbling but exciting.”

Larkin expected to continue the framework that has been laid out by Dr. Lance Stout, who resigned as superintendent to take the deputy superintendent’s position in Independence, Mo.

“I don’t see a lot of difference,” Larkin said. “We are both very collaborative in our leadership styles. When you have more than 800 people and 5,000 students, that’s a big deal. No one person can take that and run. I also believe in a system of this scale, a collaborative style is only way to be successful. There are a lot of great things under way here in Liberal the past few years, going back to Mr. Welch. The board stepped up and did things differently academically with Literacy First, AVID, and Capturing Kids Hearts. It continued with Dr. Stout and his role, and I hope to take it to the next level. I think the district has an established direction. There is a high demand for educational excellence, to grow and continue to stay focused.”

Larkin: ‘The sky’s the limit’

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Paul Larkin did not set out to become a school administrator. In fact, his decision to work in the field of education was a gradual process. Growing up in central Kansas, Larkin participated in 4-H, athletics, and worked in the fields at his family farm. “To be honest, when I went to college, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do when I grew up,” he said. “That first year, I kind of fumbled around, took some general studies. At some point, I thought back about the people who’d had the greatest influence on me — I was the first one in my family to go off to a four-year school — and I thought of so many teachers who had helped me. I thought, ‘Wow, how better to give back? Maybe I could be that for somebody on down the road.’”

Larkin spent the early years of his career as a teacher and coach. Looking back, he recalls being given opportunities for leadership by the principal at the high school where he worked.

“It was a big high school, with 1,500 kids, and I was able to work as a department head, as a coach, even though I was young, and as I look back, I can see that I was always in various kinds of leadership positions. For whatever reason, I have always leaned toward that.”

Ultimately, 22 years later, “here I am,” he said, “hoping for a superintendent position.”

Larkin is aware that many of the students in USD 480 have similar stories, in that they are the first in their families to reach a certain level of academic achievement. For some, it might be the simple act of attending a traditional school, after coming to the United States as refugees. For others, it could be completing high school. Then there are the first-generation college students like Larkin.

“My message to anyone out there would be that the sky’s the limit,” Larkin said. “The opportunities you’re presented in this country, for a lot of our demographics, present no limitations. However hard you decide to work, whatever goals you decide to pursue, you’re the only person who sets the limit, so reach for the sky.”