

# Superintendents share their goals for a good year

By Peg Quann Staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, August 26, 2015 4:30 am

Summer may be the time to dress down for school superintendents, but it's almost as busy as back-to-school season in September.

They use the quiet time to fine tune goals for the upcoming school year — goals that have been established through discussions with school board members, teachers, principals, budget directors, parents and even students.

Those who head the local districts have several concerns in common, including the challenges of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests and the new Pennsylvania Core Standards for math and language arts adopted in 2013. The standards are more difficult, and the harder PSSA tests this year may cause scores to be lower than expected.

Both Central Bucks Superintendent David Weitzel and Palisades Superintendent Bridget O'Connell have posted letters to parents noting the changes but assuring them the districts continued to do well in the testing.

Several districts have initiated changes in language arts or math curriculum to assist teachers and students in meeting the new requirements.

Pennridge School District Superintendent Jacqueline Rattigan said a big goal this year is to help students do their best, including gifted and advanced students, who she thinks have been overlooked as districts try to support children more in need.

Upper Moreland School Superintendent Robert Milrod is happy to unveil a unique program to allow high school juniors to take Montgomery County Community College courses during their senior year that will give them a year of college credit. It's the only school district in the world, he said, to have its learning management software system, called Blackboard, shared with a college. The help desk for Upper Moreland students with Blackboard is at the college.

While all superintendents have PSSA concerns, and several must deal with teacher contract negotiations, they also have varying individual goals:

## Quakertown Community School District



Margit Neiman, who has been teaching French for 25 years, prepares for the new school year at Palisades High School on Tuesday, August 25, 2015, in Kintnersville, Pennsylvania. (Photo by William Thomas Cain)

Superintendent William Harner is busy sending emails to parents. “I’m sending them to my 6,200 closest friends,” he quipped. On the district’s Web page, he summarizes his goals as the three As: academics, arts and athletics. He also writes a “Super Blog,” to speak about issues in the district.

The district’s top priority is to increase the readiness of its students for college and careers — “to raise the bar, build a curriculum toward the end game,” said Harner, a former Army officer and West Point graduate.

In the past year, the district has started an all-day kindergarten in most of its schools, and this year will start teaching Spanish to students in grade K through 5.

### **Central Bucks**

Superintendent David Weitzel’s overriding goal is to achieve the goals set by the district administration and school board members.

“I’ve always felt our primary mission should be meaningful teaching and learning in emotionally safe and supportive classrooms. When I took this position, that would always be my No. 1 priority for administrators and teachers,” he said.

This year, a main goal is fulfilling the district’s Educational Technology Initiative, he said. It will be the first school year that almost every teacher will have a district-issued laptop. The district also purchased 39 new carts, each with 30 new laptops to increase student access to computers in the three high schools.

White boards, on which teachers can pull up lessons from the Internet, and software to incorporate online learning tools into classroom curriculum have been purchased as part of the approximately \$2.5 million initiative.

Weitzel said the district also wants to address emotional health issues this year. While the district has seen a reduction in the number of students who do drugs or use alcohol, more kids have reported feeling stressed, anxious or under pressure in school.

Weitzel said he agrees with a new Pennsylvania Department of Education mandated initiative to educate kids about suicide prevention. He said that splitting the Student Services Department, which includes school guidance departments, from the Department of Special Education, will allow the district to do more in both fields. The district is working with Doylestown Hospital and the CB Cares Foundation to present a School Community Partnership speaker series. The program will be unveiled at the Sept. 8 school board meeting, he said.

### **Hatboro-Horsham**

Security is a top priority, said Superintendent Curtis Griffin.

“We work through that every year,” he said.

Another top focus this year will be a complete revision of the district’s drug and alcohol programs and

procedures. The district also will look into how to improve teaching and learning based on Pennsylvania's new Common Core curriculum standards and student performance on the PSSAs.

Griffin said a new English and Language Arts curriculum will be used in kindergarten through fifth grade and that there will be revisions to the math curriculum in the middle school.

"We are moving toward a one-to-one technology initiative," Griffin said. "One student, one device."

He said the district most likely will use laptops for secondary students and tablet computers for those in elementary school.

The district also will break ground later this month for a new Hallowell Elementary School in Horsham close to the current 50-year-old Hallowell school. The school will be state of the art, Griffin said, and when completed, the old school will be razed as part of the \$31 million project. The district also will do a feasibility study on renovations to Crooked Billet Elementary School in Hatboro. "Those are the big items," he said.

At the end of the 2015-16 school year, the district will need to begin negotiations on a new contract with the Hatboro-Horsham Education Association. Griffin said those negotiations will begin later this year.

## **Centennial**

The Centennial School District also anticipates entering contract negotiations this year before the contract with its 416 teachers will expire at the end of the 2015-16 school year.

Centennial is looking to hire a new superintendent this year. Jennifer Polinchock has been acting superintendent of the district since Joyce Mundy resigned in April.

Polinchock said the school board is reviewing candidates' applications. "All board members want to make sure they get the best candidate," she said.

The district also acquired a property on Swan Way in Warminster to be renovated into a new administration building. It is also looking into how to renovate its aging middle schools.

And Centennial, she said, will try to incorporate more "STEAM" into its curriculum this year.

For the past several years, school districts have been trying to incorporate STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — to better prepare students for jobs in technical or scientific fields.

STEAM incorporates the arts into science and technology, Polinchock said. For example, architectural fields would need someone with an art background as would careers involving graphic design.

The district is in a five-year technology development program that stresses using devices that children already have to allow them to work together on homework assignments through learning management systems.

“Many use phones as computers. They can work with a device they’re comfortable with,” she said.

Centennial also is implementing a new reading and language arts program in kindergarten through fifth grade and wants to increase its communications program “so that more information goes out to the community to celebrate some of the great things students are doing.”

### **New Hope-Solebury**

Assistant Superintendent Steve Yanni said the district is in the midst of renovations to its high school and middle school that will cost \$28.5 million. The high school was built in 1938, and renovations will add a science lab and make both schools safer and handicapped-accessible.

The district also is incorporating a National Geographic science curriculum in kindergarten through fifth grade that is “inquiry based ... hands on,” Yanni said.

The district also will expand its advanced placement offerings to including an AP government course.

### **North Penn**

Superintendent Curtis Dietrich said the district will implement a new English language arts program and will unveil a revised report card this year to better explain grades in light of Pennsylvania’s new Core Standards.

The district will introduce mini-laptops in grades four through six as part of its One-on-One initiative, while it continues to look at the impact of technology and social media on students.

The district will finish renovations at Hatfield Elementary and begin renovations at Montgomery Elementary.

The North Penn Teachers Association and administration will start negotiations on a new contract; the current contract expires in June.

### **Upper Moreland**

The 2+1+2 Ensuring College Success program that Superintendent Robert Milrod has been developing for the past several years will kick off this fall.

More than 30 high school juniors have signed up to take one class each semester at Montgomery County Community College and one class at the high school taught by an MCCC instructor. After three semesters and a full semester attending MCCC, the student will graduate with a year’s college credit. They then can earn an associate’s degree by attending the next year at the community college before transferring to a four-year school.

“We wanted to ensure more students from the district entered college and more students were successful when they matriculated,” Milrod said.

Another goal this year is to see a major renovation to Upper Moreland Middle School enter its second phase and see a proposal finalized for renovating the district’s athletic fields and gyms. The proposal

includes new turf, an all-weather track and rebuilding the middle school's pool.

## **Pennridge**

Jacqueline Rattigan, who has been superintendent for two years, said she's hopeful contract negotiations with both teachers and support staff can be resolved. Teachers have been working under an expired contract since 2014, and the support staff since 2013.

"I'm hopeful. I think we're in good shape," she said.

Major renovations to Helman Field and its facilities at Pennridge High School are almost complete. A war memorial dedication will take place Sept. 11 during a football game.

Rattigan said she has five specific goals: improving communication in the district, improving technology and making sure the district has the infrastructure to support the technology, ensuring the growth of all students, helping students improve their social skills and building trust, respect and morale throughout the district.

She said seeing students improve social skills is important because a survey showed that students — while great at texting — lack skills needed to build personal and professional relationships. "They better have those emotional intelligence skills because that's what employers are seeking," Rattigan said.

## **Palisades**

Superintendent Bridget O'Connell said the district is in contract negotiations with the Palisades Education Association, whose 150 members have been working without a contract since June. The support staff contract expires in June.

O'Connell said her goals this year focus on revising the district's comprehensive plan, "emphasizing (as always) academic excellence. As with all districts in Pennsylvania, we have been and continue to revise our curriculum and instructional practices to align with the Pennsylvania Core Standards adopted in 2013."

Another goal is to keep integrating new technology into the curriculum, she said.

O'Connell said Palisades routinely conducts safety checks in each building from both a physical plant and procedural prospective. "These checks are conducted in cooperation with our local emergency management partners and recommendations from those teams are implemented to ensure the safety of our school community," she said.

The district also strives to help students develop socially by providing activities outside school, including volleyball games between students and staff members several times a year.

"This fall, we will be kicking off our Making Connections that Matter — Strive for 5, to connect students with mentors in the community who are role models and play an important part in the development of our healthy youth," she said.