

Tri-County and GMR to explore hiring a shared Superintendent together

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At their most recent regular meetings, the school boards of the Tri-County and Greenbush-Middle River (GMR) school districts made motions that could lead to a shared superintendent between them beginning by next school year.

At its December 15 meeting, Tri-County made a motion to have the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA) continue to explore the option of sharing a full-time superintendent with GMR. At its December 20 meeting, GMR made a motion to have MSBA draw up a contract with the district to aid in hiring a full-time shared superintendent potentially with Tri-County.

If both districts go all the way through with this together, they would share in not only this potential superintendent's services starting next school year, but also in the hiring process of this individual. Gary Lee of the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA) attended both of these meetings via Zoom to discuss and promote this idea to the respective boards.

Generally, Lee explained, when two districts share a superintendent, it's a situation where a school needs a superintendent and a neighboring school with a superintendent helps this other school district by allowing it to buy the services of its superintendent.

"Here's a case where you guys are starting from scratch, working together," Lee said at the Tri-County meeting.

He considered going this route as new terrain in the state.

"To tell you the truth, I'm really excited about it," Lee said at the Tri-County meeting. "If we can make this work and get through this process, as painlessly as possible, we have something that the rest of the state is going to look at, alright. This is a big deal."

The Tri-County School is looking for a new superintendent, after hiring a new superintendent-principal last school year.

The board officially hired Michael Gadbois prior to the start of this school year, but less than three months into the job, Gadbois was involved in a September 25, 2021 incident on Tri-County School grounds. This led to him being charged with and later pleading guilty to DWI and losing his job at the school.

At its October 20 meeting, the Tri-County School Board approved Ron Ruud—the longtime former Tri-County superintendent—as the district's acting/interim superintendent.

for the remainder of the 2022 school year. He returned to the district after six years away from it.

As for GMR, the school's part-time superintendent Larry Guggisberg started there prior to the start of the 2019-20 school year, after serving 18 years as the Russian Superintendent. He highlighted the GMR district's passed referendum last November, current financial situation, community support, and "excellent"

"If there's an opportunity to look for a replacement (for superintendent) on a long-term basis," Guggisberg said at the GMR School Board meeting, "I think now the conditions are good."

Lee said the open meeting law, one that requires school boards to hold their meetings within their district confines, could cause an obstacle in this process.

"When we're starting to join and do things together, that gets to be a little problematic," Lee said at the Tri-County School Board meeting.

Working from this perspective and avoiding 14 board members—7 from each district—having to all meet, Lee proposed that each board develop a committee of three board members—for a total of six—to conduct the actual superintendent candidate interviews and deliberations. These interviews and deliberations would be live streamed, allowing boards members not in person to listen to all the responses and see how things are going.

These six individuals would deliberate and come back with a potential recommendation to their respective boards for possible final approval.

Asked by Tri-County School Board member Denise Sollund what would happen if the two boards come back with different recommendations, Lee said this "butting of heads" concerns him some.

"When you pick those three (board members) to be on the committee down the road," Lee said at the Tri-County meeting, "... you have to really be confident and have a high level of trust of those three members."

As Lee explained, all board members getting to watch the committee deliberations will allow them to hear all the different points made.

"Hopefully, we can all come to the same conclusion," Lee said.

If both school boards go through with this, Lee envisioned this process lasting from January to March. Recently having searched for a superintendent through MSBA, Tri-County has done the up front superintendent search legwork already, such as surveying the community, creating a flyer of the district's hiring criteria, and developing a school district profile.

The MSBA needs to do this same work with GMR. Lee said he would like to start this work the first part of January and come up at some point to meet with both of the boards separately to put all the information together and get a job posting out there.

Posing the question of why go this route—two schools providing one full-time superintendent position—Lee said it opens up the application pool. He highlighted how the pool for superintendents is a shallow one now, as demonstrated for this position remains. Lee announced how he expects 60 superintendent openings across the state.

"(By opening it to full-time) you're going to have a lot bigger pool to choose from, instead of looking for a retired superintendent or something like that," Lee said at the GMR meeting. "Yeah, it comes with a lot of experience, but find someone that wants to just work part-time."

Both schools have familiarity in sharing superintendents. GMR and Badger schools shared Tom Jerome's superintendent services for seven years before GMR hired Guggisberg. GMR and Tri-County also shared superintendents, in Tri-County's current interim superintendent, Ruud, for 10 years. Ruud said this worked then.

A former Fertile-Beltrami School Board member, Lee feels confident this new potential arrangement—where two districts share not only a full-time superintendent but also in the hiring process of one—will work for both districts.

"I know I'm being very pushy tonight, guys. I'm trying to sell this because I wholeheartedly believe this is a good approach," Lee said at the Tri-County meeting. "And just knowing what our towns are like up there—as you guys all know where I'm from—you know I know your area, and I know your people. And I think this will work; I really do."