

District 99 superintendent Thiele discusses new school year

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DOWNERS GROVE - As the first day of school approaches, students get the chance to meet new friends, teachers and opportunities.

They, and their parents, also will get acquainted with a new member in the education community, District 99 Superintendent Hank Thiele.



Hank Thiele

Thiele was named to the position in December 2015 ahead of the retirement of Mark McDonald over the summer. He previously served as the assistant superintendent for technology in Maine Township District 207 in Park Ridge.

Thiele began his tenure July 1, and he recently spoke with Suburban Life reporter Nathan Lurz about his first few weeks on the job and his vision for his first year:

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Lurz: Has your impression on the strengths or weaknesses of the district changed since you started?

Thiele: I knew it was a very good district coming here, and the last six weeks just reinforced that. I looked at the external measures, like Newsweek's report that we were in the top 2 percent of high schools in the country to what people in the community continue to give me feedback on how proud of their schools and teachers they are here.

The fact that there are so many members that grew up here and have chosen to come back and raise families here shows how good the schools are here and how good the teachers are here in Downers.

Lurz: How has the transition to full superintendent been?

Thiele: It's been definitely interesting, but I didn't start just six weeks ago. ... I had six months of transition time where the prior superinten-

dent, Mark McDonald, did a great job of spending a lot of time with me, talking through how the district works, it's history, the strengths of the district, which made it very easy to just step in [this] July and keep the great work he had been doing moving forward.

In my prior role in Maine, we spent nine years in a district office role, and I was dealing with and working with many of the same challenges that District 99 worked on.

Lurz: What have you learned about the district in your time in the district?

Thiele: A striking thing about this district is the level of professionalism among the administrative team and the teachers themselves and the support staff that's working here. There's a high level of understanding that we serve students here. ... They're very student-centered.

Lurz: What do you foresee being issues or concerns in the district over your first few months or year here?

Thiele: It's the first year, so it's a good opportunity to step back and

re-evaluate everything going on across the district with a fresh set of eyes. We also have a lot of new leaders in the assistant principal level this year, which brings in some new perspectives and different experiences.

The board asked us to use this year as an opportunity to evaluate our practices and make sure we understand what's going on and looking at ways to do everything better, which is the constant goal.

Lurz: Any final thoughts to share with the community?

Thiele: We're really focused this year on getting stories out, getting our students' perspective and voice out there. ... We're focusing on helping our community and our parents understand [that] what high school looks like today has changed drastically in the last 10 to 15 years, at least since you and I were in high school.

A lot of that is best told through the voices of our students, so we want to get the opportunity to get the student voice out there. People can experience high school today through the students' experience.