

Region 14 school board appoints ‘level-headed’ Olzacki superintendent

Officials say he's a passionate educator

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WOODBURY – It was Joseph A. Olzacki’s down-to-earth style, passion for kids and unconventional path made him the obvious choice for the new Region 14 superintendent, according to school officials.

The Board of Education appointed Olzacki to the helm of the Woodbury-Bethlehem school district Monday night, replacing interim Superintendent Christine Syriac. He starts Oct. 1.

On Tuesday, Board of Education members toured the area to introduce “Dr. O” to town and school officials.

Olzacki spent the past five years heading up teacher training in the African nation of Rwanda, a country still recovering from the 1994 genocide that killed an estimated 800,000 people. His job as director of the Rwandan Teacher Education Program put him on the front lines of the country’s education system, where he helped a struggling nation get back on its feet.

Board of Education Chairman Janet Morgan said she was struck by Olzacki’s personality, passion for education and can-do approach, and the board based its final decision on feedback from parents and teachers collected during a candidate search.

“We interviewed eight people, but when it came to Dr. O, he fit what the region is asking for. At this point in time, Joe is what we need: a down-to-earth, level-headed person who can move us forward and bring the communities together... be a part of our team,” Morgan said.

Olzacki grew up on his family’s small farm in East Hampton. He holds four degrees from three schools at the University of Hartford, including a doctorate in educational leadership and a masters in music.

He has more than 20 years of public education experience in Bloomfield, Chaplin and East Haddam. This is his first stint as school superintendent.

Olzacki first visited the Republic of Rwanda in 2009 while working on a project for Bloomfield schools. He was hired to work for the government and in 2013, partnering with the University of Hartford to train 3,000 teachers nationwide to educate students at an American level. There, he changed the system from a teacher-directed learning style to a student-learning style. Olzacki also helped increase teacher skills by 30 percent nationwide, reaffirming his belief that students can learn at a high level anywhere given the right tools.

“If we can do that in Rwanda, we can do that here. We have people here who can support our children,” Olzacki said.

Back in the U.S., he will make educating students a group effort.

“My big thing is community. You want to have a successful student? Then show me where the community comes together and rallies around the students. It’s got nothing to do with a superintendent, a shirt and tie, or a doctorate. It’s got to do with a commitment to kids,” Olzacki said.

Community members said they wanted a superintendent who is willing to make a long-term commitment here.

“I’m a nester,” he said. “If the funding hadn’t run out, I would still be in Rwanda,” he said of his work there.

“Every sentence in the interview was kids, kids, kids, kids,” said Board of Education Vice Chairman Maryanne Van Aken. “For me, that was very important. It was a unanimous decision that Joe was the guy.”

The new superintendent said he believes in the four C’s of education: collaboration, community, cooperation and critical thinking.

In Bloomfield, Olzacki founded the Identity Project and helped raise more than \$1 million to help students understand themselves and fend off temptations of the gang lifestyle. Part of the program involved educating kids about the Holocaust and genocidal events around the world and how they can stand up for themselves.

It was through The Identity Project that Olzacki found himself in Rwanda. And for his work there, Olzacki has received several awards of recognition, including the Voices of Hope Award for excellence in Holocaust education.

Olzacki was emotional this week in talking about his experiences in Rwanda, and said he now arrives in Region 14 battle tested and ready to continue his work for the benefit of children.