

Mark Laurrie calls it a career

Well-respected academic leader to retire at month's end

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Mark Laurrie, superintendent of the City of Niagara Falls City School District, is retiring at the end of this school year. He has worked in the district for 42 years.

Laurrie said he felt it was time to leave the district, and the post he'd worked at for 10 years. He noted he would be working on his own "life balance" as he tried new things.

"I have three plans," he said. "I have to get myself in a little better life balance. I spent a lot of time 'all in' on this job. Not just this job, but the community. It was a lot, and it came at a sacrifice of myself and others. So, life balance is important to me.

"I have plans to explore things that I have never done before that I have always wanted to. Things as simple as get into a pickleball league. And things as much as I want to go to the United States Open Tennis Tournament. ... It's the last week of August and the first week of September, and you can't leave the school district at the last week of August or the first week of September. ...

"I would love to learn to play music. I've really gotten into music, not myself playing it, but listening to others. ...

"And the final thing is, I want to be more spontaneous. I have lived (in the district) for 42 years, and then 13 as a student, just bell to bell. ... I have kind of lived with a clock in my head for a long time, and I just want to get off the clock and be more spontaneous."

Laurrie started his career as the adult monitoring the in-house suspension class. This was a new development for the district. Before then, reprimanded students would simply leave the building. The idea was to keep them in school working and sitting in his classroom.

Strangely enough, Laurrie found he enjoyed it.

"I absolutely loved it. I loved it," he said.



Mark Laurrie

"After a while, I said, 'I love being in school; I know I could be a teacher.'"

Laurrie went back to school for his certifications. Soon after, he was in a classroom teaching special education – where he felt comfortable and seemed to fit, but it was not his final destination.

"I had a lot of really good mentors," he said. "I also realized after being a teacher for a while, that when I went into the faculty room. They were complaining about the principal and I said, 'That's odd; I really like him,' and I made a choice right then that I would either stay in my classroom and not complain or I was going to be the principal. I'm going to be the one they complain about ... and be the one people came to."

He said, "I'm not someone who can do the same thing year after year. I was 24 when I became a teacher and I didn't think I could teach for 35 years. I knew I'd want to do something more, so I went to get my administrative degree and applied to be an assistant principal."

And just as before, Laurrie quickly landed a job in Niagara Falls, this time as an elementary school assistant principal in Niagara Falls,

which he loved.

Then he was asked to be a principal. He loved that, too.

"I said, 'Oh my god, this is it! I love being an elementary principal, I don't want to do anything else,'" Laurrie said.

Laurrie might've stayed there for the rest of his career but, instead, as part of his contract, he found himself moved to a middle school as a principal. Luckily, he loved that as well, but then he was moved once again to be a principal for a high school.

Again, luckily, he found he loved being a high school principal.

"I never wanted to leave elementary school; I never wanted to leave middle school; then they moved me to the high school and I got there and it was great," Laurrie said. "My goal was now to be a high school principal. ... It wasn't without challenges – and I didn't know this – but it was a training run to have this job as superintendent."

In 2008, Laurrie was asked to be a deputy superintendent after being the high school principal for eight years. Then in 2016, he interviewed to be superintendent.

The rest is history.

Veteran school board member Russ Petrozzi said he's known and worked with Laurrie for 26 years. His first impression?

"Smart, well spoken, friendly, he is the total package," Petrozzi said of Laurrie. "We've done a lot. ... Mark has been a very valuable asset to the community and the school district."

"There's not going to be any replacing Mark. We have someone following him, Sam Wojton, and I'm very confident he'll be a great superintendent – but it's going to be very hard to fill the shoes of Mark."

Laurrie has not only scored well with his bosses.

Sal Constantino, a teacher's aide who primarily works with students who are having challenges, whether academic, attendance or even disciplinary, spoke well of Laurrie's dedication to the community and his job for all students.

"I think he's great with people from all different cultures," Constantino said. "Any different race, any different financial situation – he treats everybody the same, no matter what their situation is. I think people respect that."

"He's a very good speaker and I think his strength is, if you hear him talk, he's speaking from the heart. It just flows from him."

Laurrie said his 10 years as superintendent flew by.

During that time, he was in charge of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oddly enough, Laurrie said the lockdown ran well, but bringing the students back to school was a real challenge. He wished it could've gone better.

The face of education is also changing, he said, as AI will fundamentally change the entire way students learn. There will be a lot of challenges in the coming decade, but that is for the future superintendents. As of now, Laurrie wouldn't change anything about his life.

"I think being able to move the graduation rate from 67% to 86% was a huge accomplishment," he said, musing on what he'd been able to do during his career and why he'd do it again. "An almost 20-point increase since I became superintendent. When you think of that 20% of kids who graduated who normally wouldn't – and it wasn't just me, it was a team of people – that's a huge accomplishment."

"I think it's the ability just to fight for kids, to get them the equity they deserve and achievement then deserve."

Laurrie will retire as superintendent of schools on June 30.



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