

Pencils, books, teacher's looks — Laconia classes start Tuesday

- By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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LACONIA — Students in Laconia don't return to their classrooms until Tuesday, but teachers and administrators – including new Superintendent Steve Tucker – have been busy preparing for the yearly opening day onslaught.

As he gets ready for his first school year leading the district, Tucker says his priority is to ensure Laconia's five schools are providing a quality education to students and meeting their needs, which go well beyond reading, writing and math.

With a majority of students qualifying for the federal free or reduced price lunch program, the district first has to ensure its pupils are adequately fed before they can be expected to learn. Social workers, counselors and school resource police officers are also there to see to other student needs.

"Yes, we have all of those supports and more," Tucker said. "In order to be academically ready, they have to be ready in other ways."

"We can't meet academic needs unless other needs are met and we have to engage the community."

Tucker said the district's core belief is that all children can learn.

"We have children that have to overcome challenges and our job is to educate those children," he said. "That's the reason I believe in public school.

"We take them all in. Family is really important. That education piece is foundational in a community and in a democracy, preparing kids for the future."

District leaders have been engaged in a community conversation around the "portrait of a graduate," with a goal of identifying what attributes Laconia students need to have to be ready for college, career and life. A public meeting was held on July 31.

"There are a lot of learning expectations that are out there," Tucker said. "We are trying to identify in its essence what is most important."

The goal is to identify, with input from community and staff, four to six attributes or skills that should be taught and assessed.

One skill that ranked high in surveys of parents and educators was communication.

"It needs to be broad and transferable, interpersonal, written, spoken, listening — businesses rank this very high," Tucker said.

Another priority was critical thinking, including problem-solving and analyzing.

Also getting a lot of attention at the district is the way in which information is conveyed.

"How do we teach well?" Tucker asked. "What does quality teaching look like?

"If we're in a classroom, and not all classrooms are four walls — there are many different types — we want to have clarity on what we want to see happening when teaching and learning is going on well."

The individual needs of students must be addressed, Tucker said.

"We have diverse students with diverse needs and interests. We want personalized learning for students. Does the student have a voice and choice in learning?"

"We have students with different interests and coming from different places in life. We can send people to schools like MIT, but also into fields like plumbing and construction. That's exciting for me."

Teachers worked this past week on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and will have a workshop day on Sept. 10, when school will not be in session for students.

One of the assemblies this week for teachers featured a video clip of 22 graduates of the school district, spanning a 70-year time frame.

"These are kids who have done great things," Tucker said. "Our job is to make sure students are prepared to do those things."

"We're really excited to get students back in buildings again. We are excited as a staff to welcome the kids back and get started."

Tucker spent more than 20 years working in the Laconia School District as a history teacher and academic coordinator before joining the Gilford School District as director of curriculum.

The Laconia School Board hired him to succeed Superintendent Brendan Minnihan, and Tucker began the job on July 1.

He holds a bachelor's degree in history from Plymouth State University and a master's degree in history from the University of New Hampshire. He received a certification as a history teacher and a certificate of advanced graduate studies in educational leadership.