

Tucker reflects on path to success for students

- By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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Steve Tucker, who has been appointed Laconia's next school superintendent, takes Finnegan on a morning walk. (Karen Bobotas/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

LACONIA — Steve Tucker is no stranger to hard work.

While going to Oxbow High School in Bradford, Vermont, he lived and worked on his family's 200-acre dairy farm. Chores include milking cows, haying fields, logging and maple sugaring.

At 6-foot-1, he played on his school's basketball and soccer teams, while always keeping his eye on the ball academically.

"I knew what it was like to work at a farm and I had a paper route," he said. "My parents instilled the love of work and pride that goes along with accomplishing something. Sometimes as a kid I might not have appreciated that, but I appreciate that now."

He was up early some days, milking cows before school. Summer brought other work.

"I spent a lot of summers in hay fields, cutting, raking, stacking hay, going with my grandfather to the Lake Champlain area and Grand Isle to get hay when we were low," he said.

"From the age of 12, I was driving horses in the woods, logging, pulling logs out for lumber and firewood."

Horses were also used to recover maple sap.

"We didn't have pipelines, we had horses," he said. "We'd go out with horses and sleigh buckets."

High expectations

Tucker's parents had high expectations for their children.

"They instilled the value of a good education," he said. "It was very clear to me that my parents wanted me to do my best in school, but they never pressured. I loved school, loved learning.

"My parents did a good job helping me appreciate learning. They both read a lot. Going to a bookstore or to the library was a regular thing."

Education was viewed as a way to improve one's lot in life.

"My mother's family of six grew up in Laconia and never owned a house, never owned a car, they were poor," he said. "But at the same time, they graduated from Laconia High School and were able to build something for themselves.

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"I definitely think about that with the work I do in schools."

Worked his way

After high school, Tucker went to Vermont Technical College in Randolph Center, graduating with a 2-year degree in architecture and building technology. He earned 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.

He worked his way through college, including as an assistant manager at the Howard Johnson Motor Lodge in White River Junction, which he listed on his resume for superintendent along with his experience as a history teacher and academic coordinator at Laconia High School and his present job as director of curriculum for Gilford School District.

As a young man, Tucker became a good skier, something which played to his advantage later when he became coach of the Laconia High School ski team.

Keeping it real

As a student, he came to be passionate about history.

"It is an all-encompassing subject that touches on everything from science to math to history to literature," he said.

He also developed a love of teaching and set himself a goal of making history relevant to students.

“Even if you’re teaching something about ancient Egypt, you have to find a way to make it real for students, make it matter to students, find a way to engage them,” he said.

While teaching at the high school, he met his future wife, Mitzi, who teaches physical education in the school district.

They have three children. Lydia, 15, is a gymnast and plays field hockey and lacrosse. Carson, 13, plays basketball, soccer and lacrosse. Caden, 11, plays basketball, soccer and baseball.

Tucker and his wife enjoy running and bicycling. She is training for a half-marathon, and they both have run marathons in the past.

Start date

The district’s current superintendent, Brendan Minnihan, has a contract that continues through June 30.

Tucker takes over on July 1.

“In the meantime, I’m trying to learn as much as I can, while working in Gilford and attending to my responsibilities in my current job,” he said.

“I have seen the district through different lenses, as a coach, adviser, member of community, administrator and a teacher. Seeing it through the lens of a superintendent will be different.”

Community support

He sees the community's support for school as a big positive in Laconia, where more than half of the students have family incomes low enough to qualify for the federal program for free or reduced-price lunches.

That support was evident recently when the Laconia High School girls basketball team trailed ConVal throughout a playoff game before Bella Daly hit the game-winning shot with 10 seconds left.

"The mayor, the fire chief, the school board were there," he said. "There were a lot of people at that game and that's another sign to me that shows how committed this community is to the kids, to the youth leagues, to the math team, to extended-learning opportunities, the college-planning process, the band and the chorus, the service organizations that span elementary through high school.

"I'm honored and humbled to be superintendent of these schools because I know we have people who care."

Student challenges

"There's no question that families in Laconia have challenges, but I think Laconia is a unique place with a diverse population and I like that," he said. "The focus is on teaching and learning, no matter where they come from.

"All kids can learn. It's important to believe that. I've seen kids from all walks of life do great this in district. Education is a great equalizer."

Those kids have different distractions and challenges than children of generations ago. Access to the Internet can be a game-changer.

"I think about the term digital natives, which refers to young kids as explorers," Tucker said. "They have this frontier in front of them we never had. There is so much they can

access. That tool is different and does change things, bringing opportunities and challenges both.

“At the same time, kids are kids at the core, even though the landscape has changed in culture and the world. At the core, kids want to be engaged, learn and be successful and want to be