

New superintendent will strive to make Sioux Falls schools ‘incrementally better’

Dr. Brian Maher won't be rushing to make any changes after he becomes the new superintendent of the Sioux Falls School District on July 1. He plans to spend the early weeks of his tenure just getting to know the schools and the community.

“I think the biggest challenge I'll have is to get to know the people and the systems. There is so much good going on. So I think it would be wise for me to learn why that is taking place,” Maher says. “I think we all want to stand on the shoulders of the people who came before us.”

Maher, 53, has been hired to succeed Dr. Pam Homan, who is retiring, as the superintendent of the largest school district in South Dakota.

“I don't come in with any preconceived notions, other than Sioux Falls is a great place to be and I'm going to work my tail off to make it incrementally better than it is today,” he says.

Maher currently is the superintendent of Kearney Public Schools in Kearney, Neb. He also has worked as superintendent at Centennial Public Schools and in



Dr. Brian Maher

administrative, teaching and coaching positions in a few other Nebraska communities.

He is the reigning Superintendent of the Year in Nebraska. That's an honor that he earned twice from the Nebraska Association of School Administrators. He also currently chairs the Nebraska School Activities Association Board.

He earned his doctorate and master degrees in educational administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He also has a bachelor degree in mathematics education from Midland Lutheran College in Fremont, Neb.

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Maher expects to find similarities in S.D. and Neb.

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Carly Reiter, who serves on both the Education Foundation Board and the School Board, expects Maher to help improve Sioux Falls Public Schools.



Carly Reiter

“As a School Board, we are just super excited to welcome Dr.

Maher to Sioux Falls,” she says, “and he is very excited to begin his venture. I think he’ll take us to the next level, as Sioux Falls continues to grow.”

Maher appears to be especially good at building connections, Reiter says.

“He is definitely a relationship builder and will spend the time and energy necessary to get to know the people of our district,” she says.

“I think it’s fabulous that he’ll have resources that he can reach out to and say, ‘we’re having this challenge; what are you doing about it?’ ”

Maher was one of five finalists for the Sioux Falls job, and one of two who were called back for a second interview.

He wasn’t initially interested in the Sioux Falls job when he was contacted by a recruiting firm looking for good candidates because he loved his work in Kearney, he says. However, the recruiter challenged him to take a look at Sioux Falls and its school system.

“His position was that Sioux Falls and the School District would sell themselves if I gave them a look and, boy, was he right,” Maher says.

He expects to find similarities between school systems in South Dakota and Nebraska, including in how public schools are funded.

Most states are low in their level of public support for schools, he says. He also expects to find similar cultural values among people of the two districts.

“There’s the Midwestern value in terms of work ethic and doing the right thing. I suspect that will be the same in Sioux Falls as it is in Kearney,” he says.

Maher is no stranger to working with an Education Foundation, either. The Kearney Public Schools Foundation grosses between \$250,000 and \$300,000 annually for various programs and funds.

Kearney’s foundation has a full-time director who has an office in the school. However, the organization is governed by a board with volunteer members.

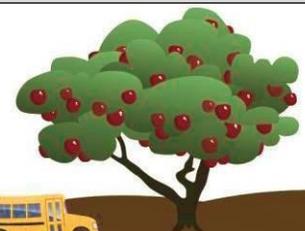
Sioux Falls’ Education Foundation also is run by a board of volunteers. It is assisted by two part-time employees. The organization gave out nearly \$40,000 in grants for innovative teacher projects this past school year. It also gave out \$8,400 to help first-time teachers buy classroom supplies.

You can help schools by making a donation

The Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization endorsed by the Sioux Falls School District. Its objective is to improve education by assisting teachers and students.

You can make a difference by donating to the Education Foundation in support academic projects and activities that are not supported by tax dollars. Gifts to the Foundation fund programs that reward and encourage innovative teaching. Grants also are awarded to help new, first-time teachers buy classroom supplies.

More information about making donations, as well as education news, is available on the Foundation’s website, www.sfeducationfoundation.org. Businesses and individuals with questions about donation options also may call the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation at 605-336-7055.



Teresa Jackson brings 'positive energy' to Board

Good teachers change students' lives, Teresa Jackson says. "There isn't anyone who hasn't been impacted in a positive way by a teacher," she says.

Jackson would like to help more teachers in Sioux Falls Public Schools get the extra tools they need to reach more students in innovative and inspiring ways, and she's in a good position to help: She's a member of the Education Foundation Board.

The Foundation awards grants annually to help teachers with innovative classroom projects. It also awards grants to help first-time teachers buy classroom supplies. The grants are funded by donations from individuals and businesses.

As an experienced marketing consultant, Jackson helps promote the Foundation. "We've got to create awareness out there. People need to know," she says.

Jackson spent 20 years working for prominent marketing companies in Sioux Falls. She recently set out on her own by forming Teresa Jackson & Associates.

She's excited about the professional flexibility she has now in running her own business. Being self-employed allows her to control who she's around and to constantly seek inspiration. "I love meeting and educating and empowering other people to succeed," she says.

Jackson graduated from Lincoln High School in Sioux Falls. She went on to major in mass communications and minor in graphic design at South Dakota State University.

She has been reintroduced to the value of public education by helping raise her 11-year-old nephew. Her brother is blind and deaf, and her sister-in-law is deaf. So her nephew spends a lot of his time with her. It's a parental-like responsibility that Jackson cherishes.

She takes her nephew to school every day and marvels at his educational growth. "He just finished reading the biography of Steve Jobs. He's amazing," she says.

Jackson enjoys spending time with family and friends. Her work and civic duties don't leave her much time for hobbies. She only got to ride her Harley-Davidson twice last year, for example, she says.

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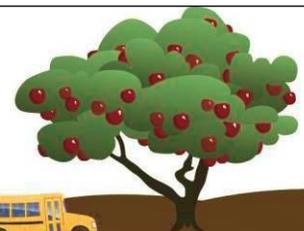
Teresa Jackson

14 volunteers lead Education Foundation

Teresa Jackson joined the Education Foundation Board about a year ago. Other volunteers who serve on the Board are:

Vernon Brown (Secretary), Catherine Dekkenga, Diane Rausch (Vice Chair), Nancy Duncan, Stephanie Gongopoulos, DeeAnn Konrad, Mike Moore, Anne Powers, Justin Reilly (Treasurer), Carly Reiter (Ex Officio), Amy Scott-Stoltz (Chair) and Jamie Simko.

The Board is assisted by two part-time employees: Foundation Coordinator Angie Kuiper and Newsletter Editor Rob Swenson.



Task force examines issues of school funding, teacher pay

Sen. Deb Soholt of Sioux Falls co-chairs a South Dakota task force that she hopes will play a key role in reforming education funding and creating higher salaries for teachers in the state.

“No one is proud that our teacher pay is 51st in the nation. That is the launching pad for this Blue Ribbon Task Force,” Soholt says.

She and a fellow Republican, Rep. Jacqueline Sly of Rapid City, co-chair the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Teachers and Students. The advisory panel was created by Gov. Dennis Daugaard and legislative leaders. The mission of the task force is to evaluate the state formula for funding K-12 education and make recommendations to the 2016 Legislature.

“It’s an honor to be part of something that has such a long-lasting possibility of impact,” says Soholt, who also is the director of women’s health for the Avera Medical Group.

“Funding of K-12 is the issue,” says Soholt. Panel members will not address curriculum-related matters or the state’s college system.

The task force is hosting a series of public and invitation-only meetings around the state to gather input. A public meeting is scheduled June 16 in Sioux Falls. Meeting details are being worked out.



Sen. Deb Soholt

A public hearing on school funding is scheduled June 16 in Sioux Falls. For more details, see www.blueribbon.sd.gov. People may submit comments to the panel through the website.

Jackson makes others smile

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Amy Scott-Stoltz, who chairs the Education Foundation Board, says Jackson’s expertise will help spread constructive information about the organization and its mission.

“I’ve known Teresa for a long time. She has a wonderful background and brings a fresh perspective to our Board,” Scott-Stoltz says. “She’s always upbeat and willing take on challenges.”

In addition to serving on the Education Foundation Board, Jackson serves on the Board of The Banquet, a ministry that provides food and fellowship to people in Sioux Falls. She also serves as a mentor for women through EmBe, formerly known as the YWCA.

Jackson has mentored two women in the Sioux Falls area, says Erin Bosch, director of women’s leadership at EmBe.

“The great thing about Teresa is that she sees potential in people that they often don’t see themselves,” Bosch says. “She’s just got a lot of positive energy. It’s hard not to smile when she smiles.”

Our Mission

The mission of the Sioux Falls Public Schools Education Foundation is to enhance educational opportunities and promote achievement among all students by supporting academic projects and activities not funded by tax dollars.

It is our belief that the good life we share here is a reflection of the quality education our students receive in our local public schools.

More information available

For more news and information about the Education Foundation and its programs, check out our website: www.sfeducationfoundation.org.

Questions about Education Foundation programs may be emailed to sfeducationfoundation@gmail.com.

Questions about donations may be directed to the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation, phone (605) 336-7055.



Teacher of the Year just wants to keep helping kids

Gretchen Johnson thought some of her students at Cleveland Elementary School would benefit from extra activity. So, on her own time, the physical education teacher organized a Y League basketball team for nine third-grade boys.

The award-winning teacher raised money from sponsors to buy basketball shoes and team clothing, and with the help of family members she hauled the boys around for games in Sioux Falls and Brandon. She even coached the boys to a seven-win, one-loss season.

“They learned a lot,” Johnson says. “They’re eager to keep going.” So is she.

“I’d like to keep them going and keep them on the straight and narrow,” she says.

That’s the kind of dedication that helped Johnson win the 27th Annual Dr. John W. Harris Teacher of the Year Award in Sioux Falls School District. She received the award, along with praise from School District officials, during a March 23 ceremony at Callaway’s in Sioux Falls.

In addition to a plaque, Johnson received \$4,000 from Sioux Falls businessman Bruce Eide, a partner in Verne Eide Motorcars, for being selected Teacher of the Year. Eide and the dealership have sponsored a cash prize for the winner each year since 2008.

Johnson is free to spend the prize money how she wants. She’ll probably use it to pay down her school loan, she says.

Johnson, 32, graduated from Washington High School and Minnesota State University in Moorhead. She started college with the idea of becoming a mathematics teacher, but decided she wanted a more active role in dealing with children.

She has taught in Sioux Falls for eight years, the past four at Cleveland. She will return to Cleveland next school year.

“I just want my students to know they’re cared for and that whatever they want to do, they can do in life,” she says.

Her longer-term goal is simply to help more children.

“I want to keep teaching and touch more kids, and get more events set up for them so that they have more opportunities,” she says.



Superintendent Pam Homan (left) and Bruce Eide (right) congratulate Gretchen Johnson after she was named Teacher of the Year.

Ann Williams, principal at Cleveland Elementary, says Johnson works well with fellow educators as well as students.

“Gretchen is one of the strongest in terms of relationship-building I’ve ever known,” Williams says. “She’s constantly reflective about meeting children’s needs.” Johnson communicates well with children, Williams says.

When she received the award from School Board President Kent Alberty and Bruce Eide, she promptly thanked her colleagues at Cleveland for helping her win.

Thirty-six educators were nominated for Teacher of the Year. In addition to Johnson, the finalists were:

- Stephanie Ayers-Haines, language arts, George McGovern Middle School.
- Lennie Davis, music, Garfield Elementary School and Challenge Center.
- Dar Steenholdt, human services, Career and Technical Education Academy.
- Alison TerHorst, psychology, Washington High School.
- Lynn Marie Thomason, Latin, Lincoln High School.

