

South Washington County Schools

New superintendent discusses district's plan during pandemic

Nielsen will begin her new job next month

By Bob Shaw
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If Julie Nielsen wanted an easy job, her timing is terrible.

She has grabbed the reins of a 19,000-student school district at a particularly difficult moment in its history.

Nielsen, who starts her new job as superintendent of South Washington County Schools in September, not only faces the challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic but also the strain of a fast-growing district. She will be the district's first female superintendent.

She was chosen after Superintendent Keith Jacobus resigned, 10 months before his contract was finished. She will receive the same salary as her predecessor — \$220,000 annually. Nielsen began working for the district 24 years ago as a student-teacher. Since 2014, she has been an assistant superintendent.

Nielsen is 51 and lives in Prescott, Wis., with her husband. She has two adult sons.

The Pioneer Press asked her questions recently, and her answers have been edited for clarity and space.

What's your educational background?

A bachelor's degree in K-12 physical education from Winona State University, and a master's in education from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

This is a very tough time for the district. Why did you want this job?

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Julie Nielsen

I am a former athlete. I played college basketball at Winona State. I have never shied away from competition.

What is the biggest challenge the district faces?

Prior to March, we were focused on the growth of the district. We now have 19,000 students. We were going to have a referendum in February 2021, but we canceled that.

It's obvious what your challenge was after March.

Yes. Coronavirus requires all hands on deck. There are a lot of moving pieces, and it takes a lot of teamwork, communication and extra time. All the details will be in place by Sept. 8.

What's the plan?

We want students back in classrooms. That is an important part of learning. Two times a week, students will be in classrooms, at 50 percent capacity. A class of 24 kids will have 12 at one time. We already have a Virtual Learning Academy of 4,000. We will have hybrid learning to reduce the number of students in the building, and allow in-person support.

What is it about schools that the public just doesn't understand?

What would surprise them is the amount of passion and

energy that can be exuded within a complicated system. Teachers put their heart and soul into public education.

What advice would you give a person considering a career in teaching?

I have a son doing student-teaching this year, and I tell him it is not about the awards, the trophies and the ribbons. It's about the rewards of doing such a wonderful thing. I would not change a thing about my career path. I am a proud teacher.

Did you grow up as a farm girl?

I was raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. I have four brothers who are now dairy farmers, and a sister who is a first-grade teacher.

Favorite book?

"Design Thinking" by Nigel Cross. It's about the process we already use in the district — going to the end-users for feedback, getting a prototype and finding solutions.

Any hobbies?

I love to work out. I go to Orangetheory Fitness. They have treadmills, rowers and weights. I go at 5 a.m., six days a week.

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