

New Montana superintendent of Catholic schools makes his rounds

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New Montana superintendent of Catholic schools makes his rounds around the state

Nick Balatsos

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St. Francis Primary Principal Deb Hayes gives new Catholic schools superintendent Tim Uhl a tour of the school on Wednesday.

LARRY MAYER/Gazette Staff

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Tim Uhl plans to rack up about 3,000 miles of travel during his first weeks as the new Montana superintendent of Catholic schools.

That's fine by him. In a state the size of Montana, that kind of travel comes with the job.

Uhl moved here from the Seattle area a little more than three weeks ago. Uhl was previously principal of the Holy Rosary Regional School in Tacoma, Wash., a position he held since 2010.

For the past couple weeks, Uhl has been touring Montana and its Catholic schools with former Superintendent Patrick Haggarty, who resigned in April.

In July, it was announced that Uhl would be taking over for Haggarty, who accepted a position, coincidentally, as superintendent for Catholic schools in Seattle.

Haggarty has been introducing Uhl to people and helping him get a feel for the place. Uhl said driving has allowed for plenty of "windshield time" with the former superintendent.

"It's been a real gift because I feel like I'm getting a great sense of the job and how to do the job well," he said.

"It's all about finding out what are the burning issues and what are the hot topics," he later added.

Before he's done, Uhl, the father of three young kids, plans to hit all 21 schools that are part of the Great Falls-Billings Diocese and Helena Diocese.

So far he's been to Butte, Great Falls, Helena, Livingston and Missoula. On Wednesday, Uhl spent the day in Billings.

He visited St. Francis Primary, Upper and Intermediate, he attended a board meeting and visited Billings Central Catholic High School, where he met with parents during an open house.

Uhl commented that the use of technology throughout the school was "impressive" and called the four school system "an interesting arrangement."

“The main takeaway is how strong a system it is and how good a school this is,” Uhl said, sitting in a Central High office on Wednesday.

Despite the large number of new towns, cities and people, Uhl said he’s not overwhelmed — yet. But he wonders if in two weeks he’ll be saying the same thing.

As superintendent, Uhl’s job is to review and approve budgets for elementary and high schools, conduct visits and evaluations and supervise policy.

As he was making his way back to Helena on Tuesday, Uhl said he’s taking the information learned “one community and one school at a time,” which he said is key to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

In the future, “limiting scope” will also be pivotal, as he’ll inevitably “want to be in Missoula, Billings and Kalispell all at the same time,” Uhl said.

Above all, Uhl said getting to know people will be the most important part of his first couple of months on the job.

“I’ve got to find out who these people are and what they’re all about,” he said.

He said through the process of getting to know them and “through process of listening, I can better serve them.”

Uhl said his past experience as a principal will help guide his new role as superintendent.

When he was a principal, he said, his job was to empower teachers. Now his job will be to empower principals — “to make those principals even better,” he said.

“There’s some really, really experienced, quality principals ... So, in some ways, I might need to get out of their way,” he said.

Before his job in Tacoma, Uhl served as principal for four years at a Catholic high school in Louisiana. Before that he was an assistant principal at Bishop Blanchet High School in Seattle. He held that position for five years.

Uhl said when the job posting for superintendent came up, he wasn't actively seeking a new job. **New Montana superintendent of Catholic schools makes his rounds**

"I was pretty happy in my job, and I was only going to apply for a job if I felt like it was a really intriguing opportunity."

He said "(Montana's) not a huge district, but a huge amount of land." He added that he felt he could "add something to each one of the schools."

He likened the urge to become superintendent to the urge an assistant coach might have to be head coach. He said it's a position where he can have more of an impact.

Now that he's here, he said he's excited and ready.

"I'm really anxious to get to all the different schools," he said. "My No. 1 priority is getting to know the schools and getting to know what they're all about."

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