

Superintendent-to-be shares insights

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At its regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, May 15, the Niles Township District 219 Board of Education approved the appointment of Nanciann Gatta, current Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, to the position of Superintendent for the 2008-09 academic year, succeeding Neil Codell upon his retirement in the summer of 2008.

According to the district website, “The Board of Education is making the appointment at this time to ensure a seamless transition in the senior administrative team,” Board President Bob Silverman said. “Our schools have benefited from being led by a top-notch management team, and we are fortunate to be able to appoint someone who knows the district so well and who has served our students and the District 219 community with such expertise and dedication.”

Gatta earned her B.A., M.A. and Ed.D from Loyola University of Chicago. She began working in the district as an English teacher at West in 1995 and served two years as executive vice president of Niles Township Federation of Teachers Union, Local 1274. She became director of English and Fine Arts at Niles North in 2000 and oversaw both departments until 2004, when she was appointed Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources.

Prior to beginning her tenure in the district, Gatta served as director of human resources at the Richelieu Group, a holding company that manages a portfolio of food manufacturing and distribution companies.

Commenting on Gatta’s appointment on the district website, Codell said, “This is another great day for District 219. [Gatta] has been a vital part of our district’s family and has served with distinction at all three campuses. She has great insight into the complexities and dynamics of the district, and has built wonderful working relationships with our students, parents, staff and administrative team. Her style is invitational, optimistic and caring. Working with her is a true joy.”

West Word recently chatted with newly appointed Superintendent.

West Word: Was becoming a superintendent your ultimate career goal when you became a teacher?

Nanciann Gatta: No. When I became an English teacher [at Niles West] I loved English literature, and I loved teaching. My first job as a high school student was teaching clarinet lessons in my parents’ home, and I knew that I wanted to have a teaching job after I graduated from college. I’ve never been ready for the next step in the sense that I’ve loved the job that I’m currently doing and that holds true today. I’ve simply worked hard at what I do and people have taken notice and offered me different opportunities. Each time a new door was opened I walked through, took a chance and am different today because of that.

WW: Describe the jobs you held prior to being named Superintendent and how it felt to move from teaching to an administrative position.

NG: I was an English teacher [for six years.] I also worked for the Niles Township Federation of Teachers. That gave me a nice balance between the classroom, which is the most intimate part of a school, to the more global picture in looking at the way schools run, how they operate and how employees are treated in terms of their salaries, benefits and working conditions. It was also at that time that I returned to Loyola University to pursue a doctorate degree. I had my hands in all three arenas.

WW: Both you and incoming principal Kaine Osburn have ties to the union. How do you think that will affect the district and the decisions you make?

NG: We understand the importance of due process. It’s not just something that the union thinks; it’s what Americans believe. [Osburn] and I understand that here have been agreements made between union leaders and the Board of Education that should be honored. Most importantly, we understand the provisions outlined in the contract, and the climate and culture. We can navigate through the system and create change while still insuring that the guarantees by the contract are not violated and that individuals have a right to due process.

WW: How did you transition from teaching to an administrative position?

NG: Upon completion of my doctorate degree, [former] Superintendent Griff Powell called me up and said, “We have two directors of English positions open in the district and I’d like you to come see me about one of them.” It so happened at that time that they were pairing English with fine arts, so each school had their own director of English and fine arts. For me, that was the best situation because I have always had a fine arts background. In high school, I was in the choir and the show choir, I played the clarinet and was in all the drama productions.

WW: What do you consider your biggest accomplishment in your years in the district?

NG: I didn’t know when accepting [the director’s position] that I would be spending more time on facilities and building...than I would on actual curriculum and instruction. I found myself in a construction trailer at least once a week in the back lot of Niles North, and I found myself advocating for the bricks and mortar that would be the future fine arts wing. I got to know about the process of planning through architects reading blueprints— never in my life did I think I would be able to read a blueprint. In the end, I am most proud in my entire career, including this job now, of the facilities that were under my watch, \$12 million worth of facilities, in the Niles North fine arts department.

WW: How did you become Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources?

NG: [After the construction was finished], I decided to request a leave of absence and return to Europe to study Italian language, art and film. I got an apartment in Rome and got back to my roots of loving university, education, art and learning. It was then, on an overseas phone call, that Superintendent Codell called me. He said, “You need to come back and be the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources.” It wasn’t planned, and I thought this would be a nice door to walk through, and I walked through that door, too. I have loved this job that I am currently in... I love having the ultimate responsibility [of] hiring teachers.

WW: How do you think your previous positions will help you in your new position?

NG: Relationships, relationships, relationships—learning how the schools work from a teacher’s, union’s, director’s and a central administrator’s perspective and understanding what the people think of those positions [is very helpful.] One thing that I learned that I never realized was [that] oftentimes, when my name pops up people think, “Ugh it’s HR; did I get in trouble?” Those were things I never was aware of before. You learn about all those little quirks, but most importantly you make relationships, and you build upon those relationships each step you take.

WW: What do you see as the strengths that will benefit you in your new position?

NG: I understand this community. I’ve worked in all three buildings...I’ve been here over a decade and I know the people that work in this district, and more importantly I know the people we serve. Like all aspects of life, relationships become the key to success, and I think I have built strong and deep relationships with this community.

WW: What is your overarching education philosophy and vision for the district?

NG: I have a holistic view of education. I believe that everything is interrelated, interconnected and interdependent. I see the importance of the curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular programs, all of which are vital to the successful development of the whole student. Sometimes we hear a lot about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and [these are] important; however, it is very important that we don’t lose sight of the learning opportunities that make the content come alive, that make...the skills that you learn in your co-curricular areas apply to real, hands on situations and projects. I’m very aware of the balance that must exist between test preparation, which inadvertently compresses curriculum, and the need for the comprehensive high school experience.

WW: What do you think the future of NCLB is in this country, and how do you think it affects the district and its approach to helping students who struggle?

NG: I think that the future of NCLB is that it will include a component of “value-added” testing. That means we aren’t comparing different students. The current NCLB program looks at [all students who take the test each year.] The school is analyzed as to whether we made growth. We’d like to see them measure the growth of the individual child...where [we look at] where you were personally when you came as a freshman and a sophomore. If there has been growth, then that’s success. In that scenario we are not leaving children behind, but we are growing them. In terms of what we’ll do as a school, we’ll continue to look at integrated curricular program like ALCUSH, freshman team, sophomore team and IIT. These are environments where several teachers know the same group of students and collaborate in that student’s success. We will continue and grow our efforts in the areas of literacy, reading and writing across the curriculum, and I think we’ve done that with the literacy center. Also, in addressing NCLB we will...collaborate with junior highs to really develop a comprehensive scope and sequence of courses from the primary grades all the way to 12th grade.

WW: Are you concerned with the district’s test scores and do you think they reflect our students’ abilities? How do you plan to raise them?

NG: The “value-added” testing system is important to me. About two-thirds of our students are making AYP, and we’re targeting those who don’t with new math, reading and literacy programs. That’s really the focus now because those are the area groups that we are not meeting AYP. I don’t think anyone who goes to these schools thinks that those aren’t initiatives. That’s where we have been putting money.

WW: Is there anyone in the district who has served as your role model?

NG: I’m going to change the question. I come from a family of educators. Gatta family dinners often include the topic of education at any level and that’s inspiring. It’s where I think of new ideas and it’s where I compare what we’re doing with what other districts are doing. Of course, secondly would be [Codell]. I’ve worked under him as a teacher and as a superintendent for seven years.

WW: What do you think Superintendent Codell’s legacy will be?

NG: First and foremost, [he] is a visionary. There is no one in this school community, or the community at large, that doesn’t know who he is. He is ubiquitous. His spirit is contagious: He loves these schools, and he loves these communities. So, he never wavers on whether or not we can do something that he believes is right for children. Think about what he has done: He was the principal and then the superintendent during the construction project; he passed the successful education fund referendum that allowed our schools to be funded so we could offer all these programs; he led the charge in pulling the district out of special education cooperation, so we could own special programs [and] have the right situation for every child regardless of special needs; he changed the school day; he secured a five year labor agreement with the teachers’ union; and he has insisted on communication with all stakeholders

WW: What would you like your legacy to be?

NG: I would like people to say that I was never satisfied with the status quo and that I was a leader that believed if we’re not moving forward, we were not moving backward. I would also want people to say I had a vision for each child and have achieved my goals for [an interconnected education.]

WW: What are some major issues facing the district in the coming years?

NG: One issue would be to balance the need to address the testing standards given to us by the state and federal government while not allowing the curriculum to be compressed and [to lose] opportunities. Number two...is school safety. I believe that schools are safe when students connect to their school. Students connect to their school in many different ways. For some, it is academics and the competitive academic teams. For others, it is [the arts, sports or a club]. I would love for any student who reads this, who is not currently participating in something in the school district, to tell me why and what we’re missing.



Gatta