



CHAPTER FOUR

Change:

Did We Really Know What We Had?

“Don’t fight forces. Use them.”

Buckminster Fuller

Jim Clarkson built Northfield's sports program—and weathered the trauma of changes in the '70s.



Meet the new superintendent

By KILLEN SHERGA

The new superintendent of Northfield's Sunset Ridge School District is Rodney J. Lewis, asked almost as many questions of his visitor from the Talk as the visitor asked him.

Lewis, who lounged comfortably in an armchair during an interview in his large office at Green Bay School, Highland Park, is winding up his stint as principal there before taking over his new job July 1 at Sunset Ridge School. He is replacing Supt. Harrison Collins who is retiring June 30.

Quick with a sniffe and a joke, Lewis explains he has been part of the Green Bay School scene for 18 years. He taught its fifth grade students, spent a year as its learning center director and, in 1969, became principal of this Lake County school.

"I HAD TO HAVE had to play a number of roles," he says while mulling over the change from being principal of a single school to overseeing a district. He believes his experience in dealing with teachers, parents and students and devising learning programs and curriculum will smooth the transition to Northfield.

"In reality, I feel at ease," he says. "Now if you were talking about a district with 16 buildings, yes, I'd be a little nervous," he laughs.

"I like their (District 29's) approach." He also likes what he calls a "harmonious relationship, generally speaking" between the board, teachers and the community.

"Any differences can be worked out. I think it's rather unique in educational philosophy and along the North Shore."

Why did you go job hunting? The editor asks.

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"I WRESTLED WITH this a long time," he answers, pausing. "I wanted another opportunity to grow professionally."

"Academically, I'd reached a plateau. I have been comfortable here and it was with a great deal of ambivalent feelings that I looked around."

Although Lewis quips, "I didn't go down the road too far," his new responsibility is most recent in a series of several major life changes. In 1973, he sold his house, took a sabbatical and enrolled at Southern Illinois University to earn a doctoral degree in education.

That pursuit, which lately meant commuting from Highland Park to both college classes and his apartment in Dallas, will end July 2, when he will add a Ph.D. to his B.A. from Lake Forest College and his master's degree in educational administration from Roosevelt University, Chicago.

He might even participate in the ritual graduation in cap and gown, because his parents, who live in Lancaster, S.C., would enjoy seeing it.

"My father would feel good about it. He'd get a kick out of it."

ROD LEWIS AND his family—his wife, Barbara, and their three sons, Scott, 19, who is finishing his freshman year at Lake Forest College, Tim, 17, and Rosa, 11, probably soon will move to the North Shore.

To District 29, Lewis will bring a people-oriented philosophy.

"I have a good feeling about people—I like people. I hope I would listen to all sides of any question and come to a reasonable decision. I am assuming problems are created by people and can be solved by people. I hope I'm not caught in a dogmatic track."

"One of my main interests as an educator is to help teachers become the best they can be."

However, his quickly adds, "I haven't fixed ideas as to what type of teacher is best."

A PERSONABLE MAN, Lewis was "enthusiastically supported" as the person for the job by a unanimous vote of the district's board of trustees. More than 100 candidates applied for the position and

Lewis emerged as the board's choice after intensive screening and interviewing.

Northfielders will have a chance to meet Lewis when he is formally introduced to the community at a reception early this fall.

However, by questioning his visitor about the community and school, by bantering with the local PTA president, and by making an inquisitive round, Lewis already has begun to meet Northfield.



Rodney J. Lewis, new superintendent of School District 29 in Northfield. "I have a good feeling about people." (Staff photo by Bob Samson)

June 10, 1976

The nationwide search for a new superintendent of District 29 began in earnest in the fall of 1975.

The candidate the school was looking for would bring a new, strict cost-cutting focus to the district.

With the help of the prominent consulting firm A. I. Kearney, the board reviewed more than 100 applications, narrowing them down to five. Their choice was unanimous: Rod Lewis, a 41-year-old Ph.D., and principal in the Highland Park school system, was the hands-down choice.

"Rod was an educated man," says Shirley Johnson, who was school board president at the time. "He was articulate. A great speaker. His credentials were impeccable. He knew our district."

"What we needed him to do," she adds, "was be very, very tough."

"Rod was a good man," adds Lyn Little, who joined the board in 1970. "I don't

think he—or we—had any idea of what was in store.

"We knew we were headed for hard times," she adds. "But we weren't prepared for the severity of the crisis."

The community was changing, too. The days of the PTA moms pitching in to carry the library books up the stairs had evolved into a community that was polarized in its view of Harry Collins' liberal, experiential approach to education.

"I remember running in a contested election for the board, right before Harry retired," says Little. "The conservatives had microphones on their cars and drove through the streets of Northfield on election day, screaming to get rid of the 'liberal' element in the schools."

"Those were the days," she adds, "when you couldn't get a seat at a school board meeting."

"I could just imagine how Harry and Mary Osborne must have felt. They knew they had a huge financial upheaval on

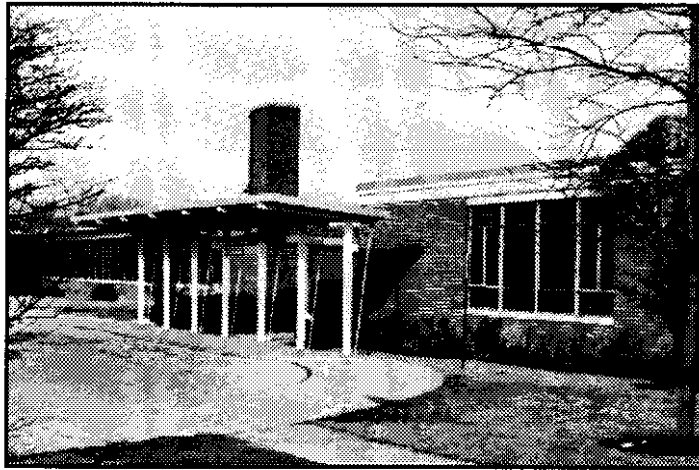
their hands. And here was this group—screaming about their curriculum."

The conservatives ultimately lost their campaign to get a foothold on the board and eventually left Northfield. But the subsequent loss of Harry, and the legacy of their criticisms against the school, put the faculty and district on very shaky ground. Factoring in the financial problems, it was a decade of serious decline.

Major cutbacks had to be made to the music, art and gym programs Harry had so carefully built. Computers were coming into the district and investments had to be made there as well. One-third of the curriculum was cut. Layoffs followed. Teacher morale plunged to an all-time low.

"I think Harry was wise to leave. It was probably the hardest thing he ever did. But it also says a lot about him," says Little.

"He didn't try to fight what was happening or stand in our way," adds former board member Bill Carson. "But after all



Middlefork was slated to close its doors in the late '70s as enrollment plunged from a peak of 849 students in 1968 to an all-time low of 350 students in 1984. But the community rolled up its sleeves to raise the cash to keep the doors open.

he'd done to build the school, he knew he wasn't right for the job."

This was the environment Rod Lewis stepped into. In Mary Osborne's view, nobody could have fixed it and come out ahead.

"Those were awful years," she says. "Even if the district had been in terrific financial condition, we would have missed Harry. But financially, we hit bottom."

Adds Lyn Little, "I cannot tell you the hours that people in the community put into sharpening their pencils to save the school."

One solution the board considered before Harry's departure was to merge Sunset Ridge with Avoca.

Reed Parker, a member of the board at the time, remembers the decision to *not* close Sunset Ridge as a defining moment in Northfield. It was also a lesson for him in what it means to listen as an elected representative to your constituents.

"I was sure that merging Sunset Ridge with Avoca was the right thing to do," says Parker. "But when the community got wind of our plan, everything changed. It didn't take a referendum for us to hear their point-of-view. You felt it all around you

"What they were saying was: 'We may be small—but we want our own school. It's part of who we are as a community. Don't take it away from us.'

"We listened," says Parker. "And we changed our minds."

It was clear, even if Sunset Ridge could be saved, that Middlefork School would close. With fewer kids and dollars, it was the only way to put the district on firmer financial ground.

The board thought selling the building was the right thing to do. But when an advisory committee was appointed to study the issue—and recommended that doors stay open, based on its value to children—Rod Lewis and the board listened.

"That told me a lot about Rod," says Dadie Wampler, who chaired the advisory group, which spent months consulting educators about the value of the school. "Rod didn't try to influence our study. He left us alone to make the decision we thought was right. We convinced the board not to sell Middlefork."

Again, the community and board rallied to find the income to keep both

schools open.

"We did everything we could to get money, renting space at

both schools to the Park District, Northfield Nursery School, special education programs—whatever we could find," says Little.

"It really *did* take a village," she adds. "The PTA, school board, members of the community—they were incredible.

"It was a wonderful example of a village coming together to support the jewel they had. They really loved their schools."

Gary Kline joined the board in 1980 with a clear sense of what the '70s had cost District 29.

"Our school board had always been 'pro-teacher'—from the very earliest days," says Kline. "But we lost a lot of trust in the '70s. There was a lot of resentment on the part of the teachers. The school fell into a decline. Academically and morale-wise, it wasn't that great."

Lewis, struggling with health problems, stepped down in 1983—clearly exhausted from the turmoil and pain of the years of cost cutting and paring down.

The following year, enrollment plunged to an all-time low: 350 students.

"I don't think Sunset Ridge would be



A plan to merge Sunset Ridge with Avoca in the mid-'70s also brought a strong outcry from the community. "We may be small, but we want our own school," Northfielders told the District 29 board. "Don't take it away from us."

where it is today if you hadn't had a Rod Lewis to make tough decisions to cut programs and people," says Little.

Adds Mary Osborne, "Nobody could have won at the job Rod was asked to do."

But the district, also in the early '80s, began to emerge from its slump.

"It's a little like the federal government," says Gary Kline. "We'd made the necessary cuts and suffered the pain. We were incredibly efficient and lean now. And all of a sudden, Northfield started to expand with a lot more commercial property and a higher tax base."

In the meantime, the board revved up for another nationwide search for a superintendent.

While they geared up, they appointed Howard Bullinck, who had been hired by Rod Lewis in 1980 to serve as administrative assistant, to temporarily fill Rod's shoes.

"We planned a very intensive search," says Gary Kline. "We didn't know much about Howard—just that he was pretty quiet and very, very young. He was always a behind-the-scenes support to Rod. But we figured he could handle the job while we launched a nationwide search."

They were surprised at what they found.

"When Howard took the job, it was clear from the start," says Kline. "He was excellent—at building teacher morale, at mastering the details of school finance, at dealing with the board and relating to the kids.

"One thing I've learned over the years: your superintendent is absolutely key to the health of your school.

"Everything plays off him—the board, the finances, the teachers, the curriculum. It's almost like a 'headmaster' position in District 29. Your superintendent absolutely defines the school.

"It was clear from the start what we had in Howard," he adds.

"We were off to the races."