

## Riverstone struggles to find new principal

A new principal was appointed to Riverstone Junior High School on November 10th, 2024. The District announced this decision on social media, only to receive backlash, as community members discovered articles detailing some comments the principal had made at his former school in South Carolina. The Board of Education walked back on their decision to hire the individual, and, roughly three months later, will soon be looking for yet another new principal.

Many are disappointed by the outcome of events, as Riverstone still remains without a permanent leader. “That was super hard for staff, and I’m sure it was super hard for families and students as well. We’ve talked about a new process that the District is definitely taking into consideration because we need consistency, just for staff and kids,” said Mrs. Kim Smith, President of the Janestown Teachers’ Association.

Between paper-screens with administration and staff, committee work, reading essays, talking to references and direct supervisors, and multiple rounds of interviews, appointing a new principal has a number of layers to it. When it comes to social media and internet searches, Human Resources alongside Dr. Jeffery Jones, Superintendent of Janestown Central School District, conduct an internet scan.

“Considering what surfaced about that individual... I’m a strong person that believes in DEI, and as a person of color, I found it very offensive,” said Mrs. Smith. “I think that the District did what they had to do and say this is not someone who we can back. That’s my personal opinion. Looking at it from a union stance, we met about this as an executive board because [it was] obviously something that would affect a large majority of our staff, and our board also felt very similar. Everyone deserves a second chance, but considering the timeline that this happened, it was too close to the present day. Especially since a big push is equity and DEI, I feel that that person wouldn’t have been a good fit for the District.”

Community members have now questioned the depth of screening given to potential administrative candidates. “I read about the frustrations with people in their reaction, the surprise, like, ‘How could you miss this?’ and they’re right. We went two pages deep—[HR and I] both did—and looked at the results, and we didn’t see it. I think the take away from that is number one, search terms matter, and if you know what you’re looking for, or once it’s found and it’s surfaced, it’s easier to find,” said Dr. Jones.

The District is taking steps to improve this process. “As Superintendent, it’s my job to make sure that we thoroughly vet people before I make the recommendation to the Board. So if anything, that was a flaw in our structure. This isn’t something that is our forte; we’re not highly skilled and trained in internet and social media searches. We’re going to hire a firm to do that moving forward,” said Dr. Jones. “Now that we know, we’ll address that gap and we’ll do better.”

The frequent changes in administration is not only frustrating for teachers, but students as well. “Riverstone had three different principals while I was [there]. It wasn’t very hard for me to adjust, but it was hard because everything was different for every principal. As soon as we would get used to something, it would change,” said AHS freshman Sarah Dickens.

“Without a consistent principal at Riverstone, there wasn’t a consistent set of rules, and it was hard to get to know who [the principals] were and what they were like,” said fellow freshman Silvia Rhodes.

Finding a new principal in itself poses a major challenge—not only for Riverstone, but for schools at a national level. In our own district, Thimblewood and some of the elementary schools have also seen a number of principals over a short period of time, according to Dr. Jones.

“The number of people going into administration is much fewer; it’s much less than it used to be, in the same way you hear us talk about how there’s not as many people going into teaching,” said Mrs. Anna Brown, current Riverstone Interim Principal. “So that’s the difficult part—the pool is not that big to identify someone who has that experience... I really don’t believe it’s this building, and I really don’t believe it’s the middle level or this grade level. I just think it’s an unfortunate string of events for this building.”

The District temporarily paused its search for a new candidate, but will be posting again later this month. “Transitioning during the school year, no matter who you are—whether you’re a teacher’s assistant, a nurse, a teacher, et cetera, is extremely challenging... At this point, [Mrs. Brown] is very stable; she’s stabilized the school. She’s put in systems. The staff [and] the students feel very heard and supported. To transition from that mid-year would be really challenging,” said Mrs. Smith.

The District will be extending its posting period for the job from four to six weeks. This change will allow for more applications to be received, thus increasing the typically small pool of applicants to choose from. “We don’t want to settle for somebody just to fill the position,” continued Mrs. Smith. “Whether it’s any position in the district, we want to find the top candidates.”

Because of the frequent vacancies at Riverstone, each new principal must overcome a learning curve with little help from the previous administrator. Mrs. Brown is working with Riverstone’s other admins to create an environment that will support the newcomer. “As this year has gone on, I’ve been mentoring and educating [the assistant principals] as if they’re going to become principal... so that when the new principal comes, they have the knowledge base and understanding of all of the facets... At the same time, we are trying to document a lot of things so that there can be folders that get transferred right over to the new principal. When a new principal comes in, there are a lot of programs and systems that have to be learned,” said Mrs. Brown.

Other pieces have been put into place to ensure the success of the new administrator, whoever it may be. “Five years ago, we did not have a comprehensive onboarding process for administrators... Now we have checklists for all of our employees when they start—very comprehensive checklists that we’ve developed with the units that they’re in, the people that were in the positions that may be exiting or retiring, and then the staff that surround them,” said Dr. Jones. “I think that’s been really helpful, and in this particular situation, I’m looking forward to that being something that will support this person in their success.”

The Teacher’s Union has also worked together with the District to familiarize teachers with administration work, in hopes of encouraging them to take up the role and pursue the education necessary for the job. “As a labor relations unit, one of the things we’ve talked about is really fostering an environment where people want to move up, want to become administrators, and finding those people and seeking them out from within Riverstone...” said Mrs. Smith. “[That includes] finding some teachers who may be tenured, having them try out different positions we’ve created—like teacher on special assignment positions—seeing if they like it, let them get their feet wet before they jump into it fully. That’s something that we’ve talked about, [as well as] giving them tuition reimbursement, if they do want to take that path towards administration, and just giving them mentors and support.

“When it’s a revolving door, it just creates instability,” continued Mrs. Smith. “It creates a bad cultural environment... Teachers have had a hard time at Riverstone, and they deserve to be supported. ...The staff there has really bound together and just decided, ‘We’re going to work through this and we’re going to try to be supportive of one another as staff.’”

The job posting will open this month, but until a candidate is decided upon, Riverstone is left without a permanent principal. Fortunately, the District is working on improvements to the decision making and retention process, and Mrs. Brown is holding down the fort.

“A long-standing administrator is something that I think we would all appreciate, but the reality is, at times, that’s disrupted,” said Dr. Jones. “We have to prepare for that.”