

Athena-Weston schools promote superintendent from within district

By JEREMY BURNHAM
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

ATHENA — The Athena-Weston School District will have a new leader this fall, but her name will be familiar to students and families.

Middle school Principal Ann Vescio will be taking over the superintendent position from retiring Laure Quaresma, the two women announced last week.

Quaresma will remain with the district part time for a year to serve as a mentor to Vescio.

Vescio takes over after being with the district since 2005.

A satisfying career

Quaresma is retiring after 42 years in education

Quaresma came to the Athena-Weston School District five years ago after a long career in Walla Walla, Washington. Quaresma had leadership roles at all levels — elementary, middle school and high school — in Walla Walla.

“I had an opportunity to lead at all those levels,” she said. “I think that helped prepare (me) for a superintendent job.”

Of the positions she held in Walla Walla, Quaresma has especially good feelings for the time she spent as the district’s leader of its dual language efforts.



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Future Athena-Weston School Superintendent Ann Vescio, left, outside Weston Middle School with current Superintendent Laure Quaresma on Friday morning, March 12, 2021.

“The opportunity to lead the dual language program and really work on language enrichment programs in Walla Walla was really huge,” Quaresma said. “That was a learning curve for me. But with an amazing staff, we were able to build that program and it has taken off at this point. I feel very proud of that.”

She said doing so many jobs in Walla Walla helped attract her to a superintendent job.

“Especially a superinten-

dent job in a small district, because you’re wearing all the hats,” Quaresma said.

A lot has happened in Athena-Weston since Quaresma took over. She led the district through the passing of a new bond, the opening of a preschool and the transition to — and then from — distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, if you ask her what her best moments on the job were, she’ll talk about her people.

“This year with bringing (director of early learning) Kerri Coffman on board ... being able to help people lead and give them opportunities to lead, I feel really good about that,” Quaresma said. “It doesn’t have to be all you. I like to grow those leaders, step aside, and then watch it all happen.”

Scott Rogers, chairperson of the school board, said Quaresma will be missed.

“Laure, to me, is one of the best administrators I have ever

worked with,” Rogers said. “She is just the epitome of an educator. ... At a small school, it’s unusual to get someone with that kind of horsepower to come in.”

Vescio ready to step up

Vescio grew up in Tennessee and started her teaching career in South Carolina. She and her husband moved to Oregon in 2003. She’s been with the school district since 2005. She started as a fifth grade teacher.

“I taught fifth grade until 2012, and then moved to seventh grade,” Vescio said. Then in 2015, I became principal of Weston Middle School, which is a fourth through eighth grade school.”

Quaresma said watching Vescio grow as a leader has been rewarding.

While becoming a superintendent hasn’t necessarily been her goal, Vescio decided to take of the challenge when she learned Quaresma might be nearing retirement.

“Last year, pre-pandemic, we started having these discussions about this possibility that Laure might step away from the superintendent position and that I might think about stepping into that role,” Vescio said.

Mentoring program

Quaresma said she’s excited

to be able to stay on for a year to help Vescio transition to the position. She referred to the arrangement as a “grow your own superintendent” program.

Rogers said Quaresma being willing to coach and mentor an in-house replacement made the board more comfortable with the idea of not bringing in someone from the outside with prior superintendent experience.

“We discussed it at the board level late last fall,” Rogers said. “The board was very supportive of Ann transitioning in. But it was a pretty unanimous that we’d be even more supportive if we could retain Laure in some capacity.”

Rogers said the arrangement will benefit the district and Vescio.

“Ann, to her credit, is very transparent with where her strengths and weaknesses lie,” Rogers said. “Laure is going to be a great mentor to kind of round her out.”

Quaresma’s position will be part time next year.

Vescio said she expects her new role to be challenging and rewarding.

“It’s a big step to go from a building principal to a district level position,” Vescio said. “I’ll have a lot to learn.”

FFA students prep for state convention

93rd annual Oregon FFA State Convention will be livestreamed

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — After missing out on a state convention last year, Hermiston High School FFA students are looking forward to this year’s event, even if it’s virtual.

The 93rd annual Oregon FFA State Convention will be livestreamed Tuesday, March 16, through Thursday, March 18, via the Oregon FFA social media pages. Students have already begun competitions, but will have the opportunity to watch workshops, industry panels and speeches on those days.

Alexis Leathers, a junior, remembered the moment last year when she got the word that the in-person state convention had been canceled due to increasing fears of gatherings during COVID-19. The group had been really excited to go, she said, and it was a letdown that preceded the early end to the entire school year. Since then, FFA students have been able to meet and compete virtually.

“It’s really hard to be interactive and still make it fun for kids in our chapter,” she said. “It’s definitely been interesting to say the least, but it’s taught us to be resilient and adaptive.”

Leathers said she resisted the idea of joining FFA at first, but her mother pushed her into it as she is glad she did. She called FFA, including her team winning state for food science and going to nationals in 2019, an “irreplaceable experience.”

“The people surrounding it are so supportive and you’re able to learn,” she said.

FFA — previously known as Future Farmers of America — was founded in 1928. It involves youths in all aspects of agriculture, including crop science, veterinary science, agricultural technology, leadership and business.

In a group interview of Hermiston FFA students reflecting on their experi-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A Hermiston FFA member departs after dropping off their animal at the 2020 Umatilla County Fair Modified Youth Livestock Show on Aug. 11, 2020. Those entering animals for auction weighed their animals and had their photos taken before departing to comply with COVID-19 safety precautions.

ence during the pandemic, FFA members said this year’s convention will be different than their last experience in 2019, to be sure.

“You definitely don’t get (to) see the same energy as in-person competitions, where you would go back to the hotel and hang out and study together,” Abigail Conner said.

Still, she and others said they were looking forward to getting to compete and participate in local socially distanced watch parties for parts of the convention. That includes the “retiring address” from Hermiston’s Jenna Wallace, who has been serving as Oregon FFA vice president.

Cidney Estes said one thing FFA students really missed during the pandemic was getting the full “fair week” experience in August 2020. Estes has been showing steers since she was in fourth grade, so just dropping off her animal at the fairgrounds for judging was a departure from a tradition she grew up with. She said it was hard to adjust, particularly because plans for the

fair kept having to change as COVID-19 case rates and state regulations fluctuated.

As a sophomore, she has yet to have the experience of an in-person FFA convention. But she said participating in FFA this year, including some limited in-person activity, and gearing up for competition has helped improve the school year.

“It’s nice to have something to do and something to look forward to, especially with school being the way it is,” she said.

Sophomore Kylie Temple said she misses road trips and tours of agricultural facilities right now, but the friendships she has made in FFA are life-long friendships, whatever the rest of the year looks like.

“We don’t have cliques in FFA,” she said.

Anna Guerrero, a senior, said she will be sad to say goodbye to FFA at the end of the year. She said before she came to the high school, she didn’t know anything about agriculture, but took an ag biology class was persuaded by Leah Smith, the FFA advisor at the time, to get

involved. She loved it.

“This was my safe place,” she said, gesturing to the ag sciences classroom.

Through FFA, she had opportunities to go into younger classrooms and teach students about agriculture, and it sparked a love of teaching that she plans to pursue after graduation this year. She said if it weren’t for FFA being a part of her high school experience, she probably wouldn’t know yet what she wanted to do, and she wouldn’t have gained as much confidence as she did over the past four years.

“FFA brought out a side of me that I never knew I had, and now it’s who I am,” she said.

Shandie Britt, the current FFA advisor and agricultural sciences teacher at Hermiston High School, said if high school students aren’t sure if they might like FFA, she would encourage them to come to a meeting and see what types of learning experiences are available.

“FFA is a place for everyone,” she said. “It offers an opportunity for people to find out who they are.”

LOCAL BRIEFING

Noncompetitive elections due to candidate refiling

PENDLETON — A change in filing has set up three candidates for three open spots on the Pendleton School Board.

In an email, Chris Garrigues said he had refiled his candidacy paperwork so that he would be running for Position 4 instead of Position 7. That means unless the school board attracts some last-minute candidates, Garrigues, a high school teacher, and Patrick Gregg, an attorney, will run unopposed in the May 18 election. Rodney Thompson, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve, is also running unopposed for Position 1.

The three seats all became open when three incumbents on the school board — Gary George, Debbie McBee and Steve Umbarger — all decided to retire from the board.

Candidates have until Thursday, March 18, to file for one of the three at-large school board seats.

In recent years, it has become common for Pendleton School Board candidates to run unopposed, whether they’re newcomers or incumbents.

Two injured in multi-car crash on Highway 11

MILTON-FREEWATER — A man and woman were injured on Sunday, March 14, on Highway 11 north of Milton-Freewater when a driver attempted to turn onto the highway, was hit by another, and then collided with a third vehicle.

Oregon State Police had yet to disclose the city of residence for those involved.

Cesar Ortiz Lopez, 39, with three passengers, two of them minors, attempted to turn left from Ballou Road onto Highway 11 northbound around 12:24 p.m., according to a report from the Oregon

State Police.

His vehicle was hit by a southbound car, spun and hit another vehicle.

The other drivers, Sue M. Wright, 62, and Geoffrey R. Bailey, 50, were injured and taken to the nearest hospital, the report stated.

Ortiz Lopez and the three passengers, including Rigoberto Ortiz, 61, were not injured.


All three vehicles were damaged and towed.

Ortiz Lopez was cited, the report stated.

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