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Profile: Christine Johns | 'Visible' administrator worked up career ladder

By Antoinette Konz

STERLING HEIGHTS, Mich. — When Christine Johns arrived as superintendent of Utica Community Schools in July 2006, her mission was to make the well-regarded, high-performing school district in a working-class suburb of Detroit even better.

It was the first superintendent job for Johns, who had started her career as an elementary school teacher in Prince George's County, Md., then worked her way up the career ladder as a curriculum specialist, principal, assistant superintendent and deputy superintendent in school districts in Maryland and California.

"We were a good district, but I think you could say that we were comfortable with where we were," said Bob McBroom, the building administrator at Utica's Instructional Resource Center. "When she came in, she told us right off the bat that good wasn't good enough, and that we needed to do better."

With 30,000 students, Utica is the second-largest district in Michigan. Ninety percent of its students are white, and less than one-quarter are eligible for subsidized lunches because they come from low-income families.

It's a marked difference from Jefferson County Public Schools, where slightly more than half the roughly 99,800 students are white and 62 percent are eligible for subsidized lunches.

But Jefferson County's diversity and size are what make it attractive, Johns said, adding that she's up to the task.

"Working in a large, urban school district is something I've been trained to do," said Johns, who earned her doctorate degree from Harvard University's Urban Superintendents Program and who also a fellow in the Broad Urban Superintendents Academy in 2004.

Still, some education advocates in Louisville express doubt whether Johns has the expertise to lead a school district wrestling with a controversial student-assignment plan that has faced several court challenges.

Raoul Cunningham, president of the Louisville branch of the NAACP, said his perception of Johns is that she didn't have much experience in the area.

When The Courier-Journal Editorial Board earlier this week asked Johns her views on the district's student-assignment plan, Johns said that while she had read material on it, she had not been able to speak to district staff about the particulars of the plan's implementation.

"I have not had an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the mechanics," she said. "I have not had access to the staff."

She noted, however, that she supports diversity in the schools, saying it is "where children learn how to

respect others,” are exposed to different ideas and develop the skills that will allow them to “effectively participate in Democracy.”

Parents, community leaders and school officials at Utica describe Johns as highly competent and smart — a superintendent who is very visible in schools and in the community.

They say she's fair, a good manager and a strong negotiator, someone who is approachable and well-liked, even though she's had to slash teachers and staff to cope with state budget cuts.

“She has some critics, but they are few and far between,” said Ralph “Skip” Maccarone, a former supervisor of Shelby Township who served for eight years before leaving office in 2008.

Her supporters say Utica's elementary math scores have increased nearly 10 percentage points and the number of students taking Advanced Placement exams has more than doubled since her arrival — surpassing 1,573 this year.

“I doubted her at first,” said Sally Klatt, the principal of Utica's Beck Elementary, where 96 percent of students are proficient in math and 91 percent are proficient in reading. “I have to say that I'm a believer now.”

Johns said Wednesday she's perfectly happy working in Utica Community Schools and hadn't looked for another superintendent job since arriving five years ago.

But when a search firm working for the Jefferson County Board of Education contacted her earlier this year about the Louisville's top education job, Johns said she couldn't resist looking into it.

“Working in an urban district is where the greatest opportunities are to help both high-performing students do better, as well as those students who experience poverty or other factors that put them at a disadvantage,” said Johns, who is a finalist with Donna Hargens, a top administrator with the Wake County, N.C., school district.

The early years

Since early in her professional life, those familiar with Johns referred to her as a rising star — an educator with a strong background in curriculum and instruction who has always had a place in her heart for underserved children.

As an elementary teacher in Prince George's County, Md., she kept her students engaged with all sorts of techniques in her classroom, said Joe Hairston, a former Prince George's County assistant superintendent who is now superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools.

“I remember doing a walk-through of her classroom and watching her interact with the children,” he said in a telephone interview. “She was among the best and brightest teachers I'd ever met, and I knew early on that she would make an outstanding superintendent one day.”

Johns, who is married and has no children, was born and raised in rural, western Pennsylvania. The daughter of a steelworker father and homemaker mother, she said she didn't always know she wanted to be an educator.

After graduating high school in 1983, she went to the University of Pittsburgh. It was shortly after the collapse of the steel industry, and she remembers being in class with displaced steelworkers and middle-aged women whose husbands had lost their jobs.

“That really set the stage for me and showed me why it's important to have an education — you have to be agile and adaptable to the changing world,” Johns said.

She worked two jobs in college — one at a daycare, the other waiting tables. At the daycare she discovered working with children was her true passion.

“From that point on, I knew I wanted to pursue a career where I could make a difference in the lives of children,” she said.

Time in Maryland and California

While she taught in Prince George's County, Md., the school district was under a federal court order to desegregate schools — the same kind of order that Jefferson County operated under from 1973 to 2000. As a result, she said she's familiar with the issues Jefferson County faces as a result.

She worked as a classroom teacher for three years, while also earning her first master's degree from Johns Hopkins University. She then became an instructional specialist with the Prince George's County district and later the principal of Fort Foote Elementary School — a high-minority, low-income school just south of Washington, D.C., that had been identified by the state for restructuring.

Academic proficiency had increased in all areas in two years — with some scores rising as high as 30 percentage points. The improvements were so significant the state selected the school for an overhaul.

“We turned that building around,” Johns said. “I re-engaged the parents and put a strong focus on reading and math and a bigger emphasis on working with the kindergartners.”

She went to graduate school at Harvard University, while also becoming a consultant with the Harvard Leadership Initiative, coaching high school principals and leadership teams on how to improve schools through the use of data.

After earning her second master's degree, while working toward her doctorate degree, she moved to Pasadena, Calif., in 1997 to work as an executive intern to the superintendent.

A year later, she was named assistant superintendent for instructional services with the Pasadena Unified School District — a diverse district with 23,500 students, 55 percent of whom were Hispanic and more than half qualified for subsidized lunches.

She implemented early learning initiatives that raised scores on state tests.

Ramon “Ray” Cortines, a retired educator who has led five major urban school districts in California and New York, was impressed with her tenure there..

“She had the balance of being a good administrator and a focus on what urban education should be,” Cortines said in a phone interview. “She was a rising star. I hated to see her leave Pasadena.”

Baltimore County move

In 2000, Hairston, who she had worked with in the Baltimore County Public Schools, became the district's superintendent. One of the first things he said he did was call Johns.

“I needed a deputy superintendent and she was the perfect fit,” he said.

Johns became deputy superintendent at age 34 of the 23rd largest district in the country, with more than 108,000 students in 163 schools. The students are 53 percent white, 38 percent black. Roughly one-third qualify for subsidized lunches.

Johns' role was to provide executive-level leadership for academic programs and support services. She also represented Hairston in his absence.

“She has a gift and a passion in working with all children, but particularly for the underserved,” Hairston said.

During her time in Baltimore County, the number of students participating in Advanced Placement increased from 54 percent and the combined scores on the SAT college entrance exam improved by 26 points.

“I was proud of the work I did in Baltimore and it was very rewarding,” she said. “But I wanted to become a school superintendent.”

She was named a finalist in districts in Florida, Washington and Pennsylvania, but was never offered the top job.

In 2006, the Michigan Leadership Institute recruited her for the job in Utica. Once they found Johns, school board members say they knew they had their next superintendent.

“She brought all the things we were looking for in a superintendent,” said Gene Klida, vice president of the Utica Community Schools board. “She brought a national perspective, in-depth knowledge about the federal education department and the ability to write grants and implement new programs.”

Landing in Michigan

Utica is less urban and more prosperous than other places Johns had worked.

But it is 15 miles north of Detroit, and like many municipalities in the area, the district has shared the economic turbulence experienced by the automotive industry. When Chrysler announced in 2009 that it would close its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant by the end of 2010 as part of its bankruptcy filing — potentially cutting 3,000 jobs and taking away nearly \$350 million to southeast Michigan's economy — Johns was one of 50 people who served on a task force to save the factory.

Mark Vanderpool, the city manager of Sterling Heights — the fourth largest city in Michigan — said Johns was a leader in the effort.

Ultimately, Vanderpool said Chrysler was offered an incentive package “it couldn't refuse.”

“It ended up buying back the facility and then announced they would make a new \$850 million investment in the plant,” he said. “It was a huge victory for this city and this region, and Dr. Johns realized the importance of playing a leadership role in that economic development project from the beginning.”

The district has had to deal with \$100 million in state budget cuts over the past eight years that have resulted in closing four elementary schools, eliminating nearly 500 jobs and reducing programs and services.

Johns led “that process in a way that treated people fairly and with dignity and had maintained programs for kids,” said Carol Klenow, president of the Utica school board.

Sylvia Smith, whose granddaughter attended one of the now-closed schools — Walsh Elementary — said she and a lot of others were still upset the school was closed.

“But most of us don't fault the superintendent,” she said. “She was forced to make a difficult decision. For the most part, I think Dr. Johns has been good for our schools.”

A ‘visible’ leader

Karen Zimmerman, the principal of West Utica Elementary, described Johns as being “very visible” in the schools.

“I feel like I can go to her about anything,” Zimmerman said. “And not only can I go to her, she seeks out information.”

Deborah Nawrocki, a teacher at Beck Elementary who has worked for the Utica district for 18 years, said Johns has “set the bar pretty high for teachers and students.”

“We have a more focused instruction, and there has been a lot of accountability for both teachers and students, and even parents,” she said.

Liza Parkinson, president of the Utica Education Association, declined to comment about Johns and the relationship the union has had with her because the district and the union are currently negotiating a new contract.

But Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, said Wednesday he had spoken with union representatives in Utica and they indicated they had a “good, working relationship with Dr. Johns.”

Johns said Wednesday that while she and the union have not always agreed on everything, “we always come away with a workable agreement.”

Tim Quinn, a national expert on superintendent searches and effective school district leadership, met Johns in 2002 when he recruited her to be in the Broad Urban Superintendents Academy — a 10-month executive management training program to prepare experienced leaders to lead the nation's urban school districts.

“Of all the people who I had the opportunity to work with and who went through the academy, I would put her among the top three intellectually,” Quinn said. “She's a very strong candidate. If the school board there thinks they have someone better, I would be shocked.”

Additional Facts

Christine Johns

Age: 45

Family: Husband, Bob Haines

Address: Shelby Township, Michigan

Education: doctorate degree in administration, planning and social policy, Harvard University, 2004; master's of education in administration, planning and social policy from Harvard University, 1997; master's of science in administration and supervision, Johns Hopkins University, 1992; bachelor's of science in elementary education, University of Pittsburgh, 1988

Awards: Meritorious Service Award from the Teachers Association of Baltimore County, 2003; Outstanding Administrator's Award from Prince George's County Chamber of Commerce, 1996; Maryland Governor's Citation for Leadership in Science, Math and Technology, 1991

Hobbies: Golfing, biking and walking

Salary: \$194,000 base plus benefits
