



August 16, 2023 05:50 AM | 3 HOURS AGO

Walsh University creates program to develop K-12 leaders

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Walsh University in North Canton this summer added a new educational offering: an MBA with a specialization in School District Leadership.

“Replenishing the leadership pipeline takes time,” said Mike Dunphy, vice president for academic affairs at Walsh, in a news release. “With the imminent turnover of superintendents and other school district executives in the next five to ten years, we’re averting a potential crisis by being intentional and creating a professional development opportunity today for our leaders of tomorrow.”

The program is a hybrid one, combining in-person and online components, and it’s expected to take participants two years to complete, going part time. It was designed by James Falter, director of graduate programs for the university’s DeVillie School of Business.

The release noted that Walsh worked with the Stark County Educational Service Center to create the new program, and Falter said the educational service center and the Jackson Local Schools had both reached out with interest in creating a curriculum that focused on their needs for future leaders. Walsh had offered some specialized MBA programs in the past, in areas like marketing and analytics, but those were based on perceived market needs. This program was designed with direct employer feedback.

“That’s really what was different is that, rather than us forcing a curriculum onto the public, it really was a partnership, where they described what they wanted to do,” Falter said.

Christopher DiLoreto, superintendent of the Jackson Local Schools, went through an MBA program himself a few years back and, though it was valuable, he realized it was sometimes a challenge to apply those lessons to the K-12 setting. That experience, coupled with efforts to proactively attract, retain and develop future leaders, made him think a more specialized MBA would be a good experience for potential K-12 administrators.

Baby Boomers are retiring and leaving the field, DiLoreto said, and there just aren’t as many people in the next generation to fill those needs. Plus, superintendents haven’t been staying in the role for many years.

“And, on top of that, the job itself has become really challenging,” he said.

Ultimately, Walsh’s new program is designed for succession planning, Falter said, helping districts promote potential leaders from within. The program brings together Walsh’s MBA content with its graduate education program. Additionally, there’s a co-op component, Falter said, and the curriculum overall aims to focus on education-related examples and case studies, instead of the more traditional corporate ones used in many MBAs. And graduates will not only earn their MBA, but also a certificate that allows them to serve as a school district business manager or treasurer in the state.

Falter said the superintendents Walsh talked to were interested in that being part of the program, as it would give future superintendents the financial skills they need to lead.

The program is open to anyone, but participants have to be willing to make the drive for the in-person portions on Thursdays. And they need some sort of recommendation or show of support from their school district, Falter said.

Conversations around potential curricula began in the fall of last year, and classes started in July.

Falter said he could see Walsh adding other MBA concentrations to meet direct employer needs like this in the future, in areas like health care or manufacturing management. It's a "competitive marketplace," he said, and it benefits colleges and universities to be "nimble and entrepreneurial."

DiLoreto said the Jackson schools had reached out to other local universities as well, with the idea for such a specialized MBA, but it was Walsh, particularly Falter, that was open to taking on the challenge.