

FACTIVA**DOWDONES**

Decatur

Va. educator says she's a match for Decatur

Bayne Hughes

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Elizabeth Thomas believes her priorities, skills and proven record make her the best choice for Decatur superintendent.

Thomas, retiring superintendent of Grayson County, Va., Public Schools, interviewed for the job Monday. She was the fourth of five finalists to undergo the process. The school board is seeking a successor to Sam Houston, who is retiring June 30.

Sandra Spivey, director of secondary education in Madison County, will interview today from 4 to 6 p.m. at Ingalls Harbor Pavilion. School board President Karen Duke said the board hopes to make a decision on the position by mid-May.

Thomas, a former special education teacher, alternative school principal and central office coordinator, is retiring in Virginia on June 30. The 55-year-old would be able to draw her Virginia retirement based on her \$102,500 salary and earn a second salary with a job in another state.

Thomas said she is looking for the right job, and she believes it's in Decatur. She was the first of the candidates to present the board with a written plan for her first 90 days, if hired.

She described her plan to a crowd of about 20 people at Ingalls Harbor as an audit of the school system involving students, school board, administrators, teachers, support staff and the community.

"I would look at all essential reports, data and costs," Thomas said. "I would look at what we do well, what needs improving and what needs to be eliminated."

Yvonne McCord has attended all four interviews. She said Monday that she was "impressed with her (Thomas') credentials and knowledge."

Local architect Fred Underwood called Thomas "a very bright woman." He said he appreciated her honesty when discussing the differences in her school system and Decatur.

Thomas' district in rural Grayson County, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia, is much smaller than Decatur. Her system has 2,000 students; Decatur has 8,700.

She did work at Washington County, Va., which has 7,400 students, and 6,900-student Wise County.

Grayson County's schools are 94 percent white. Decatur's school system is 66 percent white. One thing the systems do have in common is poverty. Grayson County has a 60 percent rate and Decatur's rate is close to 55 percent.

"Poverty is a condition that needs to be addressed," Thomas said. "These children need a greater support system and enhanced education opportunities."

Thomas said she has been successful in closing the achievement gap between white and black students.

“Our African-American children actually scored better in math,” she said.

Thomas said she likes to use a combination of traditional and “zero-based” budgeting. While traditional budget bases expenses over the previous year’s expenses, zero-based requires a justification for each item budgeted.

Despite cutting about 30 teachers and staff because of proration in recent years, she said zero-based budgeting allowed her system to give an 8.1 percent raise last year.

A former career-tech supervisor in Washington County, Thomas said she wrote a handbook on career tech that is used throughout Virginia. She said it’s important that industrial certification is available and wants students involved in community projects that teach problem-solving and give them real-life experiences.

Thomas toured Chestnut Grove Elementary School with school board member Donnie Lane on Monday morning. She said she was impressed with the city’s initiative to provide every fifth-grader a Netbook computer.

“This is something we need to expand in any district, whether it’s a Netbook or an iPad,” Thomas said.

Thomas said her school division partners with a neighboring school division on a special needs school. She is particularly proud of that school’s autism program.

She said her school system has had success with the **iStation** program that assesses reading and math skills and helps develop intervention strategies.

“This has allowed us to keep less students from going into special ed,” Thomas said.

While she said advanced placement and International Baccalaureate are excellent programs, Thomas said her system prefers dual enrollment classes that help students get a head start on college. Some even earned associate degrees before finishing high school.

“This has really been financially beneficial to our students,” Thomas said.

Elizabeth Thomas

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Age: 55

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Current position: Superintendent of Grayson County Public Schools in Independence, Va., seventh year.

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Career highlights: Supervisor of career tech, alternative education and adult education, Washington County, Va., Public Schools, 2000-06; transitional coordinator, alternative school principal, vocational evaluator and transitional coordinator, teacher, Wise County Public Schools, 1989-2000.

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