



MORTON
UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

Nov. 19, 2021

Morton School Board chooses new assistant superintendent

In accepting the offer to become assistant superintendent in Morton District 709, Joe Sander is coming full circle.

The 50-year-old Sander, an East Peoria native and currently the assistant superintendent at Washington Community High School, began his administrative career as assistant principal and dean at Morton High School in 2004-05. He, wife Jennifer and their four children have called the community of Morton home since 1997.

Leaving District 709 after one year to take a principalship in East Peoria “was one of the hardest professional decisions I ever had to make,” said Sander. “It’s just a great community and a great school district with an amazing staff.



Dr. Joseph Sander

“I’m excited to come back.”

Meanwhile, the current District 709 administrative team is very much looking forward to having him on board.

“He has a great deal of administrative experience at many grade levels, including the district office level,” said Assistant Superintendent Craig Smock, whose elevation to superintendent in the 2022-23 school year creates the vacancy that Sander will fill. “He has made a positive impact everywhere he has been due to his integrity and tireless work ethic ... I know that he will be a great fit for our school community.”

Superintendent Jeff Hill concurred: “Dr. Sander’s experience, skills and knowledge of our community will make for a very smooth transition. We are excited about the contributions he will bring!”

Sander has accumulated a wide array of experience in his 28 years in public education. In his current job at Washington High, he has served as chief financial officer with responsibility for a \$20 million annual budget, has overseen curriculum and student achievement, has developed and managed evaluation programs for teachers and other staff, has been the point person on \$25 million in capital improvements to the Washington High campus, and has secured some \$935,000 in grants for various school projects.

Prior to the last decade in Washington, he was a principal at the elementary and junior high levels in East Peoria Grade School District 86. He began his career as a high school math teacher in Washington.

Part of the appeal of returning to Morton was rounding out his résumé at a unit, or kindergarten through 12th grade, district, with all of the full-spectrum educational challenges that poses, said Sander, who is no stranger to Morton school officials. As chairman of the regional Illinois Association of School Business Officials, he has worked closely with Morton CFO Lisa Kowalski, and was previously a colleague of Troy Teater, the district’s director of curriculum and technology.

“I’m looking forward to working with a great team,” he said.

If he were to describe himself, “I’m a commitment kind of guy” who takes a very hands-on approach to his duties, running the gamut from food service to the classroom to driving a bus, said Sander, who continues to serve as a squadron

officer in the Illinois Air National Guard in Peoria. “If I can help out in any capacity, I’m going to do it.”

As a leader, “I like to engage with everyone,” he said. As an educator, “I’ve always subscribed to the continuous improvement model,” he said, taking pause at the end of the day to consider what was accomplished and what could have been done differently, or better.

Adaptability is the key to being a successful educator in the 21st century, said Sander, noting that when he started in the profession, students didn’t even have cell phones. “Technology,” he said, “has changed the way we do business.”

Sander received his bachelor’s degree from Illinois State University, later did graduate work at Bradley and Western Illinois universities, and earned his doctorate from Aurora University in 2016. He has three sons and a daughter, ranging from an eighth grader at Blessed Sacrament Catholic School in Morton to a sophomore and senior at Notre Dame High School in Peoria – his alma mater -- to a sophomore at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

The Morton School Board will make Sander’s appointment official at its next meeting on Dec. 14. He starts work in the district on July 1, 2022.

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