

LEXINGTON

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School chief earns marks of distinction

By Sally Heaney, Globe Correspondent | May 13, 2004

Ronald J. Fitzgerald retires in August after 28 years as superintendent of the Minuteman Regional Vocational-Technical School District. He will leave behind a high school program that in his view and that of others in the field has long endeavored to be cutting edge in its reach and grounded in academics at its core.

"The School Committee had the vision -- long before I came -- of being very insistent on two things," Fitzgerald, 70, said in an interview at Minuteman Regional High School in Lexington last week. "One, we will use technology, and two, we will offer the opportunity to prepare for college."

Lately, the high school has been winning praise for providing students with the skills and knowledge needed in today's high-tech world.

Last week, Minuteman was one of two vocational-technical schools in the state visited by Hans Meeder, a deputy assistant secretary with the US Department of Education. Officials from the Center for Technical Education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston selected Minuteman and Blackstone Valley Regional High School in Upton as the sites for the Meeder visit.

"I chose two schools that would best provide a model of academic and career-technical education success," said Sumner Rotman, director of the center. "You have to have the vision to get there. Ron has that vision, and the students and staff exemplify it."

David Tobin, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, said the Minuteman program is one of the best in the state.

"Under Ron's leadership, they have always developed new and innovative and state-of-the-art programs that are in demand," Tobin said. "Ron is a very thoughtful educator and very strong on research and very strong on articulating the instructional techniques that are effective in vocational education."

Minuteman was selected as one of the top 50 school sites for 2003 by the High Schools That Work national network of the Southern Regional Education Board. The network, which endeavors to improve career and technical education, includes 1,100 schools in 27 states. Minuteman Regional's biotechnology program has been nationally recognized, and, Fitzgerald said, 92 percent of the students who graduate from the school's technology or science programs go on to higher education.

So, when Meeder, who heads the federal Office of Vocational and Adult Education, came to Minuteman, the school showed off classes such as robotics, biotechnology, and pre-engineering -- disciplines that prepare students for the jobs of the future in the high-tech industries along nearby Route 128 and beyond.

Throughout the tour, the staff and students emphasized to Meeder that the Minuteman curriculum provides sound academics as well as hands-on learning.

Of course, like every vocational school in the state, Minuteman offers its students the kind of programs -- such as beauty salon, bakery, and auto shop -- that are directly applicable to work after graduation, but students in all of its courses are required to show solid achievement in academics, school officials said

"We focus on academics," said Nancy Weiss, a Minuteman School Committee member from Carlisle. "That separates us from other schools very quickly. We expect a lot of our students." Weiss has a child who graduated from Minuteman and now attends James Madison University and another child who is a junior at Minuteman.

Minuteman opened its doors in 1974, and Fitzgerald became superintendent of the 16-town district in 1976.

The towns in the district are Acton, Arlington, Belmont, Bolton, Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Dover, Lancaster, Lexington, Lincoln, Needham, Stow, Sudbury, Wayland, and Weston. There are 950 students enrolled in the school, according to October 2003 data.

Friction arose in the 1990s among the member towns because of state education funding mandates that created differences in what the communities pay to send their children to Minuteman, according to Fitzgerald. However, the School Committee and the member towns have always been supportive of the school and the education it provides, he said.

Over his years as superintendent, Fitzgerald developed approaches that emphasize

adapting studies to the learning styles of students and that allow for continuous improvement to the high school program.

Fitzgerald emphasizes what he calls "brain-compatible" education at Minuteman. All students take a one-page Brain Preference Test, which he developed, to help them recognize their learning style and find a career suitable to it.

"He matches the way the students learn to how they are being taught," Weiss said. The emphasis on quality is also part of his personal stamp on the school, she said. "Ron has put together a program for the school where everything is valued and monitored according to its quality for the students, the staff, and the community."

Fitzgerald said that in retirement he plans to finish a book on his approaches to education and to work as a consultant.

Students at Minuteman spend alternate weeks in the classroom and in the laboratory or workshop, putting what they have learned into practice.

"It gives meaning to the academics," Fitzgerald said. "So many of them are experiential learners who may be very bright, but who may be bored." He said the hands-on learning is the secret to motivating many students.

Minuteman offers fewer course electives than a regular high school. There are, for instance, fewer foreign language choices and no school band. However, students do get as much of English, math, and science fundamentals as they would at their local high schools, according to Fitzgerald.

"If you came here because you want to escape academics, go back," Fitzgerald said. "There are no opportunities anymore that don't demand excellence in communication ability, computation skills, and the ability to use a computer."

Fitzgerald said the emphasis on technology has been reinforced over the years by the schools' involvement with local businesses.

Students are given the opportunity to try out several different areas of interest. After they choose one, they can prepare for three different career tracks: to be a technician in their chosen field; to own a business in that field; or to go on to college.

"Our goal is to get the students to find what they love," said Fitzgerald. "This is the most important gift we can give."

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