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## SCHOOL

## Pathfinder Superintendent to retire

School Committee selects Eric Duda

PALMER – For the first time since 1974, the Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School District will soon have a change in its top leadership. As a career and technical high school, Pathfinder Tech features 16 technical programs and robust academic offerings, including honors and Advanced Placement courses, to students in the district's nine member towns of Belchertown, Granby, Hardwick, Monson, New Braintree, Oakham, Palmer, Ware and Warren, as well as to students through non-resident Chapter 74 tuition and school choice.

Superintendent Gerald Paist has served the district for 48 years and plans to retire as of June 30. At the last meeting of the Pathfinder Tech School Committee, members unanimously selected current Assistant Superintendent/Principal Eric Duda as the school's next superintendent effective July 1, subject to successful contract negotiations. Following the meeting Paist expressed his solid support for the committee's choice. "I could not think of a better individual to take my place," he said. "We have had a wonderful relationship and have worked side by side for the past few years; I'm excited about the future!"

Paist began working at Pathfinder Tech in 1974 after serving as a member of the administration at Westfield State College for six



Eric Duda



Turley Publications file photos

Pathfinder Regional School Superintendent Dr. Gerald Paist is retiring this June after 48 years with the district. Pathfinder Regional Vocational High School Principal Eric Duda, and assistant superintendent, has been chosen to fill the position after Paist retires. Here Paist is seen at Pathfinder's 2018 graduation.

years. He was in fact the fourth superintendent for a school that was only 2-years-old, a fact that suggests a rough beginning in the early days of the district. For the past several years, he has been the longest serving superintendent in the

commonwealth. When asked why he has served so long, he said, "It has been a wonderful place to work. We have an extraordinary faculty and staff, students who want to be here, supportive member communities, and a terrific School Committee"

Paist's tenure at Pathfinder Tech has been marked by periods of growth. Early enrollment in 1973 included approximately 325 students; in recent years, enrollment has increased to over 600 students. In addition, the number of member communities has expanded from four to nine and the program offerings have risen from ten to sixteen. School Committee Chairperson Julie Quink recently paid tribute to his work:

"The success of Pathfinder and the academic successes of its current and former students have been under your watchful eye and care for nearly a half century," she said. "The relationships that you have built with community members and member town has created a strong foundation upon which future administration can continue to build in moving Pathfinder forward in new directions and paths."

Eric Duda himself attended Pathfinder Tech as an electrical student from 1996 to 2000. Following graduation, he enrolled at Western New England University to study electrical engineering and graduated with a bachelor of science degree in 2004. He then worked as an engineer in industry until, by chance, he ran into Paist at a time when Pathfinder Tech was seeking an instructor in electronics technology. With his subsequent hiring for that position, his career at Pathfinder Tech began an upward trajectory.

He served as an electronics instructor from 2006 through 2013, subsequently earning the Pioneer Valley Excellence in Teaching Award and was appointed department head for that program. In recognition for his outstanding teaching and valuable service on a number of committees and activ-

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ities, he was promoted to vocational director in 2013 where he oversaw instruction and curriculum in all programs. From 2014 to 2017 he also took on the added responsibilities of being a cooperative education director and expanded that program beyond expectations.

In his current role of assistant superintendent/principal, he has had his finger on the pulse of virtually every aspect of the day-to-day operation of the school. He has led the charge in a multitude of initiatives that have led to positive outcomes, including an unprecedented rise in MCAS scores and an increase in the rigor and diversity of programming.

His effectiveness as a leader has been especially evident through the current pandemic when he found it necessary to respond to multiple federal, state, and local officials with ever changing rules and regulations regarding the health and safety of students and staff. That responsibility has been carried out flawlessly.

Duda is no stranger to the local political landscape. He was elected to the Palmer Town Council in 2009 and was that body's president in 2010 to 2011. He also served on the Charter Commission as a member and clerk. Today, he serves as an elected member of the Planning Board in his town of residence.

During his interview with the committee, he proposed a number of initiatives, including robust outreach efforts to district students and their families; maintaining positive relations with member town officials; updating the school's strategic plan; and the possibility of new technical programs.

In 2011, Duda earned his master of education degree in school administration from American International College and is currently pursuing his PhD. He enjoys time with his wife, Jen, and their three children.

Pathfinder Tech's 16 program offerings include advanced manufacturing, automotive technology, business technology, CAD/pre-engineering, carpentry, collision repair, cosmetology, culinary arts, electrical, electronics technology, health assisting, horticulture, hospitality management, HVAC-R, plumbing and programming and web development.

Students interested in being considered for the 2021-2022 school year may submit an application at <https://www.PathfinderTech.org>.