dallasnews.com
The Dallas Morning News

Plano ISD's 'numbers guy' superintendent pick shows his human side

By THEODORE KIM
Staff Writer
tkim@dallasnews.com

Published: 14 April 2012 10:13 PM

Richard Matkin remembers dribbling a basketball on rocky ground because he was far from any courts growing up in rural East Texas.

He recalls being teased and nicknamed "Country" in high school for his thick drawl. He once drove school buses while also teaching and tutoring to make ends meet.

So imagine the fulfillment that came Thursday when Matkin, who worked his way up from algebra teacher to administrator, was named the lone finalist to become the next superintendent of the 55,000-student Plano ISD.

"I'm coming into this position as very humble. I'm grateful for the opportunity," said Matkin, 60. "I've got an open mind and the ability to communicate with either staff or the community on what we need to do."

He will replace the man who hired him at Plano ISD in 2001, longtime chief Doug Otto. Matkin, who has filled in for Otto on an interim basis since February, is slated to begin his new duties May 3 after a state-mandated waiting period.

Matkin's forte is numbers. He was hired as the district's chief financial officer. Yet during a wide-ranging interview in his Plano office, Matkin detailed a life at odds with his staid suit-and-tie image as "the school finance guy."

He grew up the second of three children in the East Texas community of Pittsburg, home of Pilgrim's Pride chicken and Cavender's boots.

His grandparents farmed cotton and cattle. But they drilled the importance of education into his parents, Paul and Jewell — both of whom eventually became teachers. His father also worked as an engineer for General Dynamics.

Matkin's career path was set early on. Not only were his parents teachers, but so were his sisters, Mary Ann and Paula. Both of them also married teachers. Matkin's daughter, Natalie, teaches as well.

His parents "always impressed upon us: The most important thing to have in life is an education. My dad's philosophy was: Education is better than a life insurance policy. Throughout your life, if you've got an education, you can adapt to anything."

That advice came in handy for Matkin, who initially pursued his first love, basketball. As a sixth-grader, he played on concrete courts at First Baptist Church in Pittsburg. At home, he dribbled on the only hard surface available: rocks.

"I lived with a basketball in my hands," he said.

After his father was transferred to a plant in Fort Worth, the 6-foot-tall Matkin played at Southwest High School, where he developed an unshakable nickname.

"Everybody in the school called me 'Country' because of my accent," said Matkin, whose roots are still apparent today in his deep drawl. "To this day, people don't even know my name from high school."

A scholarship to play in junior college followed. Then came a stint at Division III Austin College in Sherman, where Matkin played point guard under Bob Mason, a revered coach at the school.

"From coaching style to lifestyle to the way I felt like you need to model yourself as an educator, I give all the credit to Bob Mason," Matkin said. "He was just a very unique individual."

Matkin wanted to coach, too. Yet after his marriage to Debbie and the birth of the first of his two children, Matkin's priorities shifted to family and thoughts of a career change.

So began a whirlwind few years when he began to take accounting classes even as he taught high school math and picked up odd jobs for extra cash.

"In the hardest times, I got up and drove a bus on the early routes, taught all day, then went to school two nights a week," Matkin said. "Then to make a little extra money, I tutored at Cedar Valley Community College in their math lab. It's what all young families do: You juggle a bunch of different balls."

Those long days and nights paid off. His accounting and teaching backgrounds positioned him to thrive in a niche field: school district finance. A flurry of administrative jobs ensued: at Red Oak, DeSoto , Carrollton-Farmers Branch, White Settlement and Duncanville before Plano.

Otto said in an interview that having Matkin as a successor is "an honor."

"Richard's been on my team for over 10 years," Otto said. "I'm very proud of him."

Matkin was certainly a popular choice. His nomination drew a lengthy standing ovation and praise from staff members, city officials and other stakeholders who attended Thursday's Plano school board meeting.

His supporters have pointed to his knowledge of finances as a key attribute. The district faces tight budgets for the foreseeable future, as well as crowding at some schools and rising poverty rates.

But Matkin hopes his people skills will leave a longer legacy than his number-crunching prowess. When his nomination for superintendent made headlines this past week, Matkin said, he received emails from math students he taught decades ago.

"It was like, 'Are you the same Mr. Matkin that taught me algebra at DeSoto Middle School in the '70s?'" Matkin said. "It is unbelievable to hear from junior high students that you know remembered your name from so long ago.

"You know you must have done something right."

AT A GLANCE: Richard Matkin

Age: 60

Experience: Interim superintendent of Plano schools since February. Had served as Plano's associate superintendent of business services since 2001. Previously served in various roles for school districts in Duncanville, White Settlement, Carrollton-Farmers Branch, DeSoto and Red Oak.

Education: Austin College, bachelor of arts degree, master of arts degree, certified public accountant

Home: Married with two children

Nickname at home: "Pops"

On challenges ahead: "Any organization has to continue to retool. You can't stand still or you fall behind. Industry finds it that way. ... Society and everything changes, and you've got to move with that. And in the school business and with school boards, it's my job to bring it all together. That relationship with the community, with the board, with staff. ... It's a huge challenge that you work on daily to say how you will meet all those different needs."