

Adams, Rito headed to Independence, Mo.

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Graduates are not the only people who will end their time in the district as the school year closes. Two of USD 480's experienced principals announced this week they'll be moving on when their contracts end this summer.

Liberal High School principal Keith Adams announced to his staff Friday morning that he'll leave the district. South Middle School School principal Gib Rito told his staff on Thursday that he, too, plans to move. Both men have accepted positions in Independence, Mo., the district where former USD 480 superintendent of schools Lance Stout now works. Stout left Liberal at the end of the 2012-13 school year.



"This was the best decision for me and my family," Adams said. "There are lots of opportunities,

and it seemed like the right fit.”

With a son poised to graduate from Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell and ready to enter the job market, Adams said a move east would provide family support and more options for his son. One daughter, currently enrolled at Seward County Community College/Area Technical School “is keeping her options open,” Adams said.

There’s also the lure of geographic proximity to extended family. Both Adams and his wife grew up in southern Missouri, and their parents still live in that area.

“This will be a lot closer to them,” Adams said.

Though he’s a Southwest Kansas native from Leoti and doesn’t relish the thought of being farther away from his own parents, Rito, too, cited family as the driving force behind his choice to leave Liberal.

“It’s a decision for my family,” he said. “I’ve got my girls going to K-State, and my younger daughter is in eighth grade this year. I didn’t want to pull her out of high school in the next four years, so if we were going to be closer to the older girls, it had to be this year.”

Rito said his wife, the head counselor at LHS, hopes to find a position in the Independence school district. The couple’s youngest child will begin kindergarten in the fall.

As an administrator, Rito said, “I’ve always told my people that family comes first, no matter what — and this is one of those times I have to follow what I’ve said all those years.”

Rito, who’s worked for USD 480 for 14 years, began as an elementary school principal at Washington, and moved to South around the time the school was labeled as a school in crisis. The federal government threatened to seize control of SMS — where Stout himself had served as principal — if the district failed to turn it around within a specified time frame.

Under Rito's leadership, South crept out of the low-performance hole. Now, in Rito's words, "We have so many great things going on, I hate to leave."



One of the few administrators of color in the district, Rito said his bilingual skills and understanding of Hispanic culture helped him forge relationships with parents of students. That's been a key piece of his success in a district that's 79 percent "minority," of which 69 percent of the students identify as Hispanic.

"When I look at my background, the fact that I'm bilingual, that's been very supportive to our parents and students who are not," Rito said. "As I'm leaving, I would hope there will be other leaders who also relate to the community from the language and culture. When cultures are different, sometimes they're misunderstood. I say that with respect, it's not necessarily a negative thing, but it has an effect on how things unfold."

In Rito's new job, as an elementary school principal at a school with 500 students grades K to five, he'll be in charge of more children than he currently oversees at South. Still, the former Washington Elementary School principal said he's looking forward to working with the younger age group again. As to whether he'll see a need for his unique skill set in his new, Missouri surroundings, Rito is confident his experience at USD 480 will prove an asset.

"When you work with a lot of students who are at-risk or learning English, that's going to be valuable experience and help you wherever you go," he said. "From the work I do here, I am so used to looking at data. Whether I work with a large or small number of students in need, the skills I've acquired here are an asset."

Adams, too, has steered an at-risk school back to safety.

“I came to the district in the fall of 2003, was assistant principal three years and then head principal ever since,” he recalled. Adams inherited a challenging position. Around the time he was promoted, LHS found itself on the same federal watch list as South, threatened with federal takeover. Yet within a five-year period, the school improved scores and processes so much that it was ranked as one of Kansas’ top 10 high schools by the prestigious “U.S. News & World Report” list.

Former school board member Dan Diepenbrock has said repeatedly in public that the turnaround should be credited to Adams’ leadership and vision.

“This is the man who turned this school around,” Diepenbrock said, speaking as a citizen at a school board meeting in 2013.

Programs such as AVID, which identifies students whose underperformance might keep them away from college and grooms them to make the leap, Capturing Kids Hearts and Literacy First all helped, as did the addition of harder classes. During Adams’ leadership, LHS nearly doubled its roster of Advanced Placement (“AP”) classes to prepare students for college-level work.

Nonetheless, 2013-14 has been a rocky year for Adams and his team. He endured intense criticism from parents and the community when the school sought to implement a new, more consistent grading framework with “competency-based grading” elements. As the year winds down, it appears LHS has found a balance that satisfies most of the detractors.

Adams said his decision to move on was not connected to the tumult over grading methods.

“It’s always bittersweet to leave,” he said, but that is because “it’s hard to say goodbye to such an excellent staff. This community’s been very supportive, it’s been a good place to live and work. I have nothing but great things to say about LHS. It’s a wonderful place with wonderful people.”

In Independence, Adams will serve as an associate principal at Truman High School, one of three in the Kansas City-area community. The school enrolls around 1,700 students, about 400 more than LHS.

Both Rito and Adams will complete their contracts, overseeing summer school programs in June, before they leave Liberal. However, the next few months will be emotional, Rito said.

“We first came here back in 2001,” he said. “Our kids grew up here. It seems like the years have gone so fast. That’s why it’s so hard. We knew this was coming, that when my daughter got to the 8th-9th grade year, we’d have to make a decision. It got here so much faster than we expected.”

Moving, Rito said, “has a sad side to it. I appreciate the central office, the administration, all the support from the board. What has happened at South Middle School has happened because of support from many people in this district.”