With the unexpected retirement of Superintendent Kathleen Matusiak, the Irvington Union Free School District finds itself in a period of transition. In August, to help the district through this transition, the Board of Education hired Robert J. Roelle, Ed. D. to serve as Interim Superintendent of Schools for the 2011-2012 school year.

Dr. Roelle, is only here for one year, but arrives with over 40 years of experience in public education, most recently as the Superintendent of the Katonah-Lewisboro School District. While he plans to work with the School Board, the staff, and the community to make this school year a successful school year for all, the main focus of his position will be to help the district transition from one administration to the next. “From my vantage point, the most important thing is to work with the Board as they begin their recruitment process to hire the next superintendent,” he says. “My job over this 10½ month period is to really clear the path for the next superintendent, to hopefully make that transition as smooth as possible for whomever that might be.”

While he will not have any direct input into the search for Irvington’s permanent superintendent — (“I’m not going to be making any recommendations on what kind of superintendent that they look for.”) — he is familiar with the process, and knows just how seriously everyone takes this task. “I’m anticipating that the Board will be interviewing some search firms, and those search firms will share the process that they have used,” he explains. “It would seem to me that one of the most important questions that the Board will have is how the search firms will engage the various constituent groups into the selection process.”

Apart from the superintendent search, Dr. Roelle will be reaching out to different sections of the community as he prepares for his other main task for the year – next year’s budget. “Certainly one of the most important things that we’re going to address is to sort out how we prepare a budget against the mandated 2% tax rate cap,” he notes. “So that, in itself, will occupy a considerable amount of our time.” His experience in Katonah and elsewhere has given him a full appreciation of how difficult the process can be, but he comes to it pragmatically. “As a superintendent, you’re everybody’s superintendent. You’re not just superintendent of people who support the schools because they have children in the schools, but you’re the superintendent for those residents who are taxpayers but may otherwise be empty-nesters.”

While aware of the tension that has existed at times in the school district in the past, Dr. Roelle is focused on moving forward. “I have no opinion as to what has transpired in the district, but I do have a sense of what the role of a public school superintendent is, and much of that has to do with engaging the community in a way that builds confidence in the schools. I’m sure that
everybody in our community comes to that question about the confidence in the schools with a point of view that is, perhaps, built over time based on their experiences. So I accept that as a part of my role to address those issues. Be forthright. Really tell people what they need to hear, not necessarily what they want to hear."

“More than anything, I’m a strong advocate of public schools,” continues Dr. Roelle. “So it’s important from my vantage point to really achieve that role, not for myself, but for the schools that serve the children and for the next superintendent, so that he or she may find a greater sense of good feeling towards the school.”

With so much on his plate, Dr. Roelle could be excused if he came into the position with modest expectations. Instead, he’s looking to use his limited time in Irvington to help move the district forward. Asked what he needs to accomplish to feel satisfied in a job well done, he doesn’t hesitate. “If I can look back and say that we’ve had a successful school year,” he exclaims. “That we’ve not just stood still, but we’ve advanced faculty and staff to address the issues of our times – which would be addressing the core curriculum standards, addressing the new teacher/administration evaluation requirements, [gaining] support for the school administrative budget. And then just that ‘feel good’ thing, looking around and being able to say that I did my best and that people appreciate it.”