

Burkey served as superintendent in Grant for 16 years.

As a Bartley High school senior, he thought his future might be that of a place kicker on a college football team. When he wasn't kicking field goals in McCook at college a year later, he believed he'd become a mortician. As a sophomore he'd lost interest in the mortuary sciences and was on target to get his associate's degree, but Jon Burkey didn't really know what he was going to do—until a teacher reached out and inspired a career.

Burkey is retiring this week from McCook Community College, where he has been the physical resource director for the past seven and a half years.

Prior to that, he was a K-12 teacher, principal and superintendent for 33 years. Yet, it was his experience at McCook Junior College, and a certain teacher, who had a profound impact on his career path in education.

“When my speech teacher, Mrs. Crosby, asked me late in my sophomore year what I was going to do and I said I really wasn't sure, she said, “...well... you need to be a teacher,” Burkey recalls. That simple declaration was all it took.

“Somehow that one comment really got me to thinking about the possibilities,” Burkey said. He has been thinking about the possibilities ever since.

He went on to receive his bachelor's degree at Kearney State College in speech, theater and social sciences and also received a master's in speech communication.

He spent nine years teaching in Shelton and Holdrege before getting his second master's degree in school administration. He spent four years as principal at Wymore then received his specialist's degree in administration at Kearney and took a job as superintendent at Perkins County in Grant where he spent 16 years.

By 1998, Burkey said his three children had all graduated and he decided to apply for the superintendent position at McCook High School. It gave him the opportunity to come back and help take care of his mother and the chance for Pat to be closer to her family.

“You know on my second day as superintendent, a woman who looked familiar stopped by my office to congratulate me on the new position and she told me ‘I always knew you were going to amount to something,’” Then she said, “you probably don't remember me... but I said ‘Of course I remember! You're Miss Dutcher.’ That meant so much to me to have someone from my old college do that.”

Burkey said people like Flora Dutcher and the personal relationships he developed at MCC just underline what he believes to be one of the college's greatest assets—tradition.

“It starts with that one-on-one contact, things like people reaching out to make someone feel welcome. It never stops, and it extends throughout the community and not just from people working for the college. It's a pride thing, community wide, and it is genuine. This area embraces its proud college tradition and has taken ownership like few community colleges do.”

After four years as superintendent at McCook, Burkey received a call from an MCC staff member asking if he knew anyone on staff that might be interested in the college's vacant physical resource position. After considering what was involved and considering some of the stress and pressures of the superintendent position, he started thinking about the possibilities. Burkey asked his wife what she thought about him applying for the MCC job.

“She said, ‘I think you should do it, I'm ready for you to be out of the limelight,’” Burkey said. In his four years at McCook Public School, he'd been involved in a couple bond issues – which

brought controversy and stress.

“The superintendent is a much more political position and you’re a much bigger target on a daily basis and while you develop a thick skin sometimes you forget about how much public criticism affects those closest to you.”

He said the low-point of that criticism came when his own mother became the subject of a radio call-in comment during a bond issue debate.

While he said he enjoyed his time as superintendent and has a great deal of respect for the staff, administrators and board members, he decided it was time for a change and MCC offered a perfect opportunity.

“McCook College was the reason I went into the education field and my experience here had given me many wonderful opportunities. I always thought that if the opportunity ever presented itself, I wanted to be able to give back and I thought that maybe this job gave me that possibility,” he said.

He took early retirement from the superintendent’s job and began his stint at MCC in June of 2002—and some people claim he has had a hammer or screwdriver in his hand ever since.

“As a superintendent, change is often a gradual thing, implemented over time and sometimes it’s stressful and frustrating when you can’t seem to get the immediate change you’re striving for, but as physical resources director, you can work for both long-term planning while also making immediate, noticeable changes,” Burkey said. And that has been the thrill of his job.

In his seven-plus years at MCC, Burkey has been at the center of major renovations at most every building on campus – most notably major improvements at McMillen Hall with the establishment of the Hormel Family Technology Center for Business and Industry; construction of the black box theater and new music labs, and dedicated space for EMT programs in Tipton Hall; the addition of a graphic design program in Wrightstone.

In addition Burkey has implemented major renovations to the science laboratories in Barnett Hall, a total renovation to the lower level of von Riesen Library, and numerous other facility upgrades throughout the campus as well as expansion of an off-campus welding/machine shop facility the Center for Applied Science and Technology (CAST) at 112 E. Second, in McCook.

“In the past MCC used outside contractors for some of its remodeling projects, but under the leadership of Dr. Richard Tubbs and Dr. Michael Chipps, MCC became more proactive in breathing new life into buildings and grounds on a regular and planned basis,” Burkey said.

This philosophy has allowed Burkey to “imagine the possibilities” for each new set of improvements while matching function with practicality.

“I still have ideas—but that is my biggest regret—that I had more ideas than I have had the time to implement these ideas.”

Burkey said his ultimate hope is that these changes have made MCC a great experience for students, staff and faculty.

If there has been one project that seems to represent Burkey’s time at MCC, it is the bringing back the chimes on a permanent basis.

In 2006, Burkey led an effort to restore chimes and move them to the main floor of McMillen Hall. The chimes, first installed in the basement in 1939, had been retired there and relatively unused. They were “brought out” for special occasions, but after a restoration project and support from the McCook College Foundation, the chimes were “brought out of the dark,” restored, and have been a prominent part of campus the past several years.

The system is now housed at the south end of the first floor of McMillen Hall in solid oak cabinets built by Burkey and his staff.

“Like those chimes, there a lot of great gems on this campus just waiting to be brought out,” Burkey said. He believes there are still a number of gems—including the faculty and staff--on campus waiting for someone to imagine the possibilities.

Burkey and his wife plan to move closer to their children and would like to locate near Lincoln so they can be near their two daughters and grandchildren in Kansas and a son who lives in Pennsylvania.