



Photo by Kendra Gravelle

Coventry Schools Superintendent Craig Levis, left, stands with James Morris, the principal of Darfield High School, a high school located in Coventry's sister city of Selwyn, New Zealand, during a luncheon Tuesday.

# Different worlds

## Coventry schools get visit from town's 'sister city' in New Zealand

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**COVENTRY** — Some 9,000 miles from Rhode Island in a nation roughly the size of the state of Oregon, exciting possibilities await members of the Coventry High School community.

"This is just the beginning," Superintendent Craig Levis said during a luncheon he'd arranged to welcome James Morris to town during his visit to the United States. "We don't know where this will lead, but the key is to keep the dialogue open."

Morris is the principal of Darfield High School, a school of around 850 students located in Coventry's sister

city, the district of Selwyn in New Zealand. Having never visited Rhode Island before, Morris came to town this week hoping to forge a relationship between his school and its counterpart in the Northern Hemisphere.

"Long story short, I got an email connecting me to [Morris] about three or four months ago," said Levis, who several years ago had, himself, begun investigating ways to connect the high schools in Coventry and Selwyn.

Morris had been planning a trip to Toronto, and thought it might be a good opportunity to visit Coventry to meet members of the community and learn more about the school district.

The hope, Levis told a room full of

local leaders who'd gathered for Tuesday's luncheon, is for Coventry High School to build some sort of relationship with Darfield High School. Although he's not sure yet what that relationship will look like, Levis said he's eager to establish some sort of exchange program between the two schools.

Located in a rural area around 30 minutes from the city of Christchurch, Selwyn District covers nearly 2,500 square miles and boasts a population of around 62,000. Because the district isn't very diverse, culturally, Morris said his school has striven to build a strong international program.

See **WORLDS**, page A3



## Worlds

Continued from page A1

"The thing you don't realize until you go and experience it is how valuable it is just to sit down with people and share food, go to their home," Morris said, as around him various community members mingled and fixed plates at a buffet table. "We're all human, and even in countries where the language is difficult, you can still find ways of communicating directly."

The benefits of forming relationships with schools in other parts of the world are many, Morris added.

"You learn from seeing what is the same and what is different," he said. "You find out what works well in one

system and maybe apply it to yours."

Morris said it's been interesting to compare schools in the United States with those in New Zealand. One of the biggest differences, he said, is that schools in his country are self-managing, funded directly by the federal government.

"He runs his own show, he works with the New Zealand government," Levis added. "As we know, in Rhode Island, funding is a little different."

Morris said the system gives him "heaps of freedom" when it comes to overseeing school staffing and programming — unlike here, where those things depend largely on local and state funding, Morris is able to manage Darfield High School how he sees fit.

But there are also disadvantages to the schools being self-managed, Morris said. Because schools in Selwyn aren't part of a school district, local schools miss out on the collaboration opportunities that schools in Rhode Island are afforded.

"We're not as good at working together as they are here in Coventry," Morris said, adding that having special educators who float between schools, for example, could really benefit students at Darfield.

"That's something that in New Zealand we're trying to do a lot better at, is how do we get schools to work together," he continued. "We don't want to be competing."

As for things being done at Coventry High School that he'd like to emulate, Morris said he's impressed

by the partnerships the Coventry Career and Technical Center has formed with area businesses.

Coventry isn't the only town considered a sister city to Selwyn. A couple cities in Japan, one in China and the White Mountains of New Hampshire each also share relationships with the New Zealand district.

Morris said he's enjoyed seeing how some of those other relationships have evolved over the years, adding that interactions with the cities and schools have varied. In some cases, students and teachers have visited Selwyn through exchange programs. In other instances, meetings have occurred via Skype.

"You can't predict what the value's going to be because you don't know what a relationship might

bring," Morris pointed out.

Still, Morris and Levis both seem excited about the possibilities.

"Just in the day that I've been here, the things I've learned about your system and your schools have been valuable," Morris said.

Speaking to a room full of community leaders, including both the police and fire chiefs, as he flipped through slides that showed photographs of Selwyn and shared tidbits about Darfield High School, Morris said he hopes his visit this week can help "keep momentum going."

"There have been some useful interactions," he added, as he thanked those in attendance for their warm welcome. "It's great if we can keep the relationship building."