

SCHOOL EXEC CONNECT
WEST ST. PAUL-MENDOTA HEIGHTS-EAGAN AREA SCHOOLS
SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

January 12, 2017

The School Board of the West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools requested that School Exec Connect consultants gather data from members of the Board, staff, students and community regarding the search for a new superintendent. To gather this data, individual interviews and/or focus groups were held with School Board members, district and building administrators, teachers, support staff, community members, and students. Three community forums were held on the afternoon and evening of January 4, 2017. Approximately 120 individuals participated in the interviews. They were asked to express their views regarding the most important goals for the school district to accomplish in the next 3 years, to list the district's greatest strengths and challenges, and to describe the attributes, skills and characteristics desired in the new superintendent.

This report lists the responses from each of the constituent groups. Due to the sampling methodology, this report should not be construed as scientifically accurate. The opinions set forth in this report may not reflect the opinion of the majority of staff or district residents, but do reflect the opinions of those who chose to participate. Judgments regarding what is included in this report are those of the consultants, based upon the frequency of statements received throughout the data gathering process.

The consultants utilized the opinions expressed in this report in developing the ***New Superintendent Profile***. Responses from a survey asking the same questions available through the district website were also used to develop the ***Profile***.

This report may be used in several ways. The responses should be helpful to the Board as candidates are screened and interviewed. The Board should review this report to become informed about the perceptions of the constituent groups and for possible questions to utilize with candidates during the search process. The consultants also recommend that this report be given to the newly appointed superintendent for a better understanding of the issues and opportunities facing the district.

CONSTITUENT GROUPS

West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools

Where there were multiple similar responses from a group, the number is listed behind the response. In some cases, the responses were given in a focus group setting and answers may represent more than one respondent.

MEMBERS OF THE BOARD

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Address facility needs (6)
- Continue to improve student achievement and close academic achievement gaps (5)
- Continue implementation of the Strategic Framework (2)
- Hire an effective superintendent (2)
- Build trust between staff and administration (2)
- Continue Tri District collaboration
- Address changing demographics and the differences in our schools with regard to race and economics
- Maintain the positive Board and Cabinet culture
- Work toward more collaboration and minimize the competitive environment between schools
- Integrate technology connected to learning and effectively use the devices we have
- Avoid drastic changes

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Solid implementation of Strategic Framework (3)
- Skilled and enthusiastic administrators (3)
- Good teachers (3)
- Positive public perception of school district (2)
- Improved district collaboration rather than the previous competitive silos (2)
- Strong superintendent (2)
- Incredible parent support (2)
- Financial stability
- Tri District collaboration

- Transparent School Board
- Successful technology referendum
- Respectful, forthright, candid, transparent environment
- Maximized use of current facilities so people see a need for updates/improvements
- Decentralized, strong sense of identity in individual schools
- Manageable, small elementary schools

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- Environment of fear and mistrust between teachers and administrators and principals and superintendent (5)
- Facility/Deferred maintenance needs (5)
- Changing demographics and diversity lead to inequities (4)
- Giving equal footing to each of the Strategic Framework goals
- Too many initiatives for teachers
- Strong finances challenge us to achieve academic return on our investments
- West St. Paul residents' tax increase due to Robert Street construction
- Balancing staffing: Are we too top heavy at the district level?
- Serving many different cities
- Parents working 2 to 3 jobs and unable to help their kids

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Career history with broad, deep experience, a progression of responsibilities and strong knowledge base (6)
- Strong communicator with the ability to speak and connect with a wide variety of individuals with similar and diverse perspectives (4)
- Collaborator (4)
- Innovator (2)
- Process person who plans and follows through (2)
- Transparent (2)
- Trustworthy (2)
- Good listener (2)
- Strong public presence (2)
- Views diversity as an asset (2)
- Loves our district and wants to stay here (2)
- Healer of rifts

- Honest
- Ethical
- Sense of humor
- Accountable to our rigorous McRel evaluation system
- Can lead the campaign for new facilities
- A good delegator
- Secondary school experience

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- What value do test scores have?
- What is the best thing about our district?
- How have you lobbied for educational funding?
- Why this position now?
- What is attractive about District 197?
- How bold are you willing to be?
- What is your solution for the opportunity gap?
- What kind of opportunities do you give Board members and principals to communicate with each other?
- What is your management style?
- What is the best way to motivate people?

SUPERINTENDENT AND CABINET

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Next iteration of Strategic Framework with implementation plans (2)
- Facility plan with citizen involvement and possible Spring 2018 Bond (2)
- Continue work on bridging the achievement gap (2)
- Crafting a vision of equity/personalized learning blended together (2)
- Development of our brand

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Financial stability with 16-17% fund balance due in part to student enrollment increases and passage of 2011 operating referendum (2)
- Vanguard teacher led implementation of personalized learning (2)
- Strong continuous improvement process in place
- Cabinet working together collaboratively
- Strong leadership teams in our schools
- Supportive, trusting School Board who follow the governance model
- Strong families and students
- Tri District collaboration
- Community support

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- Building leaders who prefer to work autonomously in silos rather than in teams to accomplish our personalized learning vision (2)
- School inequities due to demographic changes coupled with parent choice facilitate the need to look at transportation/boundary changes and enrollment options
- Skepticism by some of the community that our facilities are "good enough"
- Facility needs

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Strong communicator, good listener (2)
- Collaborative, team player (2)
- Strong business acumen (2)
- Relationship builder with strong engagement skills and presence in the community
- Understanding of changing demographics
- Supportive of one to one sustainable technology model
- Instructional leader
- Sense of humor
- Friendly
- Ability to stick to his/her guns
- Work/Life balance
- Strong delegator
- Visionary strategic planner

- Organized
 - Focused
 - Change agent
- 5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?**
- What is your experience with facilities planning and referenda?
 - What is the role of the superintendent in ensuring that all students achieve at high levels?
 - What is your vision for personalized learning?
 - What is your role in promoting equity?.

BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS

- 1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.**
- Addressing the achievement gap
 - Addressing facility needs
 - New approaches to address the needs of struggling students
 - Addressing equity needs
 - The need to serve all our students. Need to address college and career readiness
 - Excellence for all
- 2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.**
- Relatively stable Cabinet and building administrators
 - Supportive parents and community
 - Great kids with a rich mixture of diversity
 - A nice-sized high school and school district. Large enough for a variety of offerings, small enough for participation
 - Building administrators know their communities well
 - A School Board very supportive of a move to career and college readiness
 - Diversity
 - Strong financial base
 - Excellent partnerships
- 3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.**

- The loss of students to other educational options
- Enrollment projections point to a loss of students
- The need to make decisions that are equity based, not equality based.
- A lack of staff that reflect the make-up of our student population
- A lack of trust within the organization
- The need to “simplify” the strategic plan
- Diversity
- Resistance to change
- Competition between schools

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- A galvanizing person who can unite various communities
- Strength-based leader
- A leader of leaders
- A visible and involved leader in the district and the community
- Supports the provision of resources based upon equity needs
- A high degree of professionalism
- Strong relationship building skills
- Personable
- Helps others grow
- Honors input from others
- Agrees with our current Strategic Framework
- Someone who can simplify the plan so we can go deeper (bring focus)
- A bold leader, risk-taker
- Someone driven by student needs
- A strong curriculum and instruction background
- A learner
- Visionary

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- Give an example of how you have galvanized a community around a big issue (i.e., a referendum campaign)
- Why us?
- What do you think of our Strategic Framework?
- What is your big, audacious goal?
- What is your plan for our magnet schools?

- What do you see as our strengths?
- How is the Superintendency here different from your current position?
- How do you increase school district partnerships to create win/win opportunities?

TEACHERS

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Move our Strategic Framework forward (2)
- Address equity issues and the achievement gap (2)
- Academic excellence
- Maintain our positive financial situation
- Stay competitive, we have so much private school competition
- Sustain the personal learning initiative
- Career and college readiness
- Tri District collaboration
- Unite the district, less competition and more cooperation
- Change the two middle schools to one 5-6 school and a 7-8 school. It would provide a better balance of diversity and class size.

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- The people I work with . . . great staff (3)
- Our diversity (2)
- Many veteran staff
- Excellent parent involvement
- Family friendly atmosphere
- Common goals and strategic vision
- The structure is in place to get where we want to go
- A growing student population
- Financial stability
- Use of technology
- Strong programs for students, both curricular and co-curricular
- Excellent staff development
- Parent academy
- District size

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- A huge socioeconomic and cultural gap in our district (2)
- Over-crowding in some buildings
- Facility needs, both size and maintenance
- Lack of honest conversation about equity
- Frequent leadership changes at the high school
- Large class-size
- Initiative fatigue
- Lack of resources for ELL, counseling and magnet programs
- Financial limitations
- "Information overload" make communications with the public difficult

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Experience addressing equity issues and working with diverse populations (2)
- Sees our Strategic Framework as something to build upon (2)
- Very visible in the schools and the community (2)
- Approachable, not intimidating (2)
- Strong communicator (2)
- Open and accepting
- Experience as a teacher
- Someone who will get to know us and vice-versa
- Gains feedback from stakeholders
- Celebrates successes
- Has a vested interest in all programs
- Collaborative
- Values input
- Courageous
- Able and willing to take specific action
- Ability to work well with the union
- Ability to manage the "we're going to be here after you leave" mindset which is a product of our revolving door of administrators
- Holds principals accountable

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- How would you address early childhood programming?
- What do you look for when hiring an administrator or teacher?
- Describe the type of educational environment you want for your own children.
- How do you support teachers?
- What percentage of the time should a principal be in the building?
- How are you going to unite the district and set a “we are one” collaborative tone?
- What will you do to inspire staff?
- How will you address the achievement gap?
- How will you get a greater percentage of students in our district to attend our schools?
- What are ways you have involved businesses and the greater community in schools?

SUPPORT STAFF

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Academic achievement
- Remaining fiscally responsible
- Communicating with families and earning their trust (in light of our changing demographics)

2. List your district’s three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Solid financial condition
- Excellent staff
- Strong test scores
- Good graduation rate

3. List your district’s three greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- Changing demographics brings language barriers, wide gaps in socio-economic levels and the need for more resources in communicating with parents and meeting students’ needs

- Capturing more than 64% of our resident enrollment is a challenge with so many school choice options within our district boundaries
- Transportation, with increased walking distances, is challenging for families

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to be successful.

- Financially savvy
- Transparent
- Outgoing
- Strong communicator
- Trust builder
- Broad experience working in a school district from the ground up

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- What has been your experience working with different demographic/socio-economic populations?
- Highlight the success you've achieved in a big initiative (changing boundaries, raising student achievement, passing a bond or referendum) that involved working with a variety of stakeholders in a previous position.

PARENT LEADERS

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Continue progressiveness and inclusiveness in providing programs or diverse populations, address the cultural disconnect, and invest in all students so they are connected
- Keep the positive momentum of our tech implementation integrated with instruction
- Use resources not currently used, such as FACS classroom and green screen
- More cross collaboration between elementary and middle schools to make the connections stronger with the goal of keeping more students in our schools

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- We have good principals, and the leaders in our schools work together well.
- Community liaisons and bi-lingual staff are inclusive and make all feel welcome.
- Amazing, unique programs at our schools, but we are all Warriors
- PAN (Parent Ambassador Network)

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- Aging facilities and infrastructure needs
- Security upgrades done poorly in a piecemeal fashion
- Naysayers who share outdated, inaccurate stories

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Effective communicator with a positive voice in our schools and communities
- Relationship builder
- Innovator
- Fiscally responsible
- Values diverse populations and has experience in diverse environments
- Outlines expectations for parents and works in partnership with families to meet their needs
- Able to drive the implementation and integration of our technology with instruction
- Able to maintain the positive momentum in the implementation of our Strategic Framework, and established structures and processes
- Able to effectively inform, educate and align stakeholders with diverse perspectives on the needs of our facilities

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- Why do you want to be our superintendent?
- What is your structure for parent input?

- What innovative strategies would you use to build a sense of community in our district?
- What are your thoughts on testing?
- Where do you fall on the spectrum of micro managing vs. hands-off?
- Talk about how you would have a presence in the schools.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Educating students to succeed at the next level -- 4 year college, vocational, work force readiness
- Continue partnerships with neighboring districts
- Keeping students at or above grade level
- A focus on school readiness
- Making sure all students are up to reading level by 3rd grade
- Creating unique experiences to compete with private schools
- Equity and excellence for all
- Hiring minority staff that reflect our diversity

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Many innovative programs
- A passionate, involved community—many who grew up here are moving back
- “Hands-on” experiences for students
- Positive partnerships
- Good financial condition
- Strong community support for schools
- Strong building leadership
- STEM programs
- Most see diversity as an asset
- A welcoming community

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- High needs in the student/family populations
- A lack of staff that reflects our diversity
- High competition with private and charter schools

- Serving multiple cities
- Facility needs
- Holding teachers accountable

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- A collaborative leader who can “leverage” the fact that the community sees the school as integral to its strength
- Someone who embraces diversity and sees it as an asset
- Inclusive nature
- A learner
- Community oriented
- Innovative
- A good “head coach”
- Enthusiastic
- Positive role-model
- A risk-taker
- Excellent interpersonal skills
- A proven track record of success
- Someone who can lead addressing our facility needs
- Makes decisions based upon student needs, not staff needs
- Bi-lingual

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- How are you going to get kids in school more days each year?
- How do you develop partnerships with the community, businesses, and neighboring districts?
- Why 197?
- What is your vision for our district?

STUDENTS

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- A focus on athletics as well as academics to build school pride
- A greater use of technology in instruction
- Addressing the achievement gap

- More emphasis on co-curricular arts programs (drama, music, etc.) Better music program at the Middle School
- Hire more minority staff to reflect the make-up of the student body
- Educate all teachers on cultural competence
- Use more curriculum materials that reflect different cultures
- Stronger early learning programs to increase school readiness

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Advanced placement classes
- A variety of options for students
- A very inclusive environment among the students
- Most teachers do a good job of connecting with students
- The ALMAS program is excellent
- Many clubs are available for students, and it is easy to start a new one
- Many cultures are present here

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- A lack of good coaches and management of the athletic programs
- A lack of integration of all cultures into all activities and advanced classes
- Diverse groups tend to "group" together
- Insults from some students toward others driven by the election results
- A lack of diverse staff
- Too much "cultural sameness" at the elementary schools
- A lack of acceptance by teachers of cultural differences in speaking style, writing style, etc.

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Someone who will be very visible in the schools, at events, and in the community
- Experience with diverse cultures
- Ready to work hard to make things happen
- Someone open to our input

- Approachable, comfortable, connects with students
- Confident and believable
- Experience as a teacher
- Likeable, a people person
- Has a good sense of how technology can be used
- Experience beyond the minimum needed
- Honest and transparent
- Outgoing
- Supports early learning programs

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- Describe how you worked with a difficult person.
- What are our main problems?
- Describe your experience with cultural diversity.
- What are three problems you want to fix?
- How do you connect with students?
- How do you deal with issues?
- How do you get views from others?
- What strengths does one need to be successful?
- What role do you see for student activities?
- Do you support excellence in student activities?

OPEN COMMUNITY MEETING -- ENGLISH

1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.

- Address both curricular and extra curricular facility needs while tying the quality of our facilities with a quality education (2)
- Keep positive momentum going on current academic initiatives – strategic framework (2)
- Put together a plan for marketing the district, celebrating accomplishments, and touting District 197 as a premier school district in the twin cities (2)
- Collect data on student achievement on a regular basis
- Tap into business development partnerships within the community
- Continue the alignment to Strategic outcomes. The structure to do so exists now.

- Keep the superintendent involved and active in the community
- Increase the use of technology in instruction

2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.

- Our diversity enhances our students' educational experience (2)
- Magnet schools, choice options (2)
- Diverse experiences for students, especially in the performing arts
- Supportive parents
- Nice size district
- Strong AP program
- Our students get a great education
- Top students are truly challenged and served well
- Partnerships between our city councils
- A management focus on measureable results
- Private school folks are supportive and want our public schools to do well

3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving those goals.

- Long-term neglect of the facilities
- Competition between district schools
- We do a poor job marketing ourselves
- Student turnover, especially low income families
- Catch 22 balancing wants with available funding
- A lack of common identity among families and students from different communities
- Teacher retention
- Unrealistic vision that everyone has to go to a four year college
- The achievement gap. We need more focus and specific strategies along with better engagement with the community.

4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.

- Agrees with the current district direction and wants to make it better
- Dynamic personality and can engage the community
- A strong curriculum and instruction background

- Runs the district like a CEO runs a business
- Can connect with the community, including non-parents
- Accountable to parents
- Sees addressing the achievement gap as a priority
- Cares about kids
- An excellent communicator, clear and concise
- Open-minded listener able to facilitate the dialogue of diverse perspectives
- Visible and engaged in the schools and community
- People person with a balance of heart and business skills
- Works hard and expects others to do the same
- Involvement with students and presence at their schools and their activities
- Comfortable using data to make decisions
- Open to new ideas
- Honest, high standards
- Retains quality staff and keeps them current with professional development
- Strong leadership skills
- Presents with purpose so people understand and then holds them accountable
- Approachable
- Collaborative
- Works well with unions
- Speaking Spanish would be an asset

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- What do you see as our biggest obstacle, and what is your solution to resolve it?
- How do you intend to hear, listen, and then craft direction?
- What defines a strong school community?
- How would you plan to get to know our community, students, and staff?
- How do you inspire administrators and teachers?
- Share your experience with diverse populations.
- Demonstrate your passion for meeting student needs.
- How would you reach out to immigrant families?
- How do you make decisions?
- How do you define academic return on investment?

OPEN COMMUNITY MEETING -- SPANISH

- 1. List the three most important goals for your school district to achieve in the next three years.**
 - Keep the positive momentum in the use of technology.
 - Look into resolving transportation issues: making schools accessible to our students by shortening the walking distances/providing transportation and creating larger areas for student pick-up.
 - Hire more Spanish speaking staff.
 - Create an immersion setting so we can be more involved in the schools.
 - Create more accessible, affordable options for athletics/activities.

- 2. List your district's three greatest strengths/attributes for achieving these goals.**
 - High quality educational programs for our students
 - Safe, secure schools
 - Assistance and outreach to Hispanic parents (Examples: Parent Academy and Garlough has interpreters, Spanish speaking staff, and everything sent home is in Spanish)

- 3. List your district's greatest challenges/barriers for achieving these goals.**
 - Access to transportation for school
 - Language barriers coupled with a shortage of interpreters and Spanish speaking staff
 - Homework is in English so helping our kids is difficult

- 4. Describe the three most important characteristics/skills the next superintendent needs to possess to be successful.**
 - Open and supportive to all of the diverse groups we have in our school community
 - Passionate person who loves what they do
 - Patient
 - Someone who listens to us, not necessarily to do what we say, but to listen to our perspective
 - Should be a parent because they'd have a better understanding of parents and students

5. What questions/areas would you like the Board to ask the candidates as they select the superintendent?

- What are your plans to involve Latino families? We might appear to be ignoring things because we do not know how to be involved.
- What would you be willing to do for the students in the district?
- What specifically would you do for the Spanish-speaking students in the DACA program?
- What is your academic vision for District 197? What is your academic vision for Latino students?
- Are you aware of how many immigrants we have in the district?