

MILTON TOWN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Analysis of the Desired Characteristics of the Next Superintendent

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March 12, 2018

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide the School Board and community stakeholders a summary of the findings from several superintendent search activities organized to solicit stakeholder feedback on the desired characteristics of the district's next superintendent. These activities included:

1. A web-based community survey; and
2. Two focus groups with key organization stakeholders, one organized for staff and the other for community members.

As a third source of data, I factored in my perceptions of the screening committee's work as it selected candidates for interviewing and conducting round #1 interviews. Since the screening committee was composed of a cross section of organizational stakeholders, its perceptions of the leadership needs of the organization relative to the qualifications of the applicants provide a useful perspective.

This report is brief since there was limited time between key search process events: the focus groups were held on 3/9, round #1 interviews on 3/10, and the board meeting where these findings will be discussed is scheduled for 3/12.

Web-Based Survey

The web-based survey was published in early February and was closed to new responses on March 1st. The survey received 378 responses. Respondents were asked to give feedback in three areas:

1. Desired superintendent expertise;
2. Desired superintendent experience; and
3. Desired personal characteristics of the new superintendent.

Additionally, respondents were asked to rate the status of the organization's current performance, and to give feedback on the future direction of the district.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held on March 9, 2018. The staff focus group was attended by 10 staff. All were educators including a librarian, teachers, and administrators. All grade levels were represented. Only four community members attended the community focus group, and two of these participants were board members and a third participant was a member of the press.

The focus groups were asked to react to the data from the web-based survey. Four questions were used to prompt their discussions.

1. What personal and professional qualities and attributes do you want the next superintendent to possess?
2. What is the most important focus of work for the new superintendent during the first 6-12 months on the job?
3. What are the positive aspects of your schools and the community you would want a candidate to be aware of?
4. What will you do to contribute to the success of the new superintendent?

Desired Superintendent Expertise

The survey asked respondents to respond to the following prompt:

Listed below are specific areas of expertise that different superintendent candidates may possess. From your perspective, how much weight should be placed on each area? Rate the importance of each area using the scale to the right.

The scale started at "1" with "Critically Important" and ended with "5" and "Relatively Unimportant. Of the expertise areas listed in the survey, the following areas were rated as being "critically important" by a significant majority of the respondents.

- Public Relations
- Curriculum Development and Evaluation
- Budget Development and Management

Analysis

The areas identified in the data are areas where I think all communities would expect superintendents to have some expertise. During the focus groups and screening committee process, it became clear there was a perception the district had sufficient capacity in many of these areas. **There was consensus, however, that the priority for the new superintendent should be on the communication skills and organizational leadership skills necessary to pull the organization together.**

Desired Superintendent Experience

The survey asked respondents to react to the following prompt:

Listed below are specific experiences and skill areas that could be important when evaluating the superintendent candidates. From your perspective, how much weight should be placed on each area? Rate the importance of each area using the scale to the right.

The same scale was used as the first part of the survey. Of the areas of experience listed in the survey, the following areas were rated as being "critically important" by a significant majority of the respondents.

- Experience working with diverse populations
- Exceedingly responsive
- Ability to think outside the box
- Strong communication skills with board members
- Excellent speaking skills with large and small groups
- Ability to develop and direct a management team
- Maintaining visibility with parents and community

Analysis

The need to address diversity issues emerged in the focus groups and in the screening committee, as did the need for effective and responsive communications. Another important theme was the ability of the new superintendent to work effectively with school board members. **I think it would be important for the new superintendent to be able to relate genuinely to many different types of people, and to be effective in resolving conflict in a respectful and transparent manner.**

Desired Personal Characteristics

The survey asked respondents to respond to the following prompt:

Listed below are personal characteristics that different superintendent candidates could possess. From your perspective, how much weight should be placed on each personality characteristic when assessing each candidate? Rate the importance of each using the scale to the right.

The same scale was used as in previous sections of the survey. Of the desired personal characteristics listed in the survey, the following characteristics were rated as being “critically important” by a significant majority of the respondents.

- Honest and ethical
- Approachable
- A strong communicator
- Transparent
- Problem solver

Analysis

I think these findings support the conclusion that interpersonal communication skills should be an important consideration in hiring the new superintendent. This perspective surfaced in the focus groups and was a theme of discussion by the screening committee. **I would place these findings in a broader theme that the new superintendent needs to be able to foster trust through effective and responsive communications including listening skills.**

Current Status of the District

This section was different from the other sections of the survey in that it asked respondents to give feedback on their perceptions of where the district was now in terms of its organizational performance. Respondents were asked to respond to the following prompt.

To help us understand where our next superintendent needs to lead us, we need to take stock of where we are today. From your perspective, how well does the District currently deliver on each of the key areas shown below? Rate the District on each area using the scale to the right.

The following areas were identified as being relatively more important than others by the respondents.

- Communications/community relations
- Culture of continuous improvement
- Culture of inclusiveness
- Responsiveness to the needs of the community
- Safe school environment

Analysis

These findings seem to support a theme about school culture that was identified in both the focus groups and the screening committee's work. There was a perception among staff that school culture has become less positive over the last several years, and the three schools do not necessarily share a common culture or vision. A related finding from the focus groups was there was a certain amount of "initiative fatigue" among the staff, and a perception that this work has in many ways undermined the positive school culture that existed previously. **This indicates to me that the new superintendent needs to be skilled in assessing the dynamics of school culture and making sense of the complexity of the current educational context in Vermont.**

Future Direction

The last section of the survey asked respondents to give feedback on the future direction of the district. Respondents were asked to respond to the following prompt.

In choosing the next superintendent, which path or strategy below do you think the District should take?

Respondents were asked to choose from among three options that could be characterized as: 1) staying the course, 2) incremental change, or 3) significant change. A large majority or 68% of the respondents indicated the district should, "Find a very different kind of candidate—one who is ready to take the district in a significantly different direction." When these data were disaggregated based on the different types of respondents, the following trend was identified.

- 72% of **staff** thought the district needed, "a very different kind of candidate"
- 73% of **community members** thought the district needed, "a very different kind of candidate"
- 86% of **students** thought the district needed, "a very different kind of candidate"
- 62% of **parents** thought the district needed, "a very different kind of candidate"

It is clear all respondents believe the new superintendent should be able to lead the district in a different direction.

Analysis

It is interesting to note that a significant majority of staff are looking for a new direction. This is somewhat surprising. In my experience, staff are usually somewhat more cautious about advocating for significant change. **I conclude the new superintendent needs to be able to articulate a future-oriented vision for the district that can bring people together while at the same time strategically positioning the district for success in a time of significant change.**

Conclusions

In summary, my analysis points to several key themes relative to hiring a new superintendent:

1. The new superintendent should have the communication skills and organizational leadership skills necessary to pull the organization together.
2. The new superintendent should be able to relate genuinely to many different types of people, and be effective in resolving conflict in a respectful and transparent manner.
3. The new superintendent needs to be able to foster trust through effective and responsive communications including listening skills.
4. The new superintendent needs to be skilled in assessing the dynamics of school culture and making sense of the complexity of the current educational context in Vermont; and
5. The new superintendent needs to be able to articulate a future-oriented vision for the district that can bring people together while at the same time strategically positioning the district for success in a time of significant change.

Another observation I would make is the district has experienced significant turnover in the superintendent position, and many mid-level managers are inexperienced and working under provisional licenses. Based on my experience, this means the district needs to work towards being able to grow leadership from within the organization. To do this, the new superintendent should be:

6. A leader that can inspire others; and
7. A leader skilled in distributing leadership to create opportunities and structures for new leaders to develop and practice their skills.