

Westford Superintendent Search Focus Group and Survey Summary

Introduction

The Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), in the role of Search Consultant to the Westford School Committee, conducted an online survey and series of focus groups to gather input from various stakeholder groups in the schools and community as part of the superintendent search process. The information gathered from the survey and focus groups will help guide the Preliminary Screening Committee and the School Committee in refining the questions asked of candidates for the position and in determining the best candidate to fit the needs of the Westford Public Schools.

Participants and respondents were asked about the strengths and challenges of the Westford Public Schools, the skills and qualifications they believed the next superintendent should possess and the most important issues they believe the next superintendent would need to address. This summary reflects the themes that were prevalent in the focus groups, and the responses and comments of the online survey.

The online survey yielded a total of 343 responses. The breakdown of responses from various stakeholder groups is as follows:

Parent/guardian of a Westford Public School student	221	64.43%
Employee of the Westford Public Schools	104	30.32%
Resident of Westford without children enrolled in the schools	30	8.75%
Student enrolled in the Westford Public Schools	22	6.41%
Municipal staff/committee member	7	2.04%
Alum of the Westford Public Schools	23	6.71%
Other	14	4.08%

Please note that respondents were able to check more than one category, so the category totals exceed the total number of responses. For those in the “Other” category, the majority were either parents of former students or former employees. Some were a sub-category of one of the choices (e.g. special education parent).

A total of twelve (12) focus groups were conducted between December 1 and December 8, 2020. The schedule included three (3) focus groups for parent/guardians, one (1) for

community members, one (1) for SEPAC members, one (1) for municipal officials, one (1) for central office leadership, one (1) for grades K-2 staff members, one (1) for 3-5 staff members, one (1) for grades 6-8 staff members staff, one (1) for grades 9-12 staff members and one (1) for central office staff. The representation among focus group participants was more evenly divided than the survey. A total of eighteen (18) staff members participated and a total of twenty-three (23) people participated from parent and community groups.

Among the various stakeholder groups that participated in focus groups and responded to the survey, the themes articulated were very similar. This summary reflects the themes that arose from the survey and focus groups, not all the comments that were made.

The School District

Respondents expressed a strong pride in the reputation of the Westford Public Schools as a high-performing district. Many people commented that this is the reason people choose to move to Westford. Not only does this reputation attract families that value education, but it attracts high quality educators to the schools as well. The district provides an education with strong academics and with the supports in place to help students be successful. Respondents frequently commented on the district's value of supporting the success of every student. A wide array of co-curricular opportunities, particularly in music and the fine arts are available to students. In addition, a variety of course choices for middle and high school students exists. While there is a focus on academic achievement for all students, there is also a recognition of supporting the needs of the whole child. And, while academics and the academic success of each student is important, there is an understanding that social-emotional supports for learners are important as well. One respondent summed up the general sense of the responses: "High standards, high quality educators, support services for all, a variety of learning opportunities."

There are several attributes that people value in the schools, and which they point to as contributors to the overall success. The quality and commitment of the teaching staff, indeed of all employees in the district, was a consistent theme. The educators support their students and care about their success. Educators, in turn, feel valued and supported as individuals by the administration. Small class size was often mentioned as both the current practice and important to preserve. People pointed to the configuration of the schools at the elementary level as a positive attribute of the district. A supportive community, a positive school culture and a welcoming environment were other factors that respondents noted as strengths of the district. Open and frequent communication practices were mentioned by many respondents, but not with universal agreement, as a positive attribute of the district as well.

While the overall description of the Westford Public Schools is of a high performing district with many positive attributes, there were some areas for further growth identified.

Primary among these was the district's budget. The past several years have seen tight budgets necessitating some cuts to services and to staff. The elimination of Digital Learning Specialists was identified as a cut that has had a detrimental effect on teaching and learning, especially in light of current circumstances. Other services have been eliminated particularly at the elementary level. The elimination of support for literacy in particular was mentioned. There is a concern that these cuts could be detrimental in future years not only at the elementary level, but at the secondary level if students are not able to build strong skills in the early years. In addition, the lack of tuition free full-day kindergarten and high fees were mentioned as fiscal challenges that should be addressed.

Communication and transparency around budget decisions was another area frequently mentioned. Stakeholders expressed a desire to have more information about how budget decisions were made and more details about what is included in the budget. The need to work closely with town officials regarding the budget was another recurring theme. This includes both good communication with the town side of government, but also a willingness to advocate for the needs of the school district.

Many respondents mentioned the changing demographics in Westford as an issue that needs attention. The community is becoming more diverse ethnically and economically. This presents issues of equity, especially in areas such as tuition and fees. While there is a sense among some that the district does a good job in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion, the more prevalent sentiment is that there is work to be done. There is a sentiment that the staff needs to better reflect the student population in terms of diversity. In addition, as the demographics change, the schools need to develop a more inclusive and accepting environment for students, staff and families.

Many respondents noted that the district focuses on the whole child and has strong social-emotional supports, while others noted that there is more work to be done in this area. This could reflect an opinion that there is a need for continued focus in this area, even if it is being addressed. In addition, while some respondents emphasized the academic supports available for all students, some noted that support for students was unequal, especially for students "in the middle" who did not require services and were not high academic achievers. Several respondents noted the need for more attention in these areas due to the disruption to students' education due to the pandemic, which will have impacts beyond the time when students return to full in-person learning.

It is apparent through the responses that there are some issues with divided opinions. While many respondents indicated a need to address the issues of equity, diversity and inclusion, others indicated that this was a strength of the district. This could be because the district has started to address the issue, giving some people confidence regarding progress on the issue. Thorough and consistent communication was another topic that drew different responses. Some felt that decision-making is inclusive while others feel that decisions are made without input from a variety of stakeholders. Not unique to Westford, the topic of redistricting also drew conflicting opinions, with some people expressing the need to consider the issue and others feeling it is unnecessary. As the district moves forward, these are topics that seem to warrant further discussion within the community that the next leader should be aware of.

The Next Leader

The next educational leader of the Westford Public Schools should possess a leadership style that is inclusive and collaborative; a leader who can listen equally to all voices and ensure that all opinions are heard, respected and included in decision-making. When decisions are made, be able to stand behind the decision. Further, respondents desire a leader who can develop a strong leadership team in the district, and can support and empower the team to implement decisions.

Of course, being a strong communicator is an important attribute for any leader of a school district. In addition to the communications skills inherent in the leadership style describe above, the next leader should maintain visibility with parents, staff and the community. Westford was described as an active and involved community. There is an expectation that the leader of the school district understand and embrace this involvement.

Not surprisingly, given the budget challenges that respondents articulated, expertise in the area of budget development and management is high on the list. This includes the ability to work with town officials in the development of the budget, be capable of developing, advocating for and managing a budget that meets the educational needs of the district and the fiscal need of the town, communicating the budget transparently to stakeholders and the ability to develop budget plans that look out several years.

Very clearly, respondents put prime importance on the next leader having a strong educational background. Experience as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, building principal and teacher clearly topped the list of experience that respondents identify as important. People are also looking for someone who has a history of longevity in positions, staying long enough to thoroughly learn a position and demonstrate a track record of accomplishment.

While people clearly value the strong reputation of the Westford Public Schools as a high performing district, they also see the need to look forward in the education provided to students. This means the next leader must be able to both evaluate what is working well, but also be able to understand where change is needed to ensure that the district continues to provide students with the skills necessary to prepare them for what they will encounter after leaving the Westford Public Schools.

When asked whether the next leader of the district should continue on the current path, but seek necessary improvements, or go in a different direction, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the district should find a candidate that will stay the course, but make some changes. Many respondents who chose this answer indicated that the district is high-performing and doing well, but that change is always necessary to be on a path of continuous improvement. Of those who pointed to specifics, the area of diversity, equity and inclusion were frequently mentioned, as were the social-emotional health of students and addressing budget challenges.

Draft Qualifications:

- Success in maintaining and improving high academic performance
- Demonstrated track record of valuing and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in students, staff, and community
- Proven commitment to social emotional learning, with a focus on student and staff mental health and well-being.
- Ability to develop and direct a strong administrative leadership team
- Understands and recognizes good teaching, and encourages creativity in instruction (or “empowers staff to use a variety of teaching methods”)
- Excellent communication and interpersonal skills, including a demonstrated ability to work collaboratively with diverse school and town groups
- Possesses financial acumen and experienced in working in a transparent and open budget process.