



To: The SAU #34 School Board

From: Kenneth L. DeBenedictis, Ed.D.
NESDEC Executive Search Consultant

Re: **Superintendent Search Focus Group Report**

Date: November 12, 2009

On November 3 and 5, 2009, I conducted four focus groups: school administrators, SAU school board, staff and community. The following report includes the priorities identified by each focus group and the detailed suggestions generated by each of those groups.

In the focus groups, a system of individual brainstorming, group consensus development and priority ranking resulted in a set of recommendations focusing on responses to two discussion topics: 1) **The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences**, and 2) **The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position**

The members of each focus group were open about their concerns and their hopes and aspirations for the future. In reviewing the process, it is very clear that each group was focused upon issues pertinent to SAU #34 and its districts. It is also evident that there were shared priorities from group to group and distinct priorities specific to certain groups.

The report begins with an executive summary which represents a composite of those items given the greatest emphasis in discussions. The executive summary is followed by the responses and priority rankings generated by each focus group.

I believe that the information provided by the four groups will be helpful to all involved in the screening process for the new superintendent. The information should also provide a rich resource to the new superintendent as part of the transitional and entry process.

Many people were involved in the focus group sessions and I am very appreciative of their interest and enthusiasm. The SAU #34 School Board Search Subcommittee is to be especially commended for efforts in encouraging and organizing these discussions. School Board receptiveness in valuing community suggestions will immeasurably support the search for the new superintendent of schools.

SAU #34 SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Question #1: The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Possesses exemplary leadership capacity; is a visionary who can engage all stakeholders in moving a district forward; has good facilitation skills; knows how to develop consensus, a unifier. Can make decisions by gathering data and reaching out and then sticking with them. A strategic planner who is effective with problem solving. An out-of-the-box thinker who does not lose sight of the practical needs of the district. Someone who embraces others; values and recognizes opinions; welcoming and encouraging. Inspirational: models for others non-confrontational, respectful, working together behavior. Can articulate a clear vision of what could be if community energy and resources could be focused. Causes and promotes collaboration and sharing amongst all levels K-12. Holds himself/herself accountable and will hold others accountable as well. Comes to the district with a strong history in recognizing the value of broad-based coalitions and the inclusiveness of all stakeholders. Models skills others can emulate.
- Highly developed personal and communication skills. Experienced with successful communication practices; skilled verbally and in written form. Communicates regularly with the community and staff; welcomes input from a variety of sources; very open and approachable. Highly principled with strong integrity; articulate. Lives within proximity of the district. Skillful in developing staff and community relations. Easily engages with town officials and values benefits of working together.
- Philosophy/belief system. Goals oriented. Very interested and successful in developing communities of life-long learners. Someone who values high expectations and raises the bar for all learning and teaching. Politically wise and can connect; values collaboration with other town departments and works towards consensus in decision making. Develops an understanding of the culture of the district and works with those qualities to facilitate growth. Believes that the arts and extra curricula activities help to complete a learner. Someone who is student centered; they drive everything in the district. A visionary who clearly articulates learning and teaching over the next 3-5 years; has worked with others to action plan for that vision and incorporated accountability which provides evidence of accomplishment. Obviously, a creative person who is not content with the status quo; well read and values application of research and model programs to opportunities for students in Hillsboro-Deering.

Enters the position with a wide range of experiences; teacher, building administrator, central office. Successful with proven track record of district leadership. Experienced in the demographics of Hillsboro-Deering and knows how to engage all stakeholders. Technology savvy and skilled with connecting this capacity with learning, teaching and district management. Successful with budgeting and finances; skilled in finding ways to balance cost with need without impacting student opportunity. A strategic planner who includes measurable objectives in goal setting. Evidence of a long-term commitment in other positions. Demonstrated success with collective bargaining and contract management. Has the capacity to understand and apply state and federal laws and regulations. Experienced with state and national assessments and has successfully used test data to become part of planning for curriculum and instruction. Has successfully raised the bar for learning and teaching in other positions and knows what is necessary to make that success develop. Understands special education law and has found ways to efficiently provide for student need while in compliance with regulation.

While no candidate can possess all of the qualities and experiences noted above, considering candidates who best match the profile, during the screening and interview process, will help the screening committee recommend a strong group of candidates to the school committee. The profile will also assist the SAU #34 School Board in selecting the candidate who is best suited for the position.

Question #2: The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Building effective relationships with the community: Becoming highly visible, developing trusting relationships with townspeople, validating teachers and the successful instruction that they provide. Develop a supportive working relationship with school administrators. Become familiar with students by visiting the schools and attending activities. Energize and excite the community. Communicate with townspeople through e-mails, notices, mailings, school visits. Developing and gaining knowledge about the history and culture of the community and district; what it values and how it engages townspeople. Examining collective bargaining needs and work toward resolution of any issues or concerns.
- Organize a process to develop a vision for the district; identify needs by working with others to gather data, assess indicators and organizing an action plan; include all stakeholders in mapping a strategy, welcoming and encouraging feedback and creating a long and short-term calendar. Funding is obviously critical and must consider the communities capacity to pay. Goals should be measurable with evidence demonstrating growth.
- Examine the budget development process and seek ways to successfully communicate with the community about need. Improve budgeting approaches so that needs are

clearly articulated and detail is included to support requests; search for alternative funding strategies, i.e., increased state funding, grants, donations, etc.

- Assessing curriculum and instruction. Determine if needs of all students are included in programs; evaluate the district administrators and staff and determine professional growth needs. Determine if professional development is aligned with improvement goals. Questions that should be examined in the process: Are we reaching all students? Are some needs not being met? Are opportunities for more hands-on learning necessary? Where and for whom? Are we preparing our students for tomorrow? Is thinking about 21st Century Skills, for example, a part of our ongoing deliberations? Does the district promote high standards for all? Do we have the resources in place to make improvement goals reachable? If not, what does it take to make them happen?

**SAU #34 School District
Focus Group Summary Report
Administrators
(16 participants)
November 3, 2009**

Question #1: The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences.

In priority order:

1. Leadership capacity. Someone with strong leadership capabilities; the capacity to make decisions and stick with them. Very collaborative and recognized as articulate. Involved in the community and welcomes and enjoys that involvement. Recognized as someone with strong visible presence; frequently in the schools. Has a high expectation for professional responsibility and can develop that in others; holds people accountable. Knows how and is successful with building alliances and consensus. An outstanding communicator. Advocates for and promotes the district. Highly supportive of administrators and recognizes their significant role in promoting student growth.
2. Experience. A variety of educational experiences as a teacher and administrator at different levels. Preferably experienced as a superintendent; especially with a low income population. Understands and experienced with issues concerning special education. Possesses a CAGS or beyond in personal education. Evidence of a long-term commitment in previous appointments. Self sufficient with computers, data gathering, technology. Demonstrated success with collective bargaining, unions and contract management. Knows New Hampshire laws or has the capacity to apply them in his/her repertoire of skills. If from a private background, is capable of learning New Hampshire procedures, regulations, laws. Knows business procedures of a district; quickly learns about issues and concerns and works to develop practical solutions. Experienced with school construction and renovation.
3. Personal abilities. Has high integrity. Energetic and realistic; real, genuine, authentic. He/she is politically savvy and has a back bone. Very personal and easy to approach. Has mental toughness and very capable of dealing with criticism; skillful and experienced in turning that response into district support. Recognized as having a sense of humor. He/she is focused on students in all actions and will not waiver by pressure from others; not afraid to stand on his/her principles. Not easily influenced by the newest trend coming down the pike, but carefully assesses need and works with others before introducing new initiatives.
4. Visionary/beliefs. Forward thinking; actively open to new ways of doing things. An out-of-the-box thinker. Respectful and provides recognition for the successes of the district. A visionary; someone who creates positive change by understanding and successfully practicing the change process. A creative thinker who is not content

with the status quo. Someone who can move the district beyond achieving AYP. Strong evidence that students drive everything; someone who is student centered. A successful strategic planner; an administrator who believes in and practices outreach, involvement and planning.

Question #2: The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Assess the needs of the district; review the “lay of the land”. Where is the district? What have we done successfully? What needs to be done?
- Build relationships to develop the strategic plan for district improvement.
- Get to know the different schools because there are differences.
- Actively listen and seek out and encourage the opinions of others.
- Provide a physical presence every where.
- Clarify the vision for improvement; work with others to determine: Where are we going? Why? How are we getting there?
- Develop collaborative and cooperative relationships with all groups: professional, support, bargaining focused, community based, parents, students, etc.
- Develop trusting, supportive relationships with the community; educate the community about the efficacy of district need. Work with others to build a defensible budget to support that need.

**SAU # 34 School District
Focus Group Summary Report
School Board
(8 Participants)
November 3, 2009**

Question #1: The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences.

In priority order:

1. Leadership. He/she has good facilitation skills; knows how to build consensus; a unifier. A collaborator who can cause others to work together on shared improvement strategies. A strategic planner who has demonstrated ability to reach out, include and involve; values the opinions of others in developing an improvement plan. An inspirational leader who models the joy of learning and the excitement of growing. Able to adapt. Works well with teachers and other federations/unions; understands labor law and can work in a non-adversarial way with varied groups. He/she has excellent people skills across the spectrum of the community. A visionary leader, i.e., 21st Century Skills. Experienced in moving people in the direction of program improvement. Makes the maximum use of the resources within the community; funding, volunteerism, donations, active participation, etc. Doesn't operate with a broad broom; cutting programs to start new ones without first engaging others, assessing and determining next steps. Is open to information sharing and encourages community service.
2. Possesses a strong philosophy/belief system. Goals oriented; encouraging students to continue learning in post secondary experiences: technical, work, collegiate, military. Has familiarity with the Malcolm Baldrige program. Embraces the goals of the district and works with the school board to achieve them. Improve academic achievement in the core subject areas, fiscal responsibility and improved public perceptions. Has a healthy skepticism of "new fangled educational ideas". Creates opportunities for all to become life-long learners: students, teachers, parents, administrators. Has the ability to look at and work outside-of-the-box. Someone who is transparent. The federal law No Child Left Behind has placed constraints on the district. The new superintendent should have capacity to make some sense out of Schools in Need of Improvement and help parents to believe they have control of the program. Someone needs to follow NCLB without exception. Someone with high expectations and will instill that quality in others. Supportive of the arts and extra curricula activities.
3. Experience. Superintendent accreditation received. Experience in a blue collar community and understands this demographic. An advanced degree required, a doctorate preferred. Has hands-on teaching experience in public school; risen

through the ranks with system-wide responsibility. Possesses three years minimum superintendent responsibility with assistant superintendent experience necessary. Positive working experiences in previous positions. He/she is public relations skilled with demonstrated successes. Experience in working with special education students either hands on or as a supervisor or administrator. Has made maximum use of all community resources; financial as well as voluntary, donated, etc. Technologically savvy. Recognized as a data driven decision maker. Has successfully used measurable objectives in providing evidence of growth.

Question #2: The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Lead us to making AYP with a plan in place.
- Build lines of open communication amongst all stakeholders. Provide an understanding and appreciation by others that opinions are listened to, valued and respected
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the district and work collaboratively with stakeholders to develop a strategic plan to improve.
- Improve the budget development strategy of the district so that no default budgets occur.
- Reestablish a trusting relationship with all stakeholders: actively listen, be honest, follow up and follow through. Do what you say you will do based upon action plans developed through working with others.
- Work towards and gain the respect of the community.

**SAU #34 School District
Focus Group Summary Report
Staff
(6 participants)
November 5, 2009**

Question #1: The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences.

In priority order:

1. Leadership Capacity. Inclusive rather than exclusive; is receptive to receiving feedback. He/she seeks the opinion of others; a good active listener; a team player. Respects the people who work for him/her. Someone who is fair and welcomes/encourages the active participation of others. Professional development is based upon identified needs. Has the ability to reach out to all stakeholders. Embraces others: values input/respects opinions/works towards consensus. Active and supportive leadership that can coalesce the richness of the resources in the district. Understands the importance of culture in a district; can energize it to seek continuous district growth. Someone who values and successfully has led differentiated instruction practices; can attach learning to student interest and need. Knowledgeable about 21st Century Skills and all that the program and framework includes. Someone who can articulate a clear vision for the district. Knows and appreciates behavioral intervention models. Causes and promotes sharing amongst and between all levels K-12: Accountable for himself/herself and holds others accountable.
2. (Tie) Personal strengths. A good, active listener. Likes kids. Lives within proximity of the district; willing to live within that area if from out of state. He/she has dynamic and effective communication skills. Has high visibility; welcoming, gracious, encouraging. Openness and transparent.
2. (Tie) Experience. Teaching experience. Experienced as a superintendent; doesn't need to learn about the job. Knows how to build and defend a budget. Knows unions and negotiations: understands, values and practices collaboration. Knows secondary scheduling and can tie it to differentiated instruction. Has the ability to manage people; ascertains the strengths, needs and works with others to develop plans to improve.
3. Philosophy/belief system. Has a strong belief in schools and a capacity to help/support all to reach potential; staff will walk an extra five miles for the district if they believe their involvement is valued. Views negotiation as an opportunity for district improvement. Offers hope. Understands the culture of the district and energizes it to seek continuous improvement for teaching and learning. Believes in openness and transparency. Believes in the essential goodness of people.

Question #2: The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Establish a contract.
- Get to know the community.
- Establish a vision/direction by engaging all constituent groups: prioritize goals and develop an action plan.
- Gather evidence of progress and demonstrate it in concrete terms: show what kids can do.
- Establish welcoming rapport with the public; not intimidating them: mutual respect has high priority.
- Understand the culture of Hillsboro-Deering: build on its strengths by reaching out/connecting and developing manageable plans.

**SAU # 34 School District
Focus Group Summary Report
Community
(11 participants)
November 5, 2009**

Question #1: The new Superintendent of Schools should possess the following characteristics, background and experiences.

In priority order:

1. Leadership strengths. A proven track record of bringing people together across educational lines. Open to communications; listens well, responds, accessible. He/she has conflict resolution skills. The ability to filter out the “educational buzz” and determine what is valuable for students to experience. Inspirational; causes all to reach beyond minimum competencies. The community’s teacher/learner. Understands and can navigate the linkages of a community. High visibility everywhere. Raises the bar in all schools. Hears concerns and assesses, processes and acts on them. Holds himself/herself accountable and will hold others accountable, as well. Not afraid to “call the shots as he/she sees them”. He/she models for others how investment will make a difference in the lives of students. The true test: people want to be involved. The selected candidate has a history of causing all administrators, teachers students, parents and community to work collaboratively together.
2. Philosophy/belief systems. A student centered focus. Highly skilled with parent and community outreach . Fortitude to do what is right, despite the “chatter”. Self interest in life-long learning; a commitment to help and support all to become life long learners. A label of a district isn’t the first consideration; a district’s difficulties don’t mean that the district is broken, but has strong potential. The new superintendent needs to identify the possibilities and pursue them. Honest, open, forthcoming and accessible. Values learning about the culture of Hillsboro-Deering and will build upon the qualities inherent in the districts. Creates partnerships with parents; sustains them throughout the process. Has the ability to think and work outside-the-box; can see the forest for the trees.
3. Experienced. Classroom experience. Supervisory and hiring/firing experiences. Perhaps someone from a not-for-profit background; external to the education world. Knows finances and can develop responsible budgets. Knowledgeable about educational trends. Recruitment skills for administrators, teachers, volunteers. A variety of district experiences; can identify the Hillsboro-Deering positives, celebrate them and cause them to expand.
4. Personal qualities. Has the ability to ask questions and act appropriately upon the received information. Politically savvy: understanding of and functionality about.

Has a willingness to get hands dirty; this is a hands-on job. Responsive and welcoming. Interested in kids: they drive everything. Enjoys/loves being superintendent; passionate about the position. Develops trusting relationships which lead to motivated participants.

Question #2: The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position.

Not ranked in priority order:

- Inclusive of community and parents.
- Reach out to everybody; open communication, work on establishing trust, begin to inspire and lead.
- Hire new administrator at the high school.
- Learn about the culture of the community.
- Work with constituents to develop a five-year plan.
- Work collaboratively and cooperatively with the school board; identify rules, roles and responsibilities.
- Cause all parties in the school district to work in civil ways.
- Model non confrontational behavior.
- Get to know the students and staff.
- Complete contract negotiations with professional and support staff.
- Get a handle on the budgetary cycle; work with others to develop an understanding of town ability to pay, prioritize need accordingly and action plan over time.