

Somerville Superintendent Search – 2022/2023

Summary Report of Focus Groups and On-Line Survey

In addition to 11 community listening sessions hosted by school committee members, over 440 persons responded to the on-line survey that included both checkbox and open responses. This included 300 parents or guardians and 150 faculty members and students. There was some duplication of survey takers who fit into more than one category.

In addition to the presence of interpreters who assisted parents at several community meetings, the surveys were available in Spanish (7 survey takers), Portuguese (13 survey takers) and Haitian Creole (0). Survey takers were asked to identify their role in the community and to indicate how long they have been connected to Somerville. A relatively equal number had a connection of less than five years, between five and ten years, and more than ten years.

Questions on the survey were generally repeated in some form at the listening sessions:

1. Select the most important personal characteristics the next Somerville superintendent should possess.
2. Identify the skills and experiences the next superintendent should possess.
3. What are the skills or points of pride of the Somerville Public Schools that you think should be preserved?
4. What are the three most important issues the next superintendent will have to address?
5. Additional comments were solicited for open responses.

Summary of Comments from Focus Groups and Open Responses

Responses reflected a great pride in Somerville and its future but still raised principled criticism and various perspectives that reflect the community at large. Over 440 people contributed to the feedback and most comments looked to areas of improvement and growth, but they also expressed optimism that the district is making continuous progress, coalescence around the importance of diversity, eagerness to address various dimensions of equity, and appreciation of the educators with whom they interact or work.

A stunningly strong response focused on equity and the well-being of students. In addition, participants in both survey and listening sessions were seeking a leader who both understands the various elements of diversity and equity, but also brings a track record of developing and implementing strategies to achieve these goals and has the skill to foster culture to support students and community.

Administrators cited school to school differences that help define the roadmap for equity. They also highlighted the heavy burden that educators carry “with a lot on our plate.”

Moreover, there were many specific examples from responders that will help the next district leader focus on identified priorities. They include:

Professional Development for Staff on Anti-Bias Strategies. There was broad recognition that the district is committed to DEI and integrating anti-bias tactics into the curriculum and classroom in general. However, comments and individuals who appeared referenced the continuing need to eliminate the less obvious signs of bias and the need to use professional development time to work on these issues.

Before and After School Activities and Opportunities. This includes accommodating the schedules of parents who are working or otherwise occupied during the late afternoon hours. Among the parents who need transportation of children, before school activities them, and after school programs were new residents who represent immigrant, migrant and transient families without deep roots in the community.

Expanding Early Education Programs. Several voices were raised in support of universal pre-school as a top priority, especially given the similar objectives of the incoming governor's agenda to achieve it.

Building relationships with community agencies that serve children and families. There appear to be great opportunities to expand student and family support that include social service, immigrant support, general health and mental health, and employment services. This is consistent with recognition that successful and continuous improvement will require both wraparound services, and also non-therapeutic or economic programs like community youth agencies and youth sports.

Diversity in Academic Options/Dissent and Civility. Interestingly, proponents of both special education and vocational technical programs emphasize that promoting these services and curricular options fall under the umbrella of equity and inclusion. There was a significant number of teachers and parents who called for tolerance for different points of view, ability to disagree and dissent, and to address possible conflict around some of the issues that have tested standards of civility around the state (i.e., discussions of race, flags, LGBTQ, and testing/accountability).

Recognizing the Excellence in Teaching Wherever it Exists. Educators are eager for recognition for the work they are doing, particularly as everyone attempts to return to normalcy following the pandemic. There was a strong indication that parental support for teachers is strong but understated.

Studying and Addressing Inequities Among Schools. Parents, in particular, cited those instances where some schools have resources that others do not, or where facilities are in general need of upgrading.

Recruitment of a Diverse Faculty and Support Staff. This is a key concern for parents and students, and it a goal for the faculty. Somerville is viewed as a place that will be accommodating to faculty of color and is located in a region where a diverse faculty can be recruited, but all recognize that achieving this goal demands attentiveness to hiring practices, new teacher support, and even incentives for retention.

Equity for Classroom Support Staff and Opportunities for Advancement. While teachers continue to seek professional advancement, so, too, do paraprofessionals who wish to pursue a career path. The classroom aides have the support of their collaborating teachers in encouraging career paths for aspiring administrators and teachers.

Review the Role of Police in Schools. Responders were mixed with regard to the presence of the police in general and the school resource officer. Some are fine with the status quo, while others take an

opposite position and point to restorative discipline and restorative justice as a better strategy than a police presence. It was clear that people want to talk more about this.

Athletics and Sports/Extracurricular Activities. There were several comments related to sports and clubs as programs of value that provide opportunities beyond academics. Opportunities in extracurricular activities were cited as a key component of “inclusion” and providing opportunities to grow. Related to this was maintaining the commitment to arts and music and related creative studies which was the fourth ranked priority on issues to be addressed.

THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT

Accessibility/Empathy/Communications. Comments linked these qualities to find a leader who genuinely cares about the students, families, and educators, as much as a good manager and leader. Interestingly, “empathy” is a relatively new priority that people want in a superintendent, likely a function of the trauma of an extended pandemic and the political and social chaos that has the attention of students as well as faculty.

Fundamentally Agrees with Commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Responders widely recognized that there needs to be an ongoing effort to pursue DEI, and that the superintendent must not only lead the process, but also keep the focus on the goals.

Leadership Skills. Linked to empathy and accessibility, stakeholders want an active, visible, and strong leader who can stand up to challenges, protect the school district as a major interest within municipal government, and advocate for the district and its students.

Perceptive and Experienced in the Pursuit of Equity. Responders include the many dimensions of equity as noted elsewhere but including discipline such areas as the sharing of opportunities.

Liaison Among Schools where the superintendent is the leader for centralized planning, oversight, and sharer of best practices.

Special Education. Advocates for students with special needs spoke and wrote about services for students with learning issues. There were comments about having a superintendent who understands special education law and regulation, as well as seeing that services are shared fairly along with good teachers and specialists.

Visibility. As difficult as it is for a superintendent of a large district to be a frequent visitor to schools and classrooms, responders want to see the superintendent in their buildings, at their evening events and meetings, and elsewhere in the community.

A Leader in the Community. Responders view their next superintendent as one who can represent the district before municipal bodies making local policy, business leaders who may provide support, and social agencies that serve families.

Empathy. A desire for a leader who is empathetic and sensitive to the needs of educators as well as parents and students, characteristics that are linked to the ability to communicate and be accessible.

Understanding of Capital Improvements, including building maintenance and renovation given the poor condition of at least two schools that were referenced, and the need to upgrade others. Reference was also made to the placement of the neediest students in the worst buildings.

Experienced in the Classroom. Two out of three responders want a superintendent who has teaching experience. This is an unusually high number given that parents do not usually share this bias towards teaching as much as teachers do.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Comments from educational stakeholders cited several other important factors for the next administration:

1. Support for teachers through appropriate professional development that benefits individual teachers or specialists.
2. Collaboration on any scheduling changes that might take place.
3. Advocating for greater understanding of the challenges of recovering from the COVID pandemic and overcoming learning loss.
4. Improving access to transportation and after-school programs.
5. Building and expanding an early college program.

With the exception of municipal leaders, responders were less worried about the efficiency of how dollars are spent, but more interested in expanding services. What clearly marked a difference between Somerville and many other districts was the strong and unambiguous pursuit of equity and diversity but a barely referenced concern about school finance. Budget was the 11th rated priority among the 400 survey takers. Normally, budget and finance have a higher ranking.

Appendix: Responses to Multiple Choice Questions

The following were acknowledged in the surveys as priorities for personal characteristics. Data are percentages of responders who cited the item as among their top priorities.

Descriptor	Percentage of Responders Citing Descriptor
1. Commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	54.67 %
2. Prioritizes Recruitment, Retention, Morale and Health of Employees	45.10
3. Commitment to Challenging All Students Academically	41.69
4. Commitment to Closing the achievement and opportunity gap	33.71
5. Values Art, Music and Other Programs as Much as Core Academics	31.44
6. Inclusive Leader – Ability to Bring Diverse Groups of People Together	30.75
7. Values Social and Emotional Learning	28.93
8. Articulates a Clear Educational Vision for All Students	26.65
9. Strong Social Skills (Empathy, Humor, Collaboration, Approachable)	26.42
10. Thoughtful Curriculum and Instructional Leader	23.69
11. Advocates for Educational Innovation in the Classroom	23.01
12. Commitment to Empowering Parents, Students and Staff	22.78
13. Strong Communicator	22.78
14. Integrity	19.13
15. Give and Receive Feedback to Improve Performance-Self/Others	16.86
16. Knowledge of Special Education Laws and Regulations	16.40
17. Ability to Develop Relationships with Key Constituencies and Teams	13.90
18. Knowledge to Seek and Value Effective Student Voices	12.53
19. Knowledge of Effective Professional Development Programs	11.39
20. Prioritizes Being Visible in Schools and Classrooms	11.39
21. Articulate for English Language Learners and Sheltered Eng. Emersion	10.71
22. Present Themselves as Educational Leader in Somerville community	6.83
23. Possesses Political Acumen	4.78

The following were cited for desired skills and experiences for the next superintendent:

Descriptor	Percentage of Responders Citing the Descriptor
1. Teaching Experience	65.58
2. School Administrator Experience	51.86
3. Experience in Building Effective Relationships with Faculty and Staff	44.88
4. Experience in a School District Similar to Ours	43.95
5. Leadership in Improving teaching and Learning	43.26
6. Experience of Building a District Culture of Trust and Strong Relationships	41.63
7. Creating and Implementing a District Strategy for Improvement	33.49
8. Leadership Experience in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiatives	32.79
9. Skills in Family and Community Engagement	32.33
10. Experience Using and Communicating Data to Support Decision Making/Problem Solving	30.70
11. Experience Developing and Administrating Budget/Ensuring Financial Health of District	23.26
12. Experience in Negotiations and Collective Bargaining Process	13.02
13. Experience Working Effectively with Community Officials	11.86
14. Central Office Administrator Experience	7.91
15. Non-educational Leadership and Experience	3.26