

The New Milford Public Schools Superintendent Search Leadership Profile

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Introduction

Selecting a superintendent is the most important responsibility a school board undertakes. There are tangible and intangible aspects of leadership required in a superintendent who is going to work with the school board, staff, parents, students, and the whole community to provide high quality education for a district's children.

In light of the critical nature of this responsibility, the New Milford Board of Education sought the input of its school and community stakeholders through interviews, a survey and focus groups. The focus group options were as follows:

Focus Group Schedule:

Stakeholder	Date	Time
Parents/Guardians	Tuesday, September 20	5:30 pm or 8:00 pm
Students	Tuesday, September 20	7:00 pm
NM Teachers	Wednesday, September 28 or Thursday, September 29	7:00 pm or 4:30 pm
NM Building Administrators	Wednesday, September 21	4:00 pm
Central Office Administrators	Wednesday, September 28	5:00 pm
Non-Certified & Support Staff	Tuesday, September 20	4:00 pm
Town Elected Officials/ Staffs	Wednesday, September 28	4:00 pm
Community Members	Thursday, September 29	7:00 pm

This Leadership Profile presents findings from these interviews, focus groups, and an online survey conducted in September 2022. The consultants offered 14 interviews and focus groups and spoke with 31 individuals, including parents, teachers, para-educators, administrators, the Mayor, Town Council members, and members of the New Milford Board of Education.

In total, 147 New Milford residents and staff took the online survey. In conducting the focus groups and developing the survey, the consultants used an unbiased, structured approach involving a series of consistent questions. In addition to asking about strengths and challenges of the New Milford schools and community which could affect future leadership requirements, they asked about the qualities, characteristics, experience, philosophy, and skills most desirable in the next superintendent. The New Milford Board of Education will use these results as it considers its applicants in order to find the best possible match for New Milford at this time. The consultants are presenting their findings to the Board of Education without revealing the identity of any individual contributor.

The New Milford Board of Education has made a commendable effort to include voices from as many constituents as possible from the schools and community. Many thanks to focus group participants and survey respondents whose commitment to the schools and Town of New Milford was evident as they provided perspectives. Special thanks to Pat Silverman for her help scheduling and publicizing the opportunity to participate.

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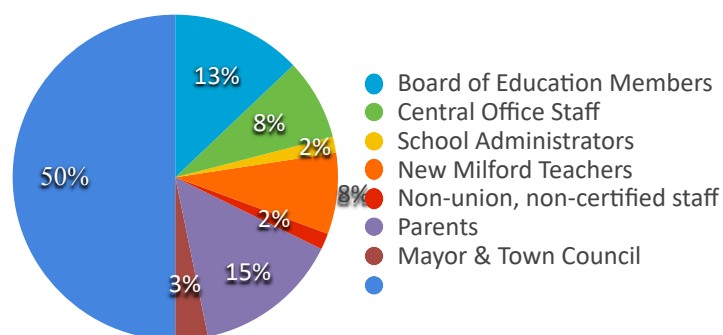
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Data Collection

In total, 178 individuals participated through interviews, focus groups, and a survey. The data collected do not constitute a scientific sampling, but a representation of the New Milford Public Schools and community at a moment in time. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Though the consultants heard the perspectives of many, this profile cannot entirely capture the complexity and nuances of the school and town. Nevertheless, the information yields some useful insights for the search process. Items are included in the following report if, in the consultants' judgment, they were repeated by a sufficient number of respondents to warrant the Board's attention.

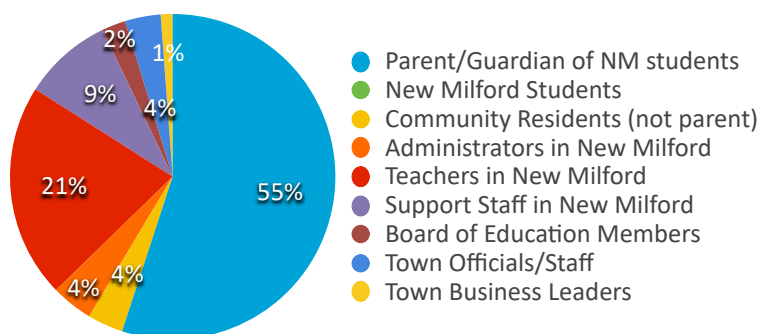
Interview and Focus Group Participants

PARTICIPANTS	31	%
Board of Education Members	8	25.8%
Central Office Staff	5	16.1%
School Administrators	1	3.2%
New Milford Teachers	5	16.1%
Non-union, non-certified staff	1	3.2%
Parents	9	29.0%
Mayor & Town Council	2	6.5%
	31	100.0%



Survey Responses

PARTICIPANTS*	147	%
Parent/Guardian of New Milford students	93	55.0%
New Milford Students	0	0.0%
Community Residents (not current parent)	6	3.6%
Administrators in New Milford	7	4.1%
Teachers in New Milford	36	21.3%
Support Staff in New Milford	15	8.9%
Board of Education Members	4	2.4%
Town Officials/Staff	6	3.6%
Town Business Leaders	2	1.2%
	* 169	100.0%



*Please note that survey participants identified themselves under multiple categories so numbers add up to more than 147.

Strengths of New Milford and its Public Schools



New Milford's new superintendent will find several areas of great strength in the district. The following, beginning in order of most cited, emerged through an analysis of interview, focus group, and survey responses: New Milford's teachers, administrators, and staff; the program overall and in a few specific areas; the community of New Milford; and the students themselves.

Teachers/Staff/Administration

The majority (147) of New Milford interview, survey, and focus group participants identified New Milford's teachers, staff, and administrators as its primary strength. Of those, 106 cited the very dedicated faculty and staff who are always learning and growing and care deeply about students and their growth and success.

In addition, 32 participants mentioned the administration as a strength, noting the talent, commitment, and dedication of several of the building administrators who support teachers, students, and staff. The administrative team is collaborative. The district pays "attention to the changing landscape and [makes] common sense decisions based on what's best for the students." Ten (10) participants mentioned that the communications from the district and some schools are very effective overall.

Program

Overall, 80 participants identified some aspect of the district's program as a strength. Of those, 52 cited the district's overall curriculum or some specific area of program. The district offers a wide variety of learning opportunities which "promote inclusiveness and a sense of belonging," and "cover the diverse interests of the student population." A strong development process supports "a challenging, fair, balanced" curriculum. Specifically cited were student access to advanced placement classes, strong STEM programming, Middle school access to algebra and geometry, and Project Lead the Way. Six (6) individuals spoke of a strong sense of community in all of the schools: "The New Milford Public Schools are small enough to be intimate with its students and community while at the same time big enough to offer much in terms of arts, sports, music, extracurricular, and ... special education." A handful of others (5) mentioned the district size and small classes in the younger grades. Twelve (12) participants specifically mentioned the strength of special education programming in meeting the needs of students and support for students' social and emotional needs.

Eighteen (18) participants cited the breadth of extracurricular offerings as a major asset of New Milford. Strong music, band, and theater programs and a variety of athletics support all age groups and ability levels. The district enjoys a spirit of pride in the schools, according to four (4) participants.

Community

Many participants (56) in this study identified some aspect of the broader community of New Milford as a great strength. Overall, 46 described a tight-knit community with a strong volunteer base, where people come together to support others in need. Several spoke of the community, beyond just parents, wanting the best educational outcomes for all its students. The town is considered affordable, and the "schools offer good value." Though its area is spread out, New Milford is a rural New England town with a small town feel. Three (3) participants

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mentioned the increasingly diverse nature of the community as a strength. The town's mayor is very involved and builds a spirit of community, according to four (4) participants.

Students/Diversity

Participants (16) identified student diversity as one of New Milford's strengths. The school district is "very inclusive in spite of [being a] conservative area...." Students are "motivated to learn who bring diverse talents and backgrounds."

Parents

According to nine (9) participants, parents are a strength of the district. A “very active parent base” is “motivated to be sure kids are getting every opportunity they can.”

Challenges Facing New Milford Public Schools



The next superintendent will grapple with some significant challenges when taking the helm of the New Milford Public Schools. The most cited challenges, in order, were community/politics/finances, staff turnover and morale, program and performance, the Board of Education, communications, parents, the aftermath of COVID, and some issues with the system structure.

Community/Finances

According to interview, focus group, and survey participants (112) , the greatest issues facing New Milford are the community and political climate, involvement of the Mayor and town government, and finances and facilities.

Though cited by a number of participants as a strength, many (57) also found challenges posed by the community. This “vocal, involved strong-willed” community can be very political and push back hard against school district decisions if they feel an individual has “made a misstep.” The political agenda of some may “spill over into operating schools.” Though the superintendent “has ultimate control over the school district, the town has a lot of opinions.” This “dynamic makes it a challenge” and a “political tug-of-war with the town.”

Social media “add another layer” to this tension, with “a number of nasties who like to stir things up.” The “people in this town can be brutal with their commentary and conservative politics.” There is also a perceived “social divide” between “newcomers who expect services to be in line with services in other places” and those who resist providing those services. The new leader will be challenged to create a more cohesive relationship between school leadership and the community at large and regaining the trust of the townspeople.

Another complicating dynamic is the role of the Mayor and of town government, according to 17 participants. Town government is overstepping its boundaries, and though a “strong proponent,” the Mayor doesn’t “stay in his lane.” As a result of the Mayor’s presence at district activities and his connection to the schools, “kids and parents go to the mayor... not following any chain of command, undermining teachers.” The Mayor “is too involved, tweeting before we [those within the district] get the news.” Adding to the tensions this can create is an interest on

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the part of town government to assume responsibility for district facilities, technology, and human resources. In addition, a Board of Education member serves as “right hand to the Mayor,” a “big conflict of interest, purposefully done.”

Participants (54) identified issues with district finances and facilities as a major challenge for the new superintendent. The community has a “long history of not keeping up with inflation” and “lacks sufficient funding.” There is little community understanding of “why budgets increase, new mandates and requirements, and cost increases [that are] out of control.” As a result, salaries lag behind other districts, and “the burden is now on the teachers [who are coping with a lack of] instructional paras, no one to make copies... broken machinery” and a lack of overall supports. In addition, building maintenance suffers from a lack of sufficient and sustainable resources.

Staff Retention and Morale

These are difficult times for educator retention and morale across the country, and according to 97 participants, these are major challenges for New Milford. Of those 97 participants, 75 cited difficulties retaining staff: The district has lost many teachers, paraprofessionals, coaches, tutors, and substitute teachers and has seen a revolving door of administrators in some schools and at the district level. The lack of strong, consistent leadership has left the district rudderless, with little moving forward. There is “erosion in practices” due to “revolving change and nothing moving forward.” Several noted, “too many departments [have been] unsupervised for too long and need restructuring and updating to be efficient.” This turnover “has to stop so the district can build year over year progress....” Some attribute turnover to low relative pay scales. As a result, “We are in an out of control crisis from the leaving of good educators” and are experiencing a “huge loss of institutional knowledge.”

Staff is suffering from low morale and burnout, according to 22 participants. Staff is “starving for validation and someone to listen to them and say it will be okay.” Those who remain are trying to pick up the work that used to be accomplished by others and simultaneously have the added responsibilities of addressing increased mental health and behavioral needs of students. Staff feel under appreciated, undervalued, under resourced, undertrained and underpaid.

The new leader will be challenged to build and retain a strong administrative team that supports and guides staff appropriately. The superintendent and staff will need to commit to providing stability and security to shore up morale and improve retention.

Performance and Program

Overall, 55 participants identified district performance, school performance, or some aspect of program as significant challenges for the new leader. Some (18) pointed to relative losses in academic rigor and quality, and the need to raise standards and innovative practices. These perceptions of slacking performance have eroded the “trust of the community, staff, and students as well as confidence in [the] school system.”

Fifteen (15) participants cited programmatic needs. They cite district need to modernize the educational system, staying current with technology, identifying and addressing shortcomings, and improving the district’s approach to reading and writing, aligning it with the “Science of Reading.” Students who are not the highest achievers may need more hands-on opportunities. The district “seems to be behind other districts when it comes to adopting the latest programs and technology that will benefit our students,” and would benefit from an openness to change and innovation.

Another 15 participants identified problems in specific schools, especially at the middle school level. A challenging age level anywhere, this school has seen administrative flux and eroding structure and accountability. The school needs support “to find a rhythm that ensures the students are experiencing an academically sound, safe, respectful day at school.”

Finally, several participants suggested the district needs to work on its vision, mission, and purpose, “creating shared understandings and vision about the future path of the school system.”

Board of Education

A number of study participants (35) identified issues involving New Milford's Board of Education. Some mentioned members' philosophical divides, some extremist perspectives, and Board members who "second-guess what's taught." The Board has also occasionally exceeded lines of authority and stepped into administrative roles, "overcompensating."

Participants felt the Board needed to "clarify roles and move back into the governance role." Some felt the Board had failed to allow the Superintendent sufficient autonomy. "Instability is likely to occur if boards interfere in the operations of a school district." One noted, "The Board puts pressure on the superintendents and they put pressure on administrators and they put pressure on teachers, then teachers on kids, then parents come in." Some parents "aren't necessarily trusting that the school board or the next leader will have their child's best interest in mind while making decisions that concern their child."

In addition, several participants felt some Board members were acting out of self-interest or exercising personal agendas, rather than the good of all the district's children. Some Board members were viewed as "too involved in their kids' experiences," or "fulfilling local politicians' goals of controlling the Board and/or the Superintendent." One said that a "Board member is right hand to the Mayor." Participants spoke of a dysfunctional relationship between town and school governing structures and failure to provide proper oversight and support. Some felt Board members were "not concerned with academics, but aimed to please the town and parents in town." As one wrote, "A little favor or inside information here and there almost always leads to greater levels of corruption, which then serve as obstacles towards achieving the ideals stated in the mission."

(It should be noted that the New Milford Board of Education is addressing their "challenges," participating in board development work and committed to emerging a high performing governance team with the new superintendent.)

Mental and Behavioral Issues/Safety

New Milford students, like those across the state and nation, are experiencing more mental and behavioral health issues, and a lack of accountability for inappropriate behaviors, according to 15 participants. "Behaviors are off the wall" and students need "clear and consistent expectations for all students with follow-through." High school students "need more supervision as well as consequences." Issues such as "vaping, smoking, fighting, and gathering in bathrooms" have made some students feel unsafe. "Teachers are fed up with the disrespect and unruly behavior of students." The system experienced 26 expulsions during the 2021-22 academic year, including six at the middle school level.

Related to this area, another 15 participants identified the need to address school safety and bullying issues, especially at the middle and high schools. Teachers want safe working conditions and families and staff want "the climate of bullying" addressed.

Communications

Though communications was cited as a strength in the prior section, 14 participants felt that there was a need for greater consistency and transparency. Staff would like a "regular, true dialogue with all of our diversified, qualified, and experienced teachers in all grades/subjects," so they know they are heard and included in decisions. Some would like to see improved messages from teachers to parents and the community. They would like to see "a reliable process that is easy for all to access, to allow parent/teacher/administrator dialogue." Communications could better manage parent expectations.

Parents

Parent involvement was also cited as a strength, but according to 13 participants, parents also pose a challenge. Described as "bullying" and "litigious," some parents have caused teachers to be reluctant to discipline students for fear of retaliation. Staff look to leadership to back them when parents are assaultive or overly demanding. The new

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leader will need to use “language and outreach that makes the parents feel engaged in their children’s education” and be “open to parents’ feedback and concerns.

Effects of COVID Pandemic

Though it is nearly three years since the COVID Pandemic began in the U.S., its aftermath is still keenly felt in our schools, according to 11 participants. They noted staff “who haven’t worked together for long and have had a tumultuous [few] year[s].” Due to supply chain and budget issues resulting from the pandemic, “teachers don’t have materials, training, consistency, or supports.” Staff are experiencing burnout, exacerbated by the “great resignation.” Leaders and staff were threatened by those upset over masks and vaccination issues.

The revolving door of leadership in a time of complex and highly-charged political upheaval during COVID have added to anxiety. In addition, student performance has been stagnant or eroding, due in part to “learning loss during the pandemic.”

System/Structure

Eight (8) individuals felt there were structural issues that will need to be addressed. There are “headwinds in terms of managing personnel.” Some felt that nothing is working effectively and the schools need to be better organized. Departments need to be brought into compliance with statutes. Some would like to see better support systems for staff and students. Finally, some Central Office practices were described as “outdated.”

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Desired Expertise and Qualities in a New Superintendent

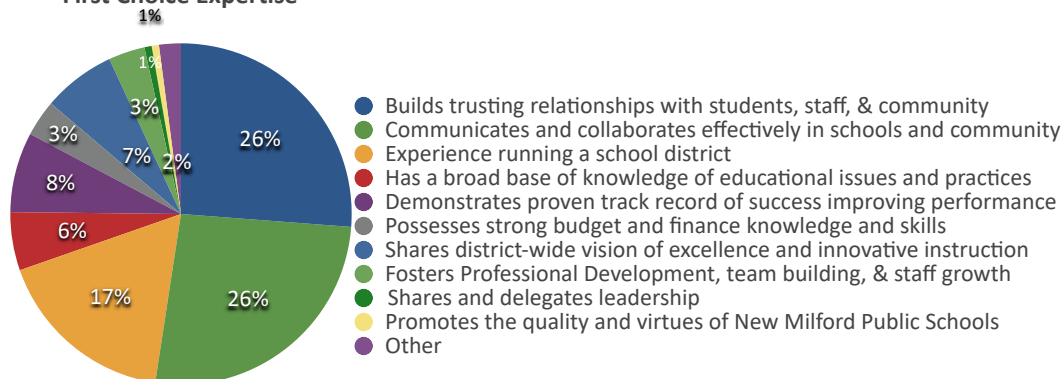
What would be the most important expertise and qualities in a new superintendent to tap the New Milford Public Schools' strengths and meet the challenges? An analysis of survey responses yielded the following:

Expertise

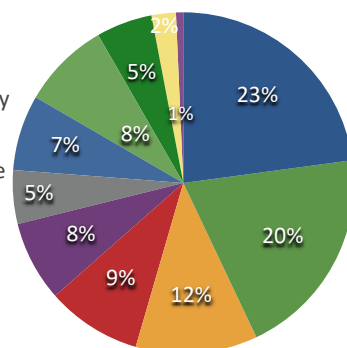
Survey respondents weighted two of the nine areas of **desired expertise** in a new superintendent significantly higher than the other skills. The **first choice** of participants was a tie between *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* and *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community*, both 26.2%. The **third choice**, at 17.2%, was *Experience running a school district*, (17.2%). If we look at respondents' **top three choices combined**, we see some shifts: *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (22.9%) now edges out *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community* (20.1%) as the top choice, and these two are weighted much more highly than the others. Still in third is *Experience running a school district* (11.5%).

DESIRED EXPERTISE IN NEW SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, & community	38	26.2%	37	25.7%	24	16.7%	99	22.9%
Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community	38	26.2%	32	22.2%	17	11.8%	87	20.1%
Experience running a school district	25	17.2%	8	5.6%	17	11.8%	50	11.5%
Broad base of knowledge of educational issues and practices	8	5.5%	16	11.1%	15	10.4%	39	9.0%
Demonstrates proven track record of success improving performance	11	7.6%	12	8.3%	10	6.9%	33	7.6%
Possesses strong budget and finance knowledge and skills	5	3.4%	6	4.2%	11	7.6%	22	5.1%
Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction	10	6.9%	9	6.3%	12	8.3%	31	7.2%
Fosters Professional Development, team building, & staff growth	5	3.4%	13	9.0%	18	12.5%	36	8.3%
Shares and delegates leadership	1	0.7%	8	5.6%	14	9.7%	23	5.3%
Promotes the quality and virtues of New Milford Public Schools	1	0.7%	3	2.1%	6	4.2%	10	2.3%
Other	3	2.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	0.7%
Totals	145	100.0%	144	100.0%	144	100.0%	433	100.0%

First Choice Expertise



Top Three Choices



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Qualities

In addition to the leadership characteristics and expertise identified in the prior section, New Milford survey respondents reflected some clear preferences for **qualities** desired in a new leader. The top **first choices** respondents identified were *Accessible, approachable, and visible in schools and community* (26%) followed by *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* (21.9%) then *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* (18.5%).

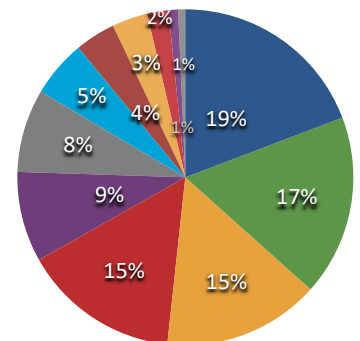
These areas lead in the "top three" category, too. *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* now accounts for 19.2%. *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* is close behind at 17.84 with *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* at 15.1%. However, now tied for third is *Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver*, also at 15.1%.

DESIRED QUALITIES IN SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community	38	26.0%	25	17.2%	21	14.4%	84	19.2%
Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus	32	21.9%	26	17.9%	18	12.3%	76	17.4%
Trustworthy, honest, respectful	27	18.5%	23	15.9%	16	11.0%	66	15.1%
Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver	15	10.3%	25	17.2%	26	17.8%	66	15.1%
Committed to transparent communication in schools & town	10	6.8%	12	8.3%	16	11.0%	38	8.7%
Inspirational team builder	7	4.8%	10	6.9%	18	12.3%	35	8.0%
Exhibits appreciation for and love of children	4	2.7%	12	8.3%	8	5.5%	24	5.5%
Knowledgeable and hardworking, with attention to detail	4	2.7%	5	3.4%	8	5.5%	17	3.9%
Fosters & values diversity, equity, inclusivity & accessibility	6	4.1%	2	1.4%	7	4.8%	15	3.4%
Dedicated commitment to New Milford's vision & mission	1	0.7%	4	2.8%	4	2.7%	9	2.1%
Life-long learner	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	3	2.1%	4	0.9%
Other	2	1.4%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	3	0.7%
Totals	146	100.0%	145	100.0%	146	100.0%	437	100.0%

First Choice Qualities



Top Three Choices



Needless to say, all of these qualities and skills are essential in a leader, yet they point to the prioritized needs of the New Milford Public Schools at this point in time. This profile will explore these areas of expertise and dimensions of leadership, integrating perspectives garnered through survey comments and focus groups.

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Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community

New Milford study participants recognize the importance of relationships to the success of the new superintendent and the district. The leader will need to work well with Central Office, the Board, and administrators, building a team spirit and improving retention of staff. The superintendent should work collaboratively with the Board of Education and not be afraid to stand firm with them. The successful leader will help Central Office and building administrators to build strong relationships.

The ideal leader will be considerate and fair to each and every individual in the district. Recognizing the impact of the pandemic on the working conditions of staff, the leader will establish realistic goals, demonstrating strong social and emotional values. Leading with a high degree of authenticity, the superintendent's behavior and thoughtfulness toward staff, students, and families will make others want to be part of the system. The leader will read others accurately and understand the political dynamics of the town.

Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community

The successful new leader will begin by listening well, hearing from and validating others, and helping to "lower the heat." Careful to clarify, insist on, and adhere to chains of command, the leader will simultaneously work to build relations personally and among others. The leader will bring savvy about strong and effective communication skills and systems and tailoring messages to varied audiences.

The caring and calm new leader will be a skilled collaborator, delegator, and creative partner, involving others in solving problems. A team player who is able to influence the opinions and actions of others, the leader will build back a sense of community in the schools. Willing to network and learn from peers, the leader's team-building efforts will generate high morale and group commitments.

The leader will also be able to work effectively with the Mayor and Town Council, keeping lines of communication open while clarifying roles and responsibilities.

Experience running a district

The ideal superintendent will have experience in the role: an analytical thinker who is seasoned in running a system and understands how to move a district forward. The leader will be polished in systems and operations, including finance, human resources, special education, English Language Learners, and school safety. The teachers will appreciate the leader's teaching experience, knowing that there is empathy for their challenges.

Accessible, approachable, and visible in schools and community

The successful leader will be actively involved in the district's schools while recognizing and modeling the chain of command. A regular presence in the schools, the leader will greet students and staff, offering a cheerful, open, calm, humble presence. The superintendent will relate well to others, problem-solving together, and not "dictating from on high."

The leader will create a shared understanding with the broader community of the values and contributions of educators who help students learn and grow. A regular presence at school and community events involving students, the superintendent will be warm and approachable, inviting others in with a friendly sense of humor.

Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus

Generating a positive climate for students and staff, the new superintendent will always act with student wellbeing at the heart of decisions. The leader will set clear direction and behavioral expectations, working with others to identify and address the varied learning needs of students from a variety of cultures. The leader will understand the changing demographics of the town and be flexible and committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, helping the system deal with an ever changing world.

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Trustworthy, honest, respectful

As one participant put it, “You cannot lead without trust. That comes first.” The successful leader will be authentic, transparent, ethical, and humble. A servant leader, this individual will respect teachers as the foundation of the system, ensuring they feel supported as educators and that they have what they need to ensure student growth and development.

Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver

An educator at heart, the successful leader will be open minded and non-judgmental. A strong, thoughtful decision-maker and mature problem solver, the superintendent will inspire confidence. Well-versed in the role, the leader will be even-keeled, with the perseverance to overcome challenges. Brave and able to take constructive criticism, the leader will balance being open with having a very thick skin, letting things slide off their back while they stand their ground. Though savvy about social media, the leader will not let postings get under the skin.

Finally, participants would also like a leader who takes the reins in building an inspiring shared vision, mission, and clarity of purpose to inspire all about the potential of the New Milford schools. The successful superintendent will gain public support by demonstrating a love of New Milford and determination to be there for the long term.