

Salem School District

**Superintendent
Search
Community
Assessment Report**

Developed by:
CES Executive Search Services

2012

Salem Public Schools Community Assessment

The Salem Public School District has begun its search for a part-time Superintendent of Schools to fill the position that is currently held by an interim superintendent. The selection of a superintendent is a state-legislated responsibility of the Board of Education. The Board's goal is to find the most qualified person who also "fits" the expectations of the school district and the community. The members of the Salem School Board believe that by gauging the will of all stakeholders they will be able to establish a reliable profile to assist in the recruitment of the next district leader. To that end, the Board has elected to work with Cooperative Educational Services' (C.E.S.) Executive Search consultant Dr. H. Kaye Griffin. Also assisting this effort is Lisa Schwartz, contracted by C.E.S. to facilitate the data-gathering and tabulation process.

In order to compile a thorough community evaluation, C.E.S. uses an unbiased, structured approach involving a series of face-to-face meetings (focus groups) as well as an online survey. Seeking input on a number of essential elements, both survey formats ask respondents to focus on the skills, qualifications, and characteristics that are deemed most desirable. Several groups of stakeholders were invited to participate in face-to-face focus group discussions. These groups were broken down as follows: 1) Middle School Students (5th through 8th grade Leadership Council); 2) Administrators; 3) Middle School Teachers and Staff; 4) Elementary Teachers and Staff; and 5) Parents and Community members. Meetings were held on two separate days, Thursday, March 8th and Tuesday, March 13th. Each discussion period lasted approximately one hour. Additionally, senior citizens were asked to contribute opinions by completing survey forms distributed at their monthly meeting on Tuesday, March 13th. An online survey was made available on the district website from March 8th through March 18th and parents and community members were encouraged to participate. The online survey utilized essentially the same questions as those used in the face-to-face focus groups sessions.

Executive Search Consultant Kaye Griffin began each focus group by explaining the intended purpose of the sessions, reviewing protocols for discussion, and providing a set of guiding questions for consideration. Each of the subgroups was asked to reflect on the following five characteristics: *Professional Experience, Prior Success, Educational Background, Special Knowledge, Personal Characteristics, and Other Criteria*. C.E.S. consultants listened carefully to all dialogue and summarized the responses in writing. Once consensus was achieved, the consultants generated a list of desired characteristics for each category. After a final review with respondents, the resulting listing became the catalogue of preferred attributes for the group in question. This methodology was consistently applied for all sessions.

When the online survey and focus group discussions were concluded, the data from each was examined, summarized and aggregated. It is important to note that although the online participants and the senior citizen cohort did not engage in group dialogue, their input is considered to be equivalent to that of the focus group data.

The report generated by C.E.S. Search Consultants represents a composite of this community's ultimate vision of the most desirable school superintendent. The following pages offer a detailed, question-by-question summary of the data-gathering process. Upon review and acceptance by the Board of Education, this report will be posted on the Salem Public Schools' website. The profile of the ideal superintendent generated from this report will serve as essential criteria for the Board as it focuses on the next two phases of the search process, recruitment and selection.

Common Areas of Interest to Stakeholders

A total of one hundred and twelve (112) people participated in Salem's *Community Assessment* process. Fifty-seven (57) respondents used the online survey option, while forty-six (46) took part in focus group discussions. Additionally, ten (10) senior citizens submitted written responses to the questions. These numbers represent a reasonable percentage of participants in a small community; it appears that Salem's residents (and those who are employed in the district) are committed, thoughtful, and engaged. This is a town that cares about its students and their learning.

The sections that follow include an analysis of responses by category. We have consolidated the data from the various survey formats (online, focus groups and written responses) in an effort to provide a summary of the overall views expressed.

Professional Experience

A majority of respondents noted that the ideal superintendent should have a background in a broad spectrum of environments, from classroom teaching and school principal to curriculum/instruction and knowledge of special education. While some cohorts noted that prior experience as a superintendent was not essential, it was highly desirable. Additionally, a background in management and leadership would be ideal, as well as the capacity to mentor. A practical knowledge of school budgets was noted, as was an understanding of middle school students. One group cited the importance of experience or familiarity with the dynamics of a K-8 structure. The online survey revealed that more than half of the respondents had a preference for experience as a school principal, followed closely by central office administrator and superintendent. In the senior cohort, it should be noted that all respondents believed that the successful candidate should come from a background in classroom teaching.

Prior Success

Virtually all respondents in this category favored the idea of a positive school environment that fosters learning, builds trust, and encourages collaboration. This element rated at, or near the top of every focus group, and was also selected by a majority of the online respondents. The ideal candidate should be able to demonstrate some measure of success in this area in a previous district. The Board might be interested in asking candidates to elaborate on how they would rate their own success in a prior school district—what might they include in a listing of measurable achievements? Such questions highlight previous accomplishments while also shedding light on a candidate's definition of the term "success."

Additionally, respondents felt that the ideal candidate should offer evidence of successful follow-through with significant programs or projects, such as technology implementation, school improvement plans, or Common Core Standards. Other themes that repeatedly emerged include: implementing positive behavior models; integrating technology effectively; evaluation of professional development needs; and working with k-8 scheduling concerns. Likewise, the task of recruitment and retention of good teachers was noted as a relevant factor in defining previous successes.

Educational Background

This question asks respondents whether the Salem Schools' Superintendent should have a doctoral degree, and if not, what level of education should he/she have achieved. It should be noted that in order to qualify for superintendency in the State of Connecticut, a candidate must possess specific certification (093), which includes a master's degree and additional advanced coursework in educational administration and supervision. (093 certification does not result in a doctorate). Following brief discussion, the consensus was that "titles do not make the man." Instead, competence and experience were deemed more important and should be considered as primary factors in recruiting the next leader. Several respondents expressed the opinion that personal and professional qualities held more weight in the long run.

Special Knowledge/Expertise

This section is an example of diverging data, where focus group responses and online answers varied due to the nature of the inquiry. The online survey asked respondents to select their top three choices based on suggestions included in the text of the question, while the focus group format was based on face-to-face dialogue. Not surprisingly, the face-to-face dialogue generated more detailed responses.

Participants in the online survey were presented with a list of eleven categories from which to choose. Rather than relying on too much statistical data, we can deduce that opinion is widely dispersed, with *faculty relations and development* and *curriculum and instruction* carrying the greatest weight (about half of all respondents chose these two categories). The next most preferred categories were *fiscal management* and *budget development*, each receiving twenty (20) votes, or just under a third of the respondents. The remaining responses were evenly dispersed among the remaining categories (see Appendix A for further information).

In group discussions, the three most frequently noted concerns were declining enrollment, building project management, and an understanding of the K-8 dynamic. Familiarity with transportation systems was mentioned, as was planned and cycled facility maintenance. A few respondents made reference to SRBI knowledge (Scientific Research-Based Interventions) as an important component of leadership. Along similar lines, the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is currently in progress and would benefit from having a leader with a good understanding of its potential. One focus group felt that it was especially important for a new

superintendent to have familiarity with Senate Bill 24 regarding education reform in CT. (This was deemed especially important in view of the fact that SB 24, Section 11, concerns the regionalization of small school districts, and could potentially have financial implications for Salem.)

Lastly, the senior citizen responses to this category were widely dispersed among the eleven categories listed in the question. *Public relations* received the most votes, although the margin was negligible (see individual focus group responses in Appendix A for further information).

Personal Characteristics

This category elicited a flood of responses in both formats. The online survey alone generated four full pages of commentary. The words *good communicator* or *good communication skills* appeared more times (in the online format) than any other set of phrases. While communication skills topped the list in overall frequency, there was also an overarching message emphasizing a love for education and children. Two quotes that exemplified the thoughtfulness of the responses and captured a relevant theme are:

“An excitement for and love of learning; a natural, inspiring leadership style.”
“Number one quality should be a desire to change children’s education for the better.”

A similar message emerged in the focus groups. Virtually all respondents indicated a preference for the suggested comments that appeared in the handout: *strong ethical values; good communicator; friendly and approachable*. Further discussion centered on a candidate’s ability to articulate a vision and communicate that vision to all constituencies. *Persuasive, charismatic and diplomatic* were common descriptors. Interestingly, in addition to speaking skills, nearly all groups identified listening skills as a desirable characteristic. Not surprisingly, several included a love for children as a qualifying attribute. The student cohort phrased it this way: *“Fun-loving and enjoys the company of kids.”*

Since students constitute the basis of this undertaking, we would be remiss if we didn’t commend those who participated in this process. The twenty-five 5th through 8th graders we spoke to comprise the school’s Leadership Council. Their contribution was noteworthy: they were bright, enthusiastic and well informed, despite their young age. Their insights were on target and remarkably inclusive. In fact, they were the only cohort to raise the issue of inter-district collaboration. They suggested that the new leader have the *“ability to promote and offer additional activities between the Salem School and other schools (regarding sports and extracurricular activities).”* These observations demonstrate critical thinking and a collaborative spirit—impressive qualities for such young students. Teachers and administrators should be very proud of this exemplary group of learners.

Final Thoughts

Generally speaking, this final question yields a broad range of responses because it asks participants to explore any pending concerns or important issues facing the Salem Public Schools. More often than not, the information gleaned here is all encompassing; people tend to have a better focus after they've exchanged information on a wide range of topics.

In this last category the online data and the focus group responses show some convergence but there is *so much* commentary, especially from the online survey, that it's difficult to discern which issues are most pressing. Accordingly, in order to provide a sound and valid assessment, we reconsidered the responses from *all* categories and looked for a prevalence factor. The following observations reflect our best judgment of the district's most critical factors to consider in recruiting and hiring a new Superintendent of Schools.

What is clear that Salem, like most other school districts in Connecticut, is experiencing a decline in enrollment. Contending with shrinking populations does not require extraordinary feats, but it does call for creative thinking and strategic redeployment of resources. The newly appointed leader should bring the skills necessary to address these topics. Another relevant concern with regard to school populations is Senate Bill 24, which includes a proposal to reduce funding to districts with less than 1,000 students. As with most legislative reform, money is a pivotal factor. The incoming superintendent will have to develop a plan to address each of these challenges without affecting educational programs and/or the overall morale of the district. Also on the subject of S. B. 24, Salem's new superintendent should be familiar with proposed reforms regarding teacher evaluations. These changes are currently under consideration by the state legislature's Education Committee and are likely to be key topics in the coming months. It might be advisable to incorporate a question about this issue as part of the interview process.

Another pending matter in the Salem School District is its renegotiation with East Lyme High School. (Graduates of Salem School go on to attend ELHS with the district providing tuition for these students.) This agreement, which is scheduled for renewal in the coming years, presents an opportunity for modification and improvement. Several groups stressed the difference between a regionalized school district and one with a cooperative arrangement, such as Salem's. Many felt that some familiarity with this concept would be helpful to a new superintendent. On a similar note, various participants spoke about Salem's K-8 structure. Small districts have unique needs and challenges, with scheduling and transportation chief among those concerns. An understanding of the K-8 model would be invaluable.

Lastly, the Salem School district is in the midst of a school renovation (roof, window, HVAC and ADA compliance upgrades). As all superintendents know, building projects tend to bring challenges. Some measure of experience and/or expertise in construction/renovation would be beneficial. In a related category, building maintenance appears to be a growing concern. A regularly-scheduled cycle of service and repair ("planned and cycled maintenance") is important to the overall well being of the school,

and should remain in the forefront of consideration. A superintendent who appreciates this ideal would be most welcome.

In closing, the Salem School District appears to be a successful model of a well-run organization; students are high achieving while teaching and administrative staff seems engaged and dedicated. Likewise, the willingness of residents to participate in this process is a measure of the town's pride in and support for its educational system. There is a clear commitment to academic rigor and civic responsibility as well as a readiness to pursue continuous improvement.

C.E.S. looks forward to helping you recruit a new leader who will sustain your path toward excellence.