

LYNN SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH FOCUS GROUP SURVEY DATA

BACKGROUND

16,800 students represent many linguistic constituencies, the largest being Spanish, Arabic, Haitian, Vietnamese, and Khmer

Student health centers are valued resources at the high schools.

STRENGTHS

Strong special education program including services to children with autism.

Strong program for English Language Learners

Translation services throughout the district.

AREAS TO ADDRESS

The focus groups and survey responders brought a very interesting perspective to recommendations for growth, development, improvement and change – specifically the constructive nature in which they were expressed. A meeting with student leaders and parents, for example, raised many important issues not because the district has failed them as people or has been deficient as an organization, but as items where potential to advance the community are at hand. Cultural proficiency and employment practices that bring about a faculty that resembles the city were presented as goals that will benefit all students and residents, rather than function as vehicles to satisfy a disgruntled constituency. As a result, the focus groups were generally constructive, insightful, and diverse in attendance and thought with individuals more concerned with Lynn than themselves. In fact, this is unusual, and this reflects well on the community.

Budget and finance was a theme that was woven into many recommendations. Parents, teachers, administrators and students discussed the impact of losing programs, electives, or pre and post-school activities because of budget limitations. Among the frequent issues was expansion and restoration of services of school resource officers.

Lynn is one of the state's lower performing districts overall, but the emergence out of the lowest 10% of districts relieves the district from the state-imposed sanctions and vulnerability to further charter school expansion. It is argued persuasively that the status does a disservice to the faculty that was considered by responders as hard working and proficient. Further, the state's current accountability and assessment system that ranks a district only as high as its lowest performing school and that the widely acknowledged punitive and somewhat arbitrary ranking criteria are designed by a hostile regulatory agency to create the appearance of underperformance. Lynn serves a high number of economically disadvantaged students, including English Language Learners, and mobile and transient young people who pose specific challenges to the faculty and leadership. The next superintendent will need to help

work through the challenges to improve outcomes of a changing student base and to keep ahead of the evolving accountability and assessment system that the state will roll-out later this year.

The district will need to develop a long term capital plan to upgrade or replace several aging buildings, some of which are pre-Depression.

The district requires a 21st Century Assessment and the state may not be the best place to look for leadership in making it relevant to Lynn. When required to use on-line assessments, students who are not technology savvy or who are economically disadvantaged are at greater risk.

Class size is relatively high with classes of 26-28 and higher identified by faculty. "With more staff to work with us, we could get more children reading at their level.

Staff are concerned that prioritizing social and emotional learning might draw attention away from academics in favor of therapeutics. One solution would be to expand the number of social workers in school. On the other hand, attention was drawn to students who are living under stress. Contrary to what the public might assume, the key causes of social and emotional distress were identified as the challenges to immigrant students who are trying to settle in a new place and, in some cases, might fear deportation or the extradition of family members; others are dealing with the greater volume of disruption or dysfunction in family life; and still others deal with the growing rate of mental health pathologies that afflict students in 2018.

Some responders explained that students are coexisting in fear of tests, controversy, and anything that will reflect poorly on them and their school and community. On one hand they want to know about the world, but, on the other hand, they may be too timid to express or articulate their dreams for themselves. Both parents and students also asked if they are being pushed enough, while other students explained that they feel pushed toward test preparation but, despite their resentment of that, they know that "at least our teachers are focused on us and care about how well we can do." There being safety in numbers, several called for expansion and inclusion of arts, sports, cultural topics, and music as examples of how they might come together. Professional development in pursuit of this goal was highly recommended.

In light of the state's new bilingual education law, expanding the options available to school districts to work with English Language Learners, Lynn must consider carefully how it wishes to work with these students and families. Many responders cited this issue and want to participate in a collaborative effort to review and revise strategies for bilingual education.

Food and nutrition are important issues according to several responders and participants. This is a multi-dimensional concern that acknowledges that many students rely on school for not only a nutritious breakfast and lunch, but sometimes for their only meals of the day. There are concerns about providing fresh fruits and vegetables and locally grown foods, and several individuals noted that a diverse community demands diverse and culturally appropriate meals. These comments were made not as a criticism of the Lynn Public Schools, but as a call to action for the future in which poverty and food

insecurity might become a greater issue and where good nutrition as a public health matter may play a larger role.

The growing demographic diversity of Lynn and of its public schools will require a diverse faculty, responsive curricula, and cultural proficiency throughout the district and community. The superintendent is expected to be a leader on this front. Several individuals recommended appropriate professional development to expand the level of cultural sensitivity.

Several individuals argued for greater civics and current event content in class after explaining how poorly citizens in general understand the mechanics of government. Students also argued for more opportunities to engage in classes and activities with other classmates from their own schools and from others as a way of building a stronger community.

There is a growing constituency for the concept of the “community school,” an idea that has been implemented in several communities but a model for which there are no precise formats and standards. In brief, the community school, as described by advocates, is one that incorporates many programs and services beyond the traditional educational work. This may include pre-school, after-school, summer school, library, social, athletic, cultural, medical/mental health, social work, family therapy, adult education, nutrition, weekend, and a range of other services all based in the community school or network of schools. Many responders believe that this concept will work to fight poverty and social distress by supporting all the work of school, and they want to alert the next superintendent to the possibilities inherent in such a program.

Many references were made about the need to conduct an assessment and inventory of current technology resources and developing a master technology plan for the next 5-10 years.

PRIORITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS FOR THE SUPERITENDENT

Presence in the **Community/Visibility in Schools**. Responders believe the superintendent should be a visible member of the Lynn community and should explain how to make that happen.

Understanding of the **needs of urban districts**, including the diverse constituencies, unique financial needs, and social demands. This would also include having had **experience working in an urban setting**.

Other stakeholders cited the value of having **worked managing a building** as a principal or building administrator.

Strong on the Use of **Data and Mathematical Analysis**. Superintendents should be able to lead the district in understanding student achievement data both to improve outcomes, but also to challenge those who would use data to rank the district arbitrarily.

Understanding of the **value of a relevant technology** program that includes up to date hardware and software and an appreciation for what technology can do to improve teaching and learning. Hardware

alone was viewed not only as insufficient, but indicative of a poor understanding of how to use technology.

Vision is important, but not without listening to the people around you and throughout the district, warned several stakeholders.

Willingness to ask for help and to know to whom to turn in the district for assistance and brainstorming.

Understanding of the **value of teams** and has the ability to get people to work together and to appreciate the skills of others.

Understanding of Special Education. The district has some particularly specialties in this area including deploying Applied Behavioral Analysis in serving students who are autistic.

Less of a top down administrator, but one who would allow schools to maintain their individuality that has developed over time.

Responsive, trustworthy and Reliable were consistent descriptors offered by faculty who advocated for a **person of principle and courage** to act boldly when necessary.

Students spoke out for a **leader who will fight bigotry** and defend those who may be underdogs, victims, or on the losing side of popularity contests. Several responders pointed to the increased awareness of LGBTQ students and adults and are eager to have a superintendent who will advocate for social equity and justice for all students and parents.

Empowering parents is a priority for the community responders who suggest that there is an untapped resource waiting to be called upon.

A superintendent who **appreciates the arts** is a goal for many responders who regret that sometimes athletics takes the greater share of resources and attention with the district has a successful music program and arts, especially at the upper grades.

Willingness to **acknowledging the differences of each school**, and to respect them when they have evolved with a specific purpose – i.e., specialized activities, programs, and curricular specialties.

Understand the **Role of the School Committee** as a means of designating areas of responsibility and allowing educators, including not only teacher leaders, but also school based administrators to do their jobs.

Possessing a **Clear Vision of Social and Emotional Learning** and its Impact on Academic Learning. Therapeutic interventions like SEL may draw teachers away from the academic work. Others may argue the opposite and see them as capable of full integration. Still, a strong argument was made that “academics are the most therapeutic.” Several people questioned the real added value of SEL and would like to see a superintendent courageous enough to question if therapeutic strategies actually work for student achievement and wellbeing.

Sufficiently Skeptical. Responders mentioned several times that they appreciate skepticism as a characteristic of their leader, especially in light of the constant inflow of ideas and innovations, and the pressure to adopt them. This, some argue, can divert them from focusing on the principal work of school. For examples, discussants were both in praise and skeptical about the value of curricular innovations, alternative pedagogies, restorative justice and discipline, and the state curriculum frameworks.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Several individuals asked that candidates be able to meet the candidates and participate in questions and answer sessions. (One responder recommended a panel of candidates respond to the audience. This is not a good idea, but it has not been tried.)

QUESTIONS TO POSE TO THE SUPERINTENDENT

Among the questions that might be considered include many in the expected topics such as communications, management style, experience with budget and finance, and leadership. Among the more interesting questions include:

Not necessarily why Lynn, but why you (compared to others)?

What benchmarks should be used to assess your performance?

What do you think of incentive-based pay or linking student test data to evaluation ratings?

What “outside-the-box” ideas have you developed and implemented in your career, or have you been in part responsible for developing?

What have you most proud of as s

Tell us something creative that you did?