

# **Woodbridge Public Schools**

## **Beecher Road School Principal**

### **Leadership Profile**

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## **BEECHER ROAD PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP PROFILE**

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### **Introduction**

Selecting a leader is one of the most important responsibilities a school district undertakes. There are tangible and intangible aspects of leadership required in a principal who is going to work with the staff, Superintendent, Board of Education, and the whole community to provide high quality education to Woodbridge's children. This may be especially true in a town like Woodbridge, where Beecher Road School is truly the center of the community.

In light of the critical nature of this responsibility, the Woodbridge Board of Education has sought the input of its school and community stakeholders through a survey, interviews, and focus groups. This Leadership Profile presents findings from five focus groups, two interviews, and an online survey conducted in November 2019. The consultant spoke with 36 individuals, including parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the Board of Education. In addition, 155 Woodbridge residents and staff completed a survey publicized through the Woodbridge district and community websites. In conducting the focus groups and developing the survey, the consultant used an unbiased, structured approach involving a series of consistent questions. In addition to asking about strengths and challenges of Beecher Road School and the Woodbridge community which could affect future leadership requirements, she asked about the qualities, characteristics, experience, philosophy, and skills most desirable in the next Beecher Principal. The Board of Education has established a Principal Search Committee which will use these results as it considers applicants in order to find the best possible match for Woodbridge. The consultant is presenting the findings to the Principal Search Committee and the Woodbridge Board of Education without revealing the identity of any individual contributor.

The Woodbridge Board has made a commendable effort to include voices from as many constituents as possible. Many thanks to focus group participants and survey respondents whose commitment to the school and town of Woodbridge was clearly in evidence as they provided perspectives. Special thanks to Marsha DeGennaro in the Superintendent's Office for her support in setting up and publicizing the focus groups and survey.

Mary Broderick

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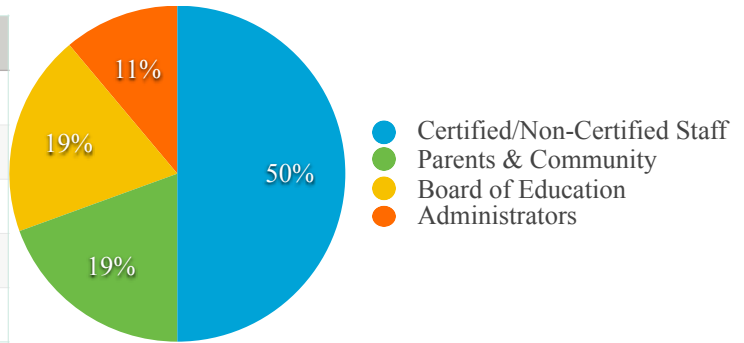
## Data Collection

In total, about 191 individuals participated either through interviews, focus groups, or an online survey. This level of participation demonstrates strong interest in the leadership of Beecher Road School.

The data collected do not constitute a scientific sampling, but a representation of Beecher Road School and the Woodbridge community. The survey was voluntary. Though the consultant 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 consultant’s judgment, they were repeated by a sufficient number of respondents to warrant the attention of the Principal Search Committee and the Board of Education.

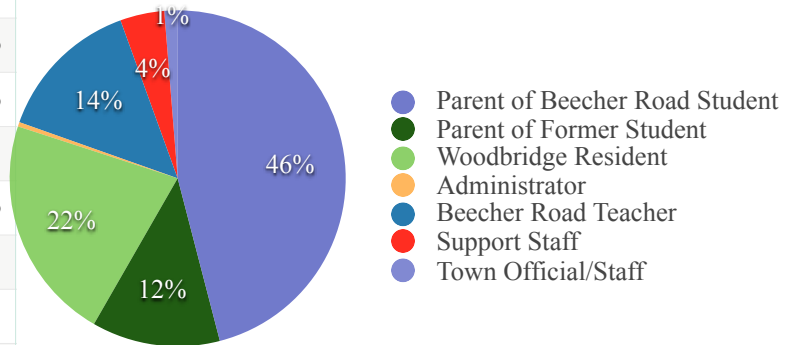
### Interview/Focus Group Participants

PARTICIPANT	36	%
Certified/Non-Certified Staff	18	50.0%
Parents & Community	7	19.4%
Board of Education	7	19.4%
Administrators	4	11.1%
	<b>36</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



### Survey Responses

PARTICIPANT*	155	%
Parent of Beecher Road Student	108	46.0%
Parent of Former Student	29	12.3%
Woodbridge Resident	51	21.7%
Administrator	1	0.4%
Beecher Road Teacher	33	14.0%
Support Staff	10	4.3%
Town Official/Staff	3	1.3%
	<b>235</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



\*Please note that survey participants identified themselves under multiple categories so numbers add up to more than 155.

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*The following themes emerged through an analysis of focus group, interview, and survey responses. In each category, themes are presented beginning with the most frequently mentioned.*



### Strengths of Woodbridge and its School

Beecher Road School and the town of Woodbridge have a lot going for them. Participants in the focus groups and survey especially highlighted the excellent staff, varied aspects of the program, supportive families and community that provides resources, an effective culture, and a terrific student body. Also mentioned as assets are the unique school size, professional development, and the school facility.

#### Exceptional, dedicated staff

Ninety-one (91) focus group and survey participants mentioned the excellent staff as one of Beecher Road’s greatest strengths. Teachers at Beecher are “top notch,” highly skilled, caring professionals who have a great deal of expertise. They are driven to solve problems to address student learning challenges. They help students grow by creating “amazing learning environments. Teachers bring to the work a spirit of collegiality, sharing lessons and ideas. They build a kind, caring, loving community. They are resourceful and creative, and “make learning fun and engaging for life.” They are highly dedicated to the school and invested in the success of students. Retention among teachers is very high and they enjoy a considerable level of autonomy. They want to conduct motivating, interest-based programs and they are allowed to. “No one is shy about advocating for kids.” They go above the call of duty and pitch in when there’s a need.

Appreciation for staff extended to all levels. Support staff bring the same kind of spirit to the school and students. In addition, 18 participants specifically mentioned Beecher’s effective, dedicated administration today. Administrators involve staff in decision-making and provide “necessary tools and support” to do their jobs. Though there is a history of turnover, a number of participants talked of “being in a good place now.” Administrators recognize the “whole child,” and are learners along with the rest of the staff. Staff felt supported by the administrators when they needed help and that their voices and opinions were equally valued.

#### Program

Participants (74) cited various aspects of the program as major strengths of the school. Beecher generally gets high marks for its innovative curriculum and differentiated instruction, with a variety of subjects offered at a high bar of academic excellence. The school has invested in Columbia Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. The district has guidelines that keep PreK to Grade 3 classroom enrollments between 17 and 19 students, and Grades 4-6 between 19 and 21 students.

Within that overall excellence, several programs received shout-outs. Participants (18) mentioned the Multi-Age Group (MAG) as an exceptional learning option with a 25 year history at Beecher. This program gives its students the chance to experience project-based learning between Grades 1 and 4.

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Others spoke of the exceptional program for special needs students, where the school goes “above and beyond for students and families.” Students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 are able to study Spanish and Grades 4 through 6 may take band. The school also boasts an excellent library, science lab, technology lab, and a swimming pool.

A multitude of enrichment offerings significantly enhance the comprehensive educational program, an advantage made possible by school enrollment of 850 students. There are also after school and extra-curricular offerings, including Math Olympiads and Robotics.

### **Supportive parents, families, and a community that commits resources**

Woodbridge is a small, attractive town centrally located just northwest of New Haven. Collaborative in nature, the town and school are historically aligned. Beecher Road School is the “crown jewel” of the town, and its heart. The town has consistently supported the school with sufficient resources to sustain an excellent program. The school also turns to the community (Yale Child Study Center, Clifford Beers, etc.) for support with student health. Seventy (70) participants mentioned supportive parents and community as major strengths.

Woodbridge boasts an involved, and supportive community. Many residents are associated with Yale, so they are exceptionally highly educated and they, in turn, value and support education. Parents have high aspirations for their children and want to contribute to the school. Open Houses draw nearly 100% of the parents. The PTO raises about \$70,000 annually to support the school. Parents want a part in shaping a positive culture at the school.

### **Culture and climate**

According to 61 participants, school culture and climate are major strengths of Beecher Road School. Components of that culture are a kind, caring, loving, nurturing environment (29), high expectations and a commitment to excellence (20), and a whole child focus (12).

Participants talked about “the Beecher Way,” where a strong, supportive community generates a spirit of caring, love, inclusivity, and support for children and staff alike. Though the school is large, it is child centered, intimate, and fair. This warm culture is combined with very high expectations and a deep commitment to excellence. “High standards are maintained without stressing the children.” Learning... “creates well-rounded, productive students.” Staff are always encouraged to try new approaches, generating an innovative spirit. “The district has always allowed staff to run with their institutional expertise,” and staff appreciate the freedom they enjoy when choosing lessons and materials.

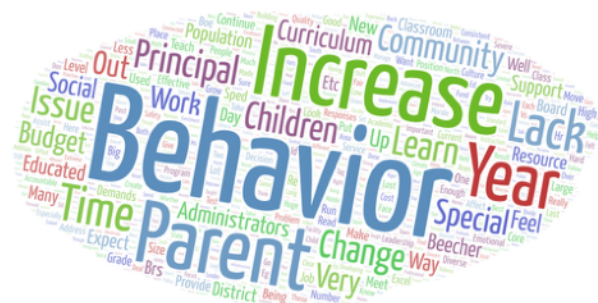
The focus of the school is the whole child. At Beecher, staff seek student growth— academically, socially and emotionally, and physically, rather than test scores. Participants felt the school is a “model of priorities.” Several mentioned that students have two outdoor breaks each day.

### **Students**

Twelve (12) participants talked about the students as a strength. Beecher students are a nice, happy, diverse group. The staff has paid attention for years to avoiding implicit bias and ensuring that there are appropriate, culturally inclusive reading materials for all children.

### **Size, facility, safety**

A small group of participants mentioned three other areas as strengths. Five talked about Beecher’s unique size, a small district with only one school: a very large PK-Grade 6. Several (4) mentioned the really attractive school facility offering a lot from which students can choose, including excellent technological resources. Finally, four (4) mentioned the safe environment and excellent school resource officer.



## Challenges Facing Woodbridge

In Woodbridge, as in many communities, the strongest assets often also pose the greatest challenges. Where some see major strengths, others see issues. The greatest concerns for this study’s participants included changes in student wellbeing and meeting their different academic and social needs, school climate, program, structural issues, resource and facilities challenges, communications, and safety.

### **Student wellbeing challenges and balancing student needs**

Though Beecher staff strive to meet the needs of all children and help them grow, children arriving at the schoolhouse door bring increasingly complex and challenging behaviors. Sixty-four (64) participants cited some aspect of student need/behavior as a major challenge the new principal will face.

### **Differentiating instruction for increasingly complex student needs**

As teachers and staff seek to “drive excellence” and ensure all students become “confident, humble learners...socially prepared to navigate the next level of education,” they are coping with the multitude of pressures that students are experiencing today, according to 28 participants. Students are generally more socially anxious, manifesting effects of depression, anxiety, and trauma. Social media and the internet in general seem to play a role in generating anxiety. Students are also at school, in some cases, from early morning into evening. The results may be risky or extreme behavior and disruption to the education process. Teachers are increasingly challenged to provide the social and emotional support students need while addressing learning needs of students at all levels. These challenges make differentiating instruction increasingly difficult.

### **Resources shifting to greater special education needs**

There is a perception among participants (21) that the special needs population at Beecher has grown and that the severity of identified students’ needs are increasing. Staff are involved in more IEPs and students have more 504s. (Current identification of special needs students is about 12%.) As a result, some cited an erosion of resources, time, and attention in other areas of the school. Several mentioned that supports are no longer as readily available for “students following expectations” and high achieving students. Support staff are stretched and there aren’t enough of them to help.

### **Behavior challenges and discipline follow-through**

Twelve (12) participants specifically mentioned behavior challenges students pose and appropriate staff response as a major issue. When students are bullying or running up and down the halls (especially in the upper grades), they need consistent discipline from the school so that all students feel safe. Some expressed concern for adult physical safety when students have behaved particularly badly. Staff felt they were not equipped to handle some extreme cases, and indeed, several students have eventually been out-

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placed when they have gotten to seventh grade. Some felt the administration had not dealt consistently with such issues, though they have seen recent improvement.

### **School climate**

Though cited as a major strength of Beecher Street School, 55 participants identified school climate as a challenge the new leader will face. Most climate issues related to staff dynamics and turnover.

### **Staff**

A number of participants (31) raised issues with staff affecting school climate. Beecher Road teachers, by their own admission, can be tough. This is a large faculty with many years of service and strongly held beliefs. They need and want to be held to a high standard, and when the school commits to a direction, they want consequences when staff members don't share core values or comply with collectively agreed upon direction. Simultaneously, they want teachers to continue to have "the freedom to do their jobs well." Several other participants (5) referenced past issues with low morale and lost trust, though some did say there had been recent improvement. A couple mentioned the "north/south" divide that separates the lower and upper grades and difficulty of one principal being responsible for 70 certified staff.

### **Administration issues**

There has been a lot of change in school leadership over the years, and it's disruptive. Participants (13) would like to see greater stability, since change invariably causes the school to take a step backward. Because of the size of Beecher and very high expectations, participants suggested that it is hard for a leader to "jump in here."

### **Overall climate**

Eleven (11) participants made reference to the overall school climate as an area of focus for the new leader. Six (6) want the new leader to "promote a culture of tolerance, understanding, communication, and acceptance" of people from all backgrounds.

### **Program**

Though many participants felt the program was a point of strength for Beecher, 45 participants found some challenges related to curriculum, enrichment, special education, the impact of testing and state mandates, and professional development.

Nineteen (19) participants pointed to curricular areas as challenges. Some believe the new leader will need to stay focused on the "changing needs of the the school and the types of learners," and ensuring the curriculum is appropriate to support them. Participants asked whether Responsive Classroom and the Teachers College projects continue to offer the best methods for Beecher students, wondering whether it's time to explore other evidence-based programs. A number of participants suggested there could be greater rigor and more consistent implementation of core curriculum and specials that is equitable for all students.

Eleven (11) participants would like to see more resources and programming for high achieving students and encouragement for students to exceed expectations.

Five (5) participants expressed that the load of special education cases has grown. Several acknowledged that it's very difficult to differentiate instruction for students "across the spectrum."

Five other participants felt the state has placed mandates on districts that impede learning, such as excessive testing and Common Core State Standards.

Finally, four participants felt that teachers need more professional development to even out the caliber of teaching across the school, and help them deliver curriculum to a changing demographic.

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### **Structural Issues**

Forty-two (42) participants identified some kind of structural issue as a challenge. Of those, 30 recognized the immense responsibility borne by a principal (along with an assistant principal) in a school of 850 students and a growing school population. It's hard to focus on a school vision when you also are responsible for curriculum development and implementation, professional development, PowerSchool, the budget, policy development, student discipline, human resources, parent relationships and communication, and making school feel like a community. The principal is also responsible for conducting about 30 teacher evaluations each year. Meetings alone take up an enormous number of the principal's hours. In Woodbridge, the position is considered a 24 hour/seven day/week responsibility because of all the responsibilities coupled with the high expectations of the community. Some expressed ambiguity about lines of responsibility between the Board of Education, the Superintendent and the Principal.

The school feels very big for students and parents, and comprises quite a large physical plant. The cafeteria was built to accommodate 200, so feeding 850 (in waves) each day can be a challenge.

Seven participants spoke of the divide between staff of the lower versus upper grades. Until quite recently, the school was divided in two, with two principals.

### **Resources/Facilities**

According to 27 participants, the new principal will be faced with budgetary constraints and facilities needs. Many (21) are concerned with an erosion in state funding and a town wish for no budget increases. Given growing enrollment and student challenges the school may not have sufficient financial resources to provide needed staffing and other supports. "Things that made Beecher so awesome may be lost, as parents are stressed, too."

Six participants pointed to facilities in need of updating. Some felt the school was too small for the population. The school has had issues of flooding, mold, and falling ceiling tiles. A couple mentioned a problem with an HVAC renovation.

### **Parents and Communications**

Again, what some see as strengths of the school, others see as challenges. Twenty (20) participants felt there were issues with parent involvement and communications. Eight described a very educated, very demanding, very large parent population. Some parents are viewed as intense, others demanding and supportive. Some parents find it hard to find their place. Others think the parents "have a lot of say and run the school."

Eleven (11) felt communications between the schools and parents could improve. Parents would like the administration to be more responsive to parent and teacher feedback.

### **Safety**

Six participants want the new leader to focus on ensuring facility safety and maintaining the school resource officer (SRO).



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### Desired Expertise, Qualities, and Characteristics in the next Principal?

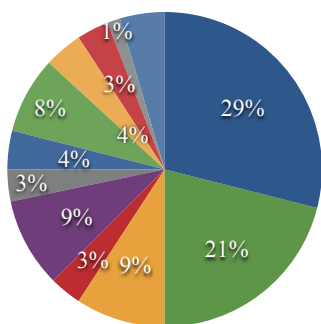
What would be the most important expertise, qualities, and characteristics in the next principal to tap Beecher Road’s strengths and meet its challenges? An analysis of survey responses yielded the following:

By far the most **desired** expertise first choice of survey respondents, was *Cultivates and promotes shared vision to move all students to excellence* (28.9%). The second #1 pick was *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (21.1%). There was a tie for a distant third between *Is responsive to concerns or suggestions raised by stakeholders* and *Has broad base of knowledge of educational issues & practices* (both 9.2%).

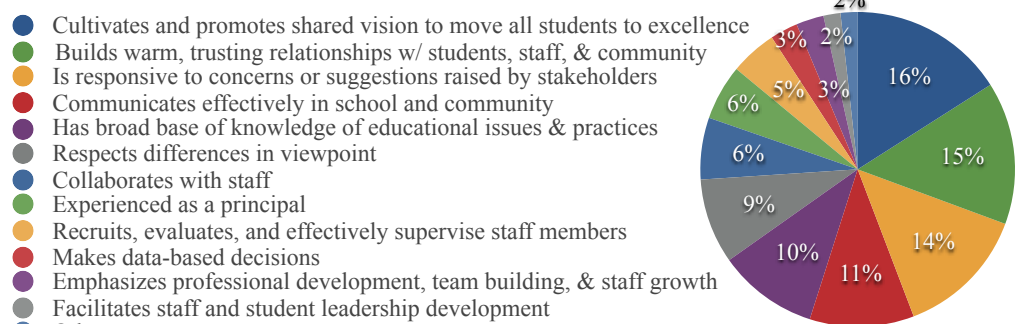
If we look at the top three choices combined, *Cultivates and promotes shared vision* remains in at the top (16%), still followed by *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (14.7%). Now *Is responsive to concerns or suggestions raised by stakeholders* (13.6%) is clearly in third place.

DESIRED EXPERTISE IN NEW PRINCIPAL	#1	%	#2	5	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Cultivates and promotes shared vision to move all students to excellence	44	28.9%	20	13.1%	9	5.9%	73	16.0%
Builds warm, trusting relationships w/ students, staff, & community	32	21.1%	18	11.8%	17	11.2%	67	14.7%
Is responsive to concerns or suggestions raised by stakeholders	14	9.2%	23	15.0%	25	16.4%	62	13.6%
Communicates effectively in school and community	5	3.3%	17	11.1%	27	17.8%	49	10.7%
Has broad base of knowledge of educational issues & practices	14	9.2%	18	11.8%	15	9.9%	47	10.3%
Respects differences in viewpoint, ability, culture of students and families and seeks equity	5	3.3%	21	13.7%	14	9.2%	40	8.8%
Collaborates with staff	6	3.9%	8	5.2%	15	9.9%	29	6.3%
Experienced as a principal	12	7.9%	9	5.9%	5	3.3%	26	5.7%
Recruits, evaluates, and effectively supervise staff members	6	3.9%	5	3.3%	11	7.2%	22	4.8%
Makes data-based decisions	5	3.3%	5	3.3%	3	2.0%	13	2.8%
Emphasizes professional development, team building, & staff growth	0	0.0%	6	3.9%	7	4.6%	13	2.8%
Facilitates staff and student leadership development	2	1.3%	2	1.3%	4	2.6%	8	1.8%
Other	7	4.6%	1	0.7%	0	0.0%	8	1.8%
	152	100%	153	100%	152	100%	457	100%

First Choice Expertise



Top Three Choices



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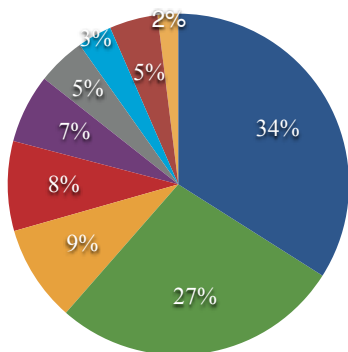
In addition to the leadership expertise addressed in the prior section, survey respondents reflected some clear preferences for **qualities** desired in a new leader. The top *first* choice selections were: *Prioritizes students' growth and wellbeing as primary focus* (34%) followed by *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* (27.5%). A distant third was *Exudes love of children, families, and community* (9.2%).

Combining the top three choices shifts things around a little. *Prioritizes students' growth and wellbeing as primary focus* (25.2%) remains at the top, followed more closely by *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* (22.5%). Now moving into the top three is *Effective and fair problem solver* (12.3%).

Needless to say, all of these qualities and skills are essential in a leader, yet they point to the prioritized needs of the Beecher Road School 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.

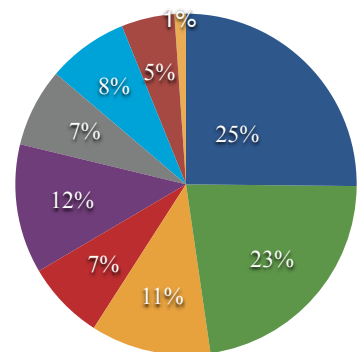
DESIRED QUALITIES IN PRINCIPAL	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Prioritizes students' growth and wellbeing as primary focus	52	34.0%	36	23.7%	27	18%	115	25.2%
Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community	42	27.5%	43	28.3%	18	12%	103	22.5%
Exudes love of children, families, and community	14	9.2%	18	11.8%	20	13%	52	11.4%
Visionary	13	8.5%	11	7.2%	10	7%	34	7.4%
Effective and fair problem solver	10	6.5%	16	10.5%	30	20%	56	12.3%
Inspirational team builder	7	4.6%	12	7.9%	15	10%	34	7.4%
Resilient in the face of challenges	5	3.3%	12	7.9%	18	12%	35	7.7%
Exemplary work ethic	7	4.6%	4	2.6%	12	8%	23	5.0%
Other	3	2.0%	0	0.0%	2	1%	5	1.1%
	<b>153</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>100%</b>

**First Choice Qualities**



- Prioritizes students' growth and wellbeing as primary focus
- Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community
- Exudes love of children, families, and community
- Visionary
- Effective and fair problem solver
- Inspirational team builder
- Resilient in the face of challenges
- Exemplary work ethic
- Other

**Top Three Choices**



### **Expertise**

#### **Cultivates and promotes a shared vision to move all students to excellence**

The successful principal will inspire all students to “push themselves to achieve more than they thought possible.” Setting very high expectations, the leader will work with staff, parents, and the community to meet every student where they are and tailor learning to help them thrive. The leader will create an environment of “unrivaled excellence” and “best in class curriculum” that sets Beecher apart.

#### **Builds warm, trusting relationships with students, staff, and community**

The new leader will foster a positive school culture of excellence, warmth, and nurturing. The leader will be affirming and collaborative, demonstrating caring about students, staff, and families.

Reflecting the school’s commitment to the “whole child,” this leader will likewise appreciate the “whole teacher,” knowing faculty and staff and inspiring them to grow personally and professionally. The principal will treat faculty fairly, inviting their voices and valuing their perspectives, willing to learn together. Experienced as a teacher, this leader will understand the issues with which teachers are contending and will recognize and appreciate their efforts.

The leader will warmly welcome parents’ thoughts and perspectives and respond in a timely manner to their concerns. While fostering healthy home/school relationships, the leader will consistently enforce school policies.

#### **Is responsive to concerns or suggestions raised by stakeholders**

The effective leader will make people feel heard and valued. The leader will be a great communicator and advocate for the success of the students and school. This individual will also have an “all hands on deck” approach, and offer a support system to back up teachers.

#### **Has broad base of knowledge of educational issues**

The successful leader will be intellectually curious, with a breadth of interests, cultivating personal growth. A forward-thinker, able to communicate effectively orally and in writing, this leader will keep abreast of issues of teaching and learning. Understanding the change process, the leader will inspire and challenge the staff to learn and grow. The leader will be knowledgeable about curriculum at all levels as well as research about reading and math instruction, multi-age grouping, and project-based learning. The principal will also have a broad and deep foundation in promoting positive student behavior and effective consequences.

### **Qualities**

#### **Prioritizes student growth and wellbeing as primary focus**

This leader will ensure Beecher is delivering on its promise to educate the whole child, fostering excellence and firm expectations in a caring, loving, open and inclusive environment. Beecher students come with a diverse range of backgrounds, interests, and talents. The leader needs to ensure that each child has a stimulating, motivating learning experience. The leader will understand and cultivate diversity, be inclusive of diverse cultures, and foster inclusivity in the school.

The leader will need to focus on the social and emotional development of children, holding students accountable for behavioral issues while empathizing with the difficulties some students experience in their lives. The principal should ensure there are programs to support healthy social and emotional development and consistency in staff responses to behavioral issues.

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The successful leader will help keep staff knowledge fresh and responsive to students' needs. There may be occasion to challenge teachers when they are not supporting student growth or implementing agreed upon curricula and programs. Staff may need ongoing implicit bias training to foster an inclusive culture. They may need guidance if their professional learning committee teamwork is not productive. In these and other cases, the leader may need to be firm in insisting on a culture that puts the interest of students first.

The leader will also be an effective advocate for the resources needed to provide students with a comprehensive, inspiring learning experience in a safe environment.

### **Accessible, approachable, and visible in the school and community**

Beecher's new leader will have a high level of emotional intelligence. A warm, compassionate, positive, empathetic, smiling individual, this leader will be tactful, and resilient in the face of adversity. This leader's engaging presence and caring attitude will build staff morale. Deeply committed to Beecher, this principal will be present at nearly all functions and deeply invested in the community.

### **Exudes love of children, families, and community**

This won't be a job, but a passion for the leader who will spread generosity, love, and infectious enthusiasm about students and their education, believing everyone can grow and improve. Students will be drawn to the principal as a trusted individual. The principal will create an inclusive environment where all students feel safe, welcome, valued, and heard. This individual will model humility and kindness.

### **Solves problems fairly and effectively**

The successful leader will bring great experience as a teacher, leader, manager, cultivator of change, and team builder. Though open to the opinions of staff and engaging their perspectives, this leader will also be strong and ready to make tough decisions. The leader will balance the wants of staff with the needs of students, and ensure effective discipline when student behavior is impeding the learning of other students.

The position will require careful balancing of competing demands. The creative, highly energetic, and organized leader will be committed to a position that requires full attention, since the small administrative staff fulfills typical central office functions. The successful principal will love the work... and a challenge.