

# **The Hamden Public Schools Superintendent Search Leadership Profile**

Prepared by

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# SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP PROFILE

## 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 Hamden 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:

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>
Central Office Administrators	Thurs., May 19	1:00	Central Office, Rm 101
School Administrators	Thurs., May 19	4:30	Church Street Media Center
	Wed., June 1	5:00	West Woods Media Center
Early Elementary Teachers	Thurs., May 19	3:30	Church Street Media Center
Later Elementary Teachers	Wed., June 1	4:00	West Woods Media Center
Middle School Teachers	Wed., June 1	2:45	Middle School Media Center
High School Teachers	Fri., May 20	2:15	High School Media Center
Special Services Teachers	Thurs., June 2	3:45	ZOOM
Students Students/Recent Alumni	Wed., June 1	2:15	High School Media Center
		7:30	ZOOM
Non-certified & Support Staff	Mon., May 23	4:00	ZOOM
Current & Prospective Parents/Guardians	Thurs., June 2	7:00	ZOOM
Legislative Council/Town Staff	Thurs., June 2	2:30	ZOOM
Community Members	Thurs., June 2	6:00	ZOOM
Collaborators: Universities, non-profits	Thurs., June 2	12:00	ZOOM

This Leadership Profile presents findings from these focus groups and an online survey conducted in May 2022. The consultants offered 14 focus groups and spoke with 58 individuals, including parents, teachers, administrators, the Mayor, Legislative Council members, and members of the Hamden Board of Education.

In total, 233 Hamden 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 Hamden 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 Hamden Board of Education will use these results as it considers its applicants in order to find the best possible match for Hamden at this time. The consultants are presenting their findings to the Board of Education without revealing the identity of any individual contributor.

The Hamden 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 Taryn Donnarummo for her help scheduling and publicizing the opportunity to participate, and to focus group participants and survey respondents whose commitment to the schools and Town of Hamden was evident as they provided perspectives.

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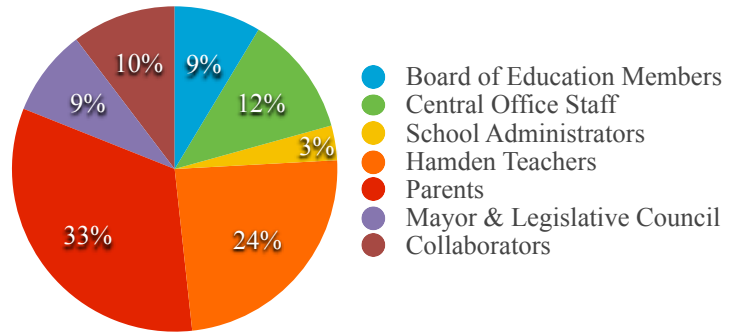
## SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP PROFILE

### Data Collection

In total, 291 individuals participated through interviews, focus groups, and the survey. The data collected do not constitute a scientific sampling, but a representation of the Hamden 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.

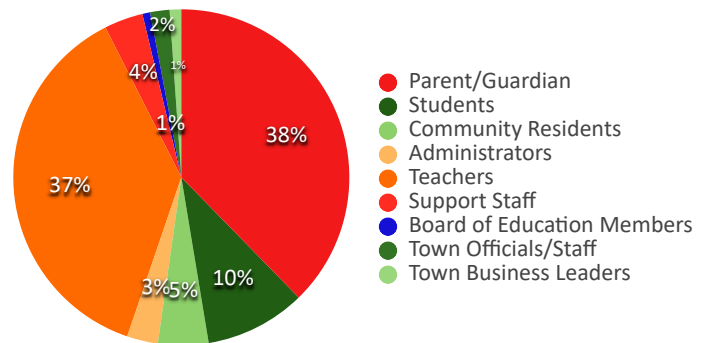
#### Interview and Focus Group Participants

PARTICIPANTS	58	%
Board of Education Members	5	8.6%
Central Office Staff	7	12.1%
School Administrators	2	3.4%
Hamden Teachers	14	24.1%
Parents	19	32.8%
Mayor & Legislative Council	5	8.6%
Collaborators	6	10.3%
	<b>58</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



#### Survey Responses

PARTICIPANTS*	233	%
Parent/Guardian of Hamden students	101	37.7%
Hamden Students	26	9.7%
Community Residents (not current parent)	13	4.9%
Administrators in Hamden	8	3.0%
Teachers in Hamden	100	37.3%
Support Staff in Hamden	10	3.7%
Board of Education Members	2	0.7%
Town Officials/Staff	5	1.9%
Town Business Leaders	3	1.1%
	<b>* 268</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



\*Please note that survey participants identified themselves under multiple categories so numbers add up to more than 233.



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of information at us from a textbook and expecting us to learn it all by [our]selves. The teachers are also really cool and fun to be around and they make us feel like they're our friends which is really comforting to students. Students can talk to teachers like that without being worried about being judged or them reacting differently than how they wanted them to because they're teachers." Teachers work as "cohesive teams working closely to support students and their families."

Though there may have been some erosion due to COVID, staff retention in Hamden has historically been strong. The district has trained and kept people. Thanks to "so many veteran teachers, the building runs itself."

### **Program**

Participants (103) identified some aspect of the program or curriculum as a strength of Hamden Public Schools. Staff "stay on top of current instructional practices to continually revise and update curricul[a]." The common, districtwide curriculum "focuses on making sure a variety of backgrounds are seen and embraced." Student-centered projects and assessments challenge students in various educational domains.

Many spoke of the vast and diverse course and extracurricular and enrichment opportunities offered to students districtwide, and especially at the High School. Specifically mentioned were advanced placement classes, physics, engineering, robotics, and the opportunity to get an associates degree before graduating.

Several program areas received specific mention. Fifteen (15) participants spoke of the value, love, and appreciation the schools and town place on the Arts (music, visual, theater) as a great strength. Thirteen (13) mentioned some aspect of special services and mental health, specifically the variety of special education programs, counselors, support for English Language Learners, Response to Intervention, mental health awareness, and support offered in that area through a partnership with Clifford Beers.

A handful of participants (9) mentioned the neighborhood schools, the strong community built around them, and the cohesion among the elementary teachers across the district. Eight (8) mentioned the district's partnerships with local colleges and educational institutions, including opportunities for experiential and service learning and career mentorships.

### **Connected community**

According to 49 participants, the spirit of the community of Hamden and family culture in the schools are great strengths. This is a "larger town with a small town feel" and a lot of different neighborhoods, "each with its own unique vibe." People feel a sense of pride in the community and its schools and support each other. The town offers a lot of activities that include everyone, such as summer events with food trucks, fire works, and featuring a variety of arts. The community also comes together to tackle thorny challenges together through task forces.

The schools themselves are "like a family" with some students and staff descended from generations of Hamden families. School environments are described as "very welcoming." Several participants mentioned strong, active parent involvement.

Ten participants mentioned Hamden's location as a strength, situated near major urban areas, surrounded by colleges and universities, and boasting beautiful parks, libraries, and other resources. The community has the potential to serve as a model for other municipalities.

### **Leadership**

Participants (32) identified strengths of leadership in Hamden. Administrators in Central Office appear to work well together and want what's best for students. Those leaders talk about vision, especially the imperative of equity, so there is a sense among some of everyone moving in the same direction. These leaders respect others' autonomy and empower others to share their perspectives.



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### Diversity and equity

Though the majority of participants in this study identified diversity as Hamden's greatest strength, many (116) also recognized the challenges that the community's diversity poses. Overall, the greatest diversity challenge for the schools is to provide equitable access to a high quality education for each student.

One significant diversity challenge for the new leader will be to navigate the demands of the state and many in the community to racially balance the elementary schools and provide each student comparable access to educational resources on one hand, and appreciation for and commitment to neighborhood schools on the other. Though Hamden overall is diverse, there are varying levels of diversity within its neighborhoods, with the greatest imbalances within the northern, more affluent pockets and the southern part of town, where families are more economically challenged. Participants' varied perspectives reflected the tension the town is experiencing.

The district, including the Board of Education, studied the issue of racial balance for years and generated five possible scenarios. They have voted on one, potentially impacting 40% of the student body. Part of the plan is to move 6th grade out of the elementary schools and into the Middle School, pending a construction project that won't be completed until 2024. Then elementary students would be assigned to "attendance zones" and special services would be centralized. As one participant put it, "DEIA work is crucial. We have a lot of long-term plans for Hamden. We want the leader to take the reins on that... take our vision, push our vision, enhance what's already been done; bring UPK programs into our schools; desegregate our schools."

The 29 participants who identified the racial balance issue as a challenge were mixed in their assessment of the issue. Some were concerned that the Middle School needs to get discipline and other issues under control before sixth graders moved there. The leader will need to sort through all of these issues to determine a direction that won't create an exodus of families.

A second access challenge and another tension identified by participants involved the de-leveling of Middle School classes. Some participants believed the leveling system created inequities for special needs students and those from more challenged backgrounds. Others expressed concern that de-leveling reduced rigor and motivation to succeed. Participants described a great need to improve motivation of students, and the jury is out on whether de-leveling helps or hinders student motivation.

A third, though less controversial diversity issue is staffing. Though the district has hired many teachers of color, some participants desire staffing that better reflects the demographics of the broader student body, recognizing that such staffing "just creates a better learning environment for everybody."

Finally, the leader will need to retain a focus on anti-racism and enhancing cultural competency. These diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges will require ongoing community dialogue and clear communications and decision-making to move Hamden forward.

### Leadership, decision-making, and communications

While participants identified some leadership strengths noted in the prior section, there are leadership issues, according to 91 participants. In addition to overall leadership, areas in this section include a need for coherent systems, issues involving the Board of Education, and communications and transparency.

Participants would like the new leader to oversee a strong and focused group of people advocating for the schools in Central Office. A number of people spoke of the "disconnect between the upper management and teachers and students," where policies are handed down that frustrate those most affected by them. Many would like leaders to be more present in the schools, working closely with and supporting staff, and truly listening to parents and students.

A number of participants spoke of wanting a new leader to establish a system for decision-making and once decisions are made, standing by them in the face of pushback. There are three levels where decisions are made: The building level, the department level, and the executive level. Decisions are often made in isolation, and the

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process itself and communication of decisions can be unclear. Though administrators may benefit from autonomy, that freedom can cause confusion and inconsistency, burning out staff in the process. Participants would like to see consistency in decision-making, policy, and messaging. The leaders should hear from all stakeholders, make a decision, then stand firm once the decision is made, stating what is in the best interest of students and the system. The leaders also need to ensure everyone has equal access to information.

The system would benefit from a cohesive vision and a system of aligned goals. A number of participants called the school system disjointed and disconnected, with building leaders and staff in general working in silos. One said, "Nothing connect(s) us with purpose." Another offered, "Schools are run inconsistently and are not unified." They would like strategic planning to reduce anxiety and diffuse anger. For example, the district could use a "system-wide response to student behavior concerns." Though "individuals above us do appreciate the heart and passion... there is a lack of structures, procedur(es) and follow-through."

Participants (13) specifically mentioned the need for transparent communications and a system to keep stakeholders informed.

Finally, 15 participants identified issues with the Board of Education. Some spoke of a new board that will need to "understand the difference between being 'on the ground' working with students and sitting at a desk making decisions that affect those who 'work on the ground'." There is also a sense of disconnect regarding the Board's "understanding and grasp of the reality" and the actual needs in the schools. Some felt the Board was intensely divided politically and that the Board was "always at odds" with the Legislative Council. Board members need to understand their role and how to work together with the administration toward a unified purpose.

### **Academic expectations and student learning**

Many districts have eased up on expectations as students, staff, and families have grappled with the effects of COVID, but now people would like expectations and motivation to increase. A number of participants (79) identified as major concerns for the new superintendent low expectations, declining academic rigor, and quality of instruction. They want to see students challenged academically and everyone "refocus(ed) on the business of school." They would like high quality curricula that "give students the best chance (of) vocational and collegial success." They want the quality of learning improved, and, in turn, the district's reputation. Some recognized that this includes a variation in offerings to address the needs of struggling learners.

Sixteen (16) participants also identified issues with special services, believing the district could do a better job with inclusion. Some suggested there needs to be a reorganization of the special education department "to make it more efficient." Several felt there has been insufficient support for students with learning needs. There is also frustration among many that there are "two sets of rules" in disciplining students, since state law may prevent the district from administering comparable consequences to students with individualized education plans. Some found this potentially demoralizing. Others felt alternative programs for students unable to be successful in a comprehensive school need a higher level of support.

### **Staff morale and retention**

Another bit of fallout from the COVID pandemic has been lowered staff morale and retention. Participants (64) felt that teachers and staff are feeling worn down by the pandemic, political divides, and the myriad stressors that are part of public education today. A number mentioned that teachers are feeling they do not have a voice and they don't garner sufficient respect for their efforts. As a result teachers are leaving or planning to leave the district, especially at the Middle School level. "Staff are exhausted at the end of the day," and there isn't sufficient staffing to support students, further demoralizing them. They feel decisions are made "by people who have no idea what is coming at them on a daily basis." The new leader will be challenged to improve morale and focus on staff retention.



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### **Finance and tax rates**

Fifty-one (51) participants identified issues with the town's finances, tax rates, and resulting budget constraints as a major challenge for the new leader. Hamden, which many reported has a high tax rate, is addressing a long-brewing pension obligation crisis, with an accrued debt of about \$1 billion. Over the last four years, the district budget has increased by about 2.6% total. The community could use a long-term financial plan to address this crisis.

### **Town and community trust**

Finally, the new leader will need to gain the trust of the community, according to 15 participants. Some talked about the town being polarized with hidden agendas and "politics getting in the way of doing what's best for students and teachers." The new leader will need to connect with and pull together the broader community to enhance commitment to the future of the Hamden Public Schools.

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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 Hamden Public Schools' strengths and meet the challenges? An analysis of survey responses yielded the following:

#### Expertise

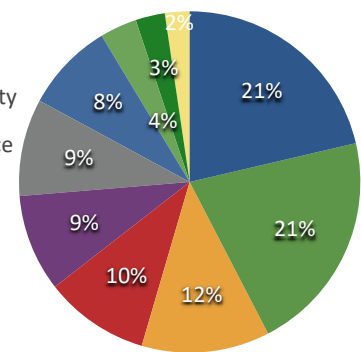
Survey respondents weighted two of the nine areas of **desired expertise** in a new superintendent significantly higher than the other skills. The **first choice** of participants was *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community* (23.9%) followed by *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (22.6%). The **third choice**, at 17%, was *Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction*. If we look at respondents' **top three choices combined**, we see some shifts: *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (21.3%) now just edges out *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community* (21.1%) as the top choice, and these two are weighted much more highly than the others. Still in third is *Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction* (12.1%).

DESIRED EXPERTISE IN NEW SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, & community	52	22.6%	59	26.1%	35	15.4%	146	21.3%
Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community	55	23.9%	42	18.6%	47	20.6%	144	21.1%
Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction	39	17.0%	25	11.1%	19	8.3%	83	12.1%
Demonstrates proven track record of success improving performance	24	10.4%	26	11.5%	18	7.9%	68	9.9%
Possesses strong budget and finance knowledge and skills	17	7.4%	20	8.8%	26	11.4%	63	9.2%
Has a broad base of knowledge of educational issues and practices	10	4.3%	22	9.7%	31	13.6%	63	9.2%
Fosters Professional Development, team building, & staff growth	12	5.2%	19	8.4%	27	11.8%	58	8.5%
Shares and delegates leadership	3	1.3%	5	2.2%	16	7.0%	24	3.5%
Promotes the quality and virtues of Hamden Public Schools	4	1.7%	7	3.1%	8	3.5%	19	2.8%
Other	14	6.1%	1	0.4%	1	0.4%	16	2.3%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

First Choice Expertise



Top Three Choices



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### Qualities

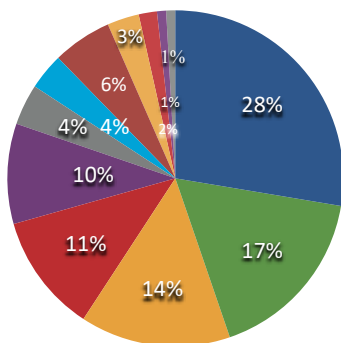
In addition to the leadership characteristics and expertise identified in the prior section, Hamden survey respondents reflected some clear preferences for **qualities** desired in a new leader. The top **first choices** respondents identified were *Accessible, approachable, and visible in schools and community* (27.6%) followed at a distance by *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* (17.1%) then *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* (14.5%).

These areas lead in the "top three" category, too. *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* now accounts for 18.1%. *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* is close behind at 17.8% with *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* at 15.3%.

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

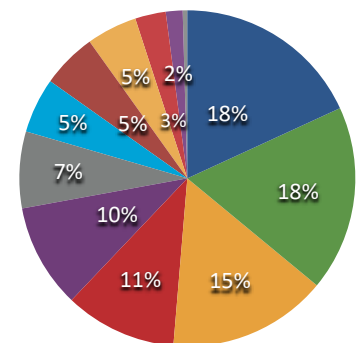
DESIRED QUALITIES IN SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community	63	27.6%	40	17.7%	20	8.9%	123	18.1%
Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus	39	17.1%	48	21.2%	34	15.2%	121	17.8%
Trustworthy, honest, respectful	33	14.5%	30	13.3%	41	18.3%	104	15.3%
Fosters & values diversity, equity, inclusivity & accessibility	26	11.4%	22	9.7%	25	11.2%	73	10.8%
Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver	22	9.6%	19	8.4%	27	12.1%	68	10.0%
Committed to transparent communication in schools & town	9	3.9%	21	9.3%	20	8.9%	50	7.4%
Inspirational team builder	8	3.5%	16	7.1%	12	5.4%	36	5.3%
Exhibits appreciation for and love of children	13	5.7%	12	5.3%	11	4.9%	36	5.3%
Knowledgeable and hardworking, with attention to detail	7	3.1%	12	5.3%	14	6.3%	33	4.9%
Life-long learner	4	1.8%	3	1.3%	13	5.8%	20	2.9%
Dedicated commitment to Hamden's vision & mission	2	0.9%	3	1.3%	6	2.7%	11	1.6%
Other	2	0.9%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%	3	0.4%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>678</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**First Choice Qualities**



**Top Three Choices**

- Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community
- Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus
- Trustworthy, honest, respectful
- Fosters & values diversity, equity, inclusivity & accessibility
- Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver
- Committed to transparent communication in schools & town
- Inspirational team builder
- Exhibits appreciation for and love of children
- Knowledgeable and hardworking, with attention to detail
- Life-long learner
- Dedicated commitment to Hamden's vision & mission
- Other



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

Hamden seeks an empathetic, compassionate leader who will get to know the students, staff, and the community and gain their trust by demonstrating caring, commitment, and support. This individual will recognize the strengths and be committed to the growth of those who work and learn in the schools and will structure their efforts to enhance that growth.

Deeply committed to student learning, the individual will invite students to be thoughtful advisors in decision-making. Staff, too, will feel understood, valued, and cared for. Community members will trust that the schools are in good hands under this individual's leadership, receiving open and honest communications about successes and challenges and plans to address issues.

### ***Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community***

The successful leader will know the schools, students and staff. After listening carefully and learning where the district is succeeding and struggling, then collaboratively determining appropriate systems for learning, discipline, and decision-making, the leader will define and enforce protocols to ensure a safe and dynamic learning environment for all. The leader will then make every effort to ensure consistency in decision-making, policy, and messaging.

This leader will be able to navigate conflict-ridden issues, welcoming and valuing the diverse voices of the community, approaching issues with a recognition that others may have a better idea. The leader will help everyone understand clear decision-making processes, ensuring the process for hearing from affected stakeholders occurs prior to making major decisions.

The leader will also focus on parents' experience navigating the school system, streamlining processes and eliminating redundancies.

### ***Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction***

The ideal new superintendent for Hamden will first learn about the schools and community, then help articulate an inspiring vision of excellence and innovative instruction to generate a dynamic learning environment. The leader will align district efforts behind a common and shared sense of purpose. In so doing, the leader will inspire staff at all levels to work hard. Building continuity and team effort, the leader's efforts will erode the silos currently in the system.

Versed in instructional practice from preschool to high school to special education to experiential learning to restorative justice, this leader will help staff understand the importance of tailoring instruction to each student, ensuring excellence and equity are both highly valued.

The leader will learn about the deep work the district has already undertaken to enhance equity, and will take the reins to reach the district's vision and ensure all children, no matter their background and circumstances, are motivated and have the resources and opportunities to achieve at high levels.

### ***Accessible, approachable, and visible in schools and community***

The successful leader will be a regular presence in the schools and will know students and staff. Able to listen in order to learn, understanding to know, able to connect with capabilities and potential of others, this individual's practices will allow stakeholders to feel the leader knows the culture in each school and is making decisions based on a first-hand understanding of their conditions and dynamics. Students and teachers will feel confident in the leader's grasp of issues and will appreciate the openness to their opinions and observations.

The leader will be the primary advocate for the schools, promoting the great things happening, and insisting on sufficient budgets to support student growth and fair and equitable distribution of resources.

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### ***Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus***

The successful new leader will love students, teachers, and learning. This leader will hold high academic and behavioral expectations for students from all backgrounds. A seasoned teacher with a nurturing presence, this individual will help students and teachers enjoy the learning process and will value the thinking, opinions, and attitudes of students and staff in making policy decisions that affect them.

This leader will also generate a culture that encourages growth and learning for all, not just in core academic areas, but in the arts and athletics as well. The leader will value professional development and invest in staff training that serves the growth of students.

### ***Trustworthy, honest, respectful***

Humble, calm, measured, open-minded, and cooperative, the successful new leader will deeply respect students, families, staff, and the community and will listen thoughtfully to their stories, opinions, and perspectives. The leader will treat teachers as professionals, respect them as human beings, and understand the trauma they and the students have been enduring. This individual will behave with integrity and honesty in all dealings. Direct and candid, the individual will be savvy about political forces, but will not be seen as politically biased.

### ***Fosters and values diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility***

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) will be dearly held values of the new leader. The superintendent will study Hamden's history and experience with DEIA, seek to understand these complicated issues and how they have persisted in the Hamden schools, and will bring fresh eyes to analyze strengths and areas for growth. The leader will seek to create a system that is anti-racist, shifting the district "from talking about Equity to making instructional decisions FOR Equity," monitoring progress through analysis of data.

The leader will continue to prioritize hiring diverse staff members so that the staff reflects the student community.

### ***Decisive, confident, objective problem solver***

This individual will bring a great work ethic and know how to organize the running of a school district so everyone's efforts are aligned, communications systems are established to keep everyone in the loop, and decision-making processes are clear and responsive to stakeholder perspectives. Encouraging operational efficiency, the successful leader will run a tight ship, but be flexible. This leader won't back down under pressure, confident that major decisions have been fully researched and a variety of perspectives sought.

Finally, this leader will bring joy to the work, inspiring others to make the Hamden Public Schools the hallmark of excellence and equity in learning.