



**SCHOOL
LEADERSHIP LLC**

SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH DARIEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SPECIFICATION DEVELOPMENT REPORT

October 14, 2025

Participants in Forums and Focus Groups

Community Input:
Forums and
Focus Groups:
135 Participants

Survey:
538 Survey
Responses

- Interim Superintendent of Schools
- Central Office Staff
- Cabinet
- Central Office Operational Directors
- Department Chairs and Instructional Directors
- Principals/Assistant Principals
- Elementary, Middle School and High School Teaching Staff and Support Staff
- Union Leadership Representatives
- PTO Leadership Representatives
- CDSP Special Education Committee
- Darien Music Parent Association
- Darien Advocates for Education of the Gifted
- Darien Foundation/Thriving Youth
- Blue Wave Booster Club/Athletic Foundation
- Community Forum
- High Student Focus Group
- Board of Education
- Elected Town Officials

EACH INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP SHARED THOUGHTS ON THREE BROAD QUESTIONS

- What qualities, skills, characteristics, and experiences are most important for the next superintendent?
- What are the key strengths of the district? What would draw excellent candidates to apply?
- What are the major challenges for a new superintendent? What issues will he/she need to address?

SURVEY RESPONSES

Q1 In the following list of prior experiences for a Superintendent, please click the boxes beside the TWO prior experiences that you feel are MOST CRITICAL (realizing ALL are important) for an individual to be successful as Superintendent of Darien Public Schools:

Answered: 538

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Superintendent of schools	43.68%	235
Central office administrator (e.g. Assistant Superintendent)	21.75%	117
School principal	33.09%	178
Classroom teacher	36.80%	198
Leader in improving an already high-performing school district	60.59%	326
Total Respondents: 538		

Q2 In the following list of skills, please check the boxes beside THREE that you believe are most critical for an individual to be successful as Superintendent of Darien Public Schools:

Answered: 538

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Labor Relations including collective bargaining	7.99%	43
Curriculum and instructional knowledge and leadership (including current research and best practices)	56.51%	304
Data collection and analysis	3.72%	20
Human Resources (e.g. selection and support of personnel)	19.33%	104
Leadership in special education	8.74%	47
Knowledge of budgeting, finance and facility planning	48.33%	260
Short and long-range strategic planning	33.27%	179
Community engagement (including public speaking and written communication)	30.86%	166
Collaborative and successful at building highly productive teams	39.41%	212
Advocating for the school system at the local and state levels	32.90%	177
Use of technology in the classroom	4.83%	26
Understanding and responsive to the needs of a diverse student population	8.92%	48
Total Respondents: 538		

SPECIFICATIONS BASED ON SURVEY, FOCUS GROUPS AND FORUMS

An inspirational, strategic, and innovative leader who:

- Sets high standards, holds self and others accountable, and is committed to maximizing the potential of every student;
- Possesses a deep understanding of how curriculum, instruction, and assessment combine to enhance student learning;
- Leads with confidence, conviction, courage, and integrity;
- Communicates clearly, honestly, and transparently with all segments of the school and broader community;

SPECIFICATIONS, (CONTINUED)

- Is visible and accessible in the district's schools and collaborates with and values the voice of stakeholders;
- Proactively and strategically addresses concerns before and as they arise;
- Skillfully manages the district's finances, effectively utilizes and deploys resources, and develops and sustains productive partnerships with local and state officials; and
- Is excited about working in Darien and is committed to developing a shared vision for the future that builds upon the district's longstanding commitment to excellence.

SPECIFICATION DEVELOPMENT REPORT SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH

DARIEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

October 7, 2025

On September 15, September 16, September 24, September 30 and October 7, School Leadership consultants held 29 forums and focus group meetings, 25 in person and 4 virtual meetings.

The purpose of the meetings was to encourage direct, broad-based participation in the development of the specifications that will guide the superintendent search process. Participants were encouraged to share views and perceptions about the community and its schools, its leadership challenges, and the qualifications, experiences and characteristics to be sought in candidates for the superintendent's position. The meetings, attended by a total of 135 persons, were also meant to provide the consultants with an opportunity to learn, first-hand, about the District through the eyes of those who serve and are served by it, and to gain a sense of the culture, traditions, and qualities that make the schools and community of Darien unique and special.

The Board of Education Search Committee and Cass Philpott provided invaluable assistance in arranging for the identification, scheduling and extending of invitations to these focus groups. We appreciate the warm hospitality extended to us by Darien's central office staff for which we are most appreciative.

It is important to state that the process used was not intended to represent an in-depth analysis of Darien Public Schools, nor was it meant to seek solutions to ongoing issues or challenges. Rather, it was designed to gather general information regarding how the educational and broader community view the current condition of the District and attempt to identify some of the District's challenges, expectations and strengths as they relate to and impact the superintendent search process.

MEETING FORMATS:

School Leadership consultants conducted a planning meeting with the Board of Education Search committee on June 2, 2025 to begin the process of identifying the groups and individuals with whom the consultants should meet. In addition, the consultants met individually with each Board member over the months of July and August, 2025.

The meetings with the Search Committee resulted in the following scheduled focus groups or individual meetings (number of participants in parentheses):

Darien Education Association Representatives (3)

Union Leadership Representatives (4)

Assistant Principals (8)

Central Office Operational Directors (2)

Department Chairs and Instructional Directors (6)

Darien Music Parent Association (5)

Principals (Elementary, Middle, High school) (6)

Central Office Staff (5)

Elementary, Middle and High School Teaching Staff (*Note: meetings were conducted with staff at each of the District's 7 schools*) (21)

Interim Superintendent of Schools (1)

Community Forum (16)

Elected Officials (6)

The Council of Darien School Parents/PTO Chairs (9)

Darien Advocates for Education of the Gifted (3)

Darien Foundation/Thriving Youth (7)

Blue Wave Booster Club/Athletic Foundation (7)

Cabinet [included Assistant Superintendent of Special Education and Student Services, Director of Human Resources, Director of Finance and Operations] (3)

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction (1)

Note: Due to a scheduling conflict with a scheduled PD, this meeting was held separately via Zoom)

Support Staff (2)

Executive Assistant to the Superintendent (1)

High Student Focus Group (7)

Board of Education (9)

Darien CDSP Special Education Committee (3)

ONLINE SURVEY

In addition, the Board approved an online survey which was made available from September 15 through October 3 through a link on the District's website. A total of 538 persons responded to the survey; the tabulated data from the survey are appended to this report.

QUESTIONS ASKED

In general, the meetings, focus groups and online survey sought to elicit responses to three broad questions or prompts:

- What qualities, skills, characteristics, and experiences are most important for the next superintendent?

- What are the key strengths of the District? What would draw excellent candidates to apply?
- What are the major challenges for a new superintendent? What issues will he/she need to address?

An unduplicated presentation of the responses to these questions will be found in Appendix I. Together with the online survey results, all of the data collected suggest that Darien's stakeholders share similar views of the District and its schools, its challenges, and the qualities it seeks in its new superintendent. (This is not to say, however, that this unanimity exists with respect to every specific issue currently facing the District where, in some instances, there are some differing perspectives.)

SUMMARY

By way of summary by School Leadership, LLC, the following are the major characteristics that the input would suggest the Board should be seeking and screening for in candidates for the position, and that might be used in any advertising of and recruitment for the vacancy:

An inspirational, strategic, and innovative leader who:

- Sets high standards, holds self and others accountable, and is committed to maximizing the potential of every student;
- Possesses a deep understanding of how curriculum, instruction, and assessment combine to enhance student learning;
- Leads with confidence, conviction, courage, and integrity;
- Communicates clearly, honestly, and transparently with all segments of the school and broader community;

- Is visible and accessible in the district's schools and collaborates with and values the voice of stakeholders;
- Proactively and strategically addresses concerns before and as they arise;
- Skillfully manages the district's finances, effectively utilizes and deploys resources, and develops and sustains productive partnerships with local and state officials; and
- Is excited about working in Darien and is committed to developing a shared vision for the future that builds upon the district's longstanding commitment to excellence.

The Board, at its October 14 meeting, received and reviewed this report and authorized the use of the results for advertising of the vacancy.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Martin Brooks
Rina Beder
For School Leadership, LLC

APPENDIX I
REPORT ON FORUMS: DARIEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH

1. What qualities, skills, characteristics and experiences do you feel are most important for the next superintendent?

Leadership and Vision

- A visionary and innovative leader with experience in a similar district
- Strong, steady leadership with the confidence to make difficult decisions
- Integrity, courage and a calm, unflappable presence
- A clear and well-defined vision and mission, with the ability to create and implement a shared direction
- Strategic thinker who sets clear priorities and builds cohesive systems across the district
- Creative problem solver who inspires innovative solutions and “makes things happen”

Instructional Excellence and Student Focus

- Student-centered focus, always placing teaching, learning, and student needs at the forefront
- Commitment to enhancing instruction, expanding academic opportunities, and fostering a culture of learning
- Knowledge of special education, with the ability to balance rising costs while ensuring high-quality services for students
- Ability to build a learning community that celebrates all students

Communication and Relationships

- Excellent communicator who is transparent, proactive, direct and able to explain the “why” behind decisions

- Relationship builder who cultivates trust with parents, staff, students and the community
- Collaborative, approachable, and willing to listen
- Presence in the schools and visible and accessible to students, staff and families
- Effective and enthusiastic advocate for the district and ability to productively work with the Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance

Governance and Management

- Skilled manager with expertise in operations, finance, and budgeting
- Politically savvy with ability to guide effective board governance
- Effective mentor who develops the leadership team and builds staff capacity
- Values staff, trusts them to do their work, and maintains accountability while avoiding micromanaging

Additional Perspectives (Less Frequent Mentions)

- Decisive
- Ability to make district globally competitive
- Knowledge of AI, technology and implications for education
- Someone who “controls the room”
- Willing to stay long-term
- Ability to “ask the right questions”
- High energy
- Guide community in school spirit
- Sense of humor
- Apolitical
- Has a vision for the middle school
- Ability to “read the room”

2. What are the key strengths of the District? What would draw excellent candidates to apply?

Community Strengths

- Highly engaged, educated and supportive community that deeply values education
- Well-resourced community willing to contribute time, expertise and financial support
- Strong community pride and identity
- Beautiful location, near New York City and Long Island Sound offering good quality of life

Staff and Students

- Talented and dedicated teaching staff committed to excellence across academics, arts and athletics
- High performing, motivated students

Reputation and Opportunities

- A well respected and high achieving district, “people move to Darien for its schools”
- Ongoing investment in excellent facilities and building projects
- Strong academic, arts and athletic programs
- Highly competitive compensation package (mentioned less frequently but noted as a strength)
- A district with “many pieces in place” and exceptional potential for continued growth
- A community and staff eager for strong, visionary leadership

3. What are the major challenges for a new superintendent? What issues will he/she need to address?

Governance and Leadership

- Need to strengthen board governance and role clarity
- Managing factions within the district and community
- Politically divided climate that mirrors broader national level tensions
- Pressure from high demanding parents who sometimes step out of protocol when dealing with concerns
- “Too many cooks” – a sense of overlapping roles and blurred boundaries
- Utilization of staff for maximum efficiency

Trust, Communication and Community Relations

- Lack of clear, consistent and transparent communication
- Reactive decision-making without sufficient explanation of rationale
- Back-channel communications undermining trust
- Concerns about transparency and credibility

Teaching, Learning and Student Needs

- Special Education
 - High classification rates possibly linked to reaction to 2012 case
 - Rising costs
 - Need for stronger classification and service delivery systems and greater consistency among the schools
- Curriculum in need of review and revision
- Student mental health needs becoming more prevalent
- Achievement- focused culture creating stress (“achievement or bust”)
- Ensuring all students needs are met – not just high performers or those needing services
- Need for more high-quality professional learning experiences for staff

District Culture and Climate

- Lack of trust
- Competitive and stressful culture for students
- Challenges with staff retention
- Need for mentoring, teamwork and stronger collaboration system wide
- District perceived as being “top heavy”

Operations and Resources

- Rising costs and increasingly challenging budgets
- Uneven support for programs
- Need for better prioritization (“everything is not equally important”)
- Anticipated increase in student population due to new buildings
- Increase in socio-economic diversity
- AI and its role in education

Additional Perspectives (Less Frequent Mentions)

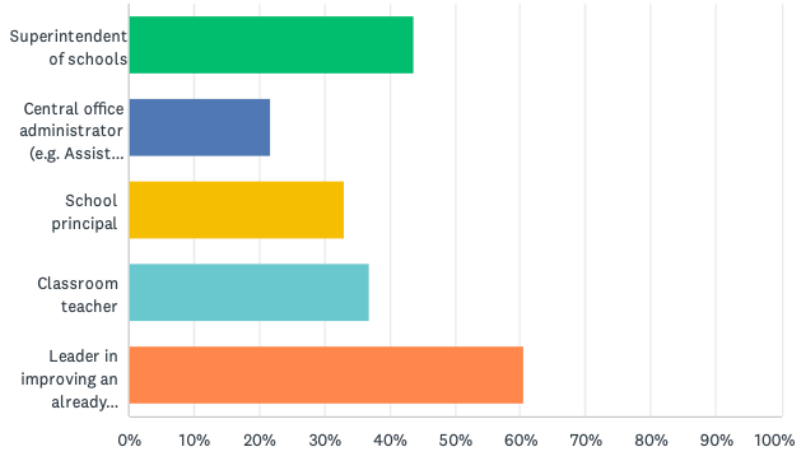
- Concerns about the middle school program
- Disconnect between administrators and teachers, and between BOE and administrators
- Lack of school spirit

TABULATED SURVEY RESULTS

DARIEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH

Q1 In the following list of prior experiences for a Superintendent, please click the boxes beside the TWO prior experiences that you feel are MOST CRITICAL (realizing ALL are important) for an individual to be successful as Superintendent of Darien Public Schools:

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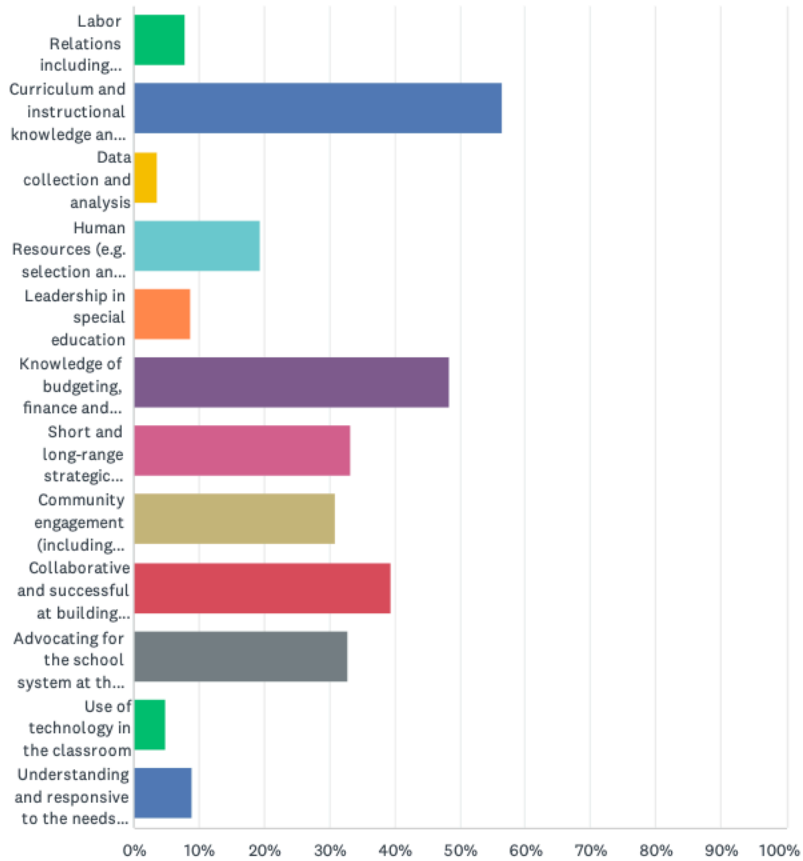


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