

MEMORANDUM

To: Lincoln Sudbury Regional School Committee

From: Glenn Koocher, Executive Director, MA Association of School Committees

Date: April 28, 2013

RE: Summary of Comments from Focus Groups and On Line Survey
Position of Interim Superintendent/Principal

THE INTERVIEW AND SURVEY PROCESS

Three focus group sessions were held on April 24, 2013 at Lincoln Sudbury High School at which a total of forty individuals, including 30 faculty members, attended. These included a session for community members, administrators, and faculty. In addition, an online survey was accessible to the Lincoln Sudbury stakeholder community and the public at large from April 24 through April 28. Seventy-one individuals logged onto the survey and responded to questions. Of online survey takers, 42.3% were students, 33.8% were educators in the district, 19.7% were parents or family members, 7% were other employees, and 4.2% were community members.

The questions posed to the focus groups and in the online survey were the following:

1. What are the most important responsibilities for the interim Superintendent/Principal through June 2014?
2. What important challenges confront the Lincoln Sudbury Regional School District over the next 12-18 months of which the interim Superintendent/Principal must be mindful?
3. What skills, abilities and character traits do you seek in your interim Superintendent/Principal?
4. Please provide any additional comments.

INTERVIEW AND SURVEY SUMMARY

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCERNS

There were several important observations from the surveys that do not necessarily respond to the specific questions posed.

Preserving a High Performing and Successful School. The school has been described as the “Jewel of our Two Communities.” Students excel academically and in extracurricular activities. The faculty is respected for its competence and commitment to the students. Several interviewees noted that this success and the collaborative management style (see below) have been attained over a period of time during which successive leaders and educators, working with parents, have cultivated it. There is confidence that this can continue and grow, but there is also the concern that anything less than effective management and commitment to collaboration can undermine the success.

The School During a Crisis. The interviews took place in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing that had occurred about ten days earlier. The trauma of having individuals wounded and others traumatized invoked memories among many stakeholders of the murder of a student at the high school in 2007. Although the incident had been managed as well as any school might have addressed such a traumatizing event, both the Marathon bombing and the recent attack on a Connecticut elementary school served as reminders that the faculty of Lincoln Sudbury live with the memories of their crisis and that this must be in the mind of any administrator who assumes a leadership position at the high school.

Collaborative Decision Making. A consistent theme among those interviewees who attended the focus groups was the appreciation for the culture of collaborative leadership and decision making that has defined Lincoln Sudbury’s relationship between faculty and administration. Faculty members were strong in their comments about being involved in the interim and permanent Superintendent/Principal selection process and of their interest in serving in the process. They also spoke strongly about the need to cultivate and, to some extent, restore this concept for collaborative school leadership which is perceived by some to have waned of late.

Transitions at Lincoln Sudbury Regional High School. At the end of the current year, or within the next 12 months, several important positions will be turning over. They include not only the Superintendent, but also the Curriculum Director, Mathematics Coordinator, Director of Student Services, a full time housemaster, and the Athletic Director.

Concerns about Budget and Finance. While responders were unanimous in praising the manner in which district finance and operations are overseen at this time, many remain mindful that the

district has had problems in this area in the past. Also, the effect of the recent recession and some elements of local fiscal conservatism have put great pressure on the Superintendent/Principal to speak persuasively to the community stakeholders to win support for more generous local appropriations. Also, as an impact of the recession and other budget restrictions, user fees have doubled for students, faculty growth has failed to keep track with increased enrollment, and the number of elective courses has been reduced. It is a tribute to school leaders and community advocates that the school continues to perform well in the face of the fiscal impact of the recession.

Technology Override. The district is trying to address technology needs in the district. Students and faculty have commented on this. In the fall of 2013, voters in Lincoln and Sudbury will be asked to approve a vote to support a technology initiative in the school district. Key to the success will be the role of the Interim Superintendent/Principal to work for the success at the polls.

Concerns about Morale and a Collaborative Culture. Faculty take great pride in the school and in their work. Several cite an erosion of the collaborative culture that has defined the school for many years. Community members appreciate the excellence represented by the faculty and the school. However, within the community, particularly in Sudbury, harsh criticism of the school budget by certain factions has had a stinging effect upon faculty members. Some interviewees referred to palpable pockets of anger, not uncommon in any large organization, but a matter that, if not managed appropriately, can become more problematic.

Making the Most of the Transition Year. Stakeholders were strong in their feeling that the interim Superintendent/Principal should continue to lead a process of improvement and progress rather than simply acting as a transition year administrator focusing on stabilization. There are several important challenges toward which the community members and staff would like to make continuous progress. Several expressed the importance of a smooth, but forward-looking transition year.

The Concept of the Superintendency/Principalship. A few districts have debated the merits of a dual superintendency and principalship which is utilized in a few Massachusetts schools. There was concern that this “huge job” needs to be mastered carefully. Interestingly, most of the interviewees are comfortable with the concept and support it for the Grades 9-12 secondary school district. They recognize the need to balance the responsibility of school leadership with those obligations to the community and to general district oversight. It will be important to ascertain the candidates’ perspectives on how best to balance the responsibilities.

The Role of the School Committee. In a high performing district where faculty and administrators take great pride in their work and see their efforts as key to student success, it is

not uncommon for faculty and even students to seek opportunities for shared input and roles in some decision-making processes in collaboration with the School Committee.

Rollout of the New Educator Evaluation. A new educator evaluation is being rolled out for teachers and administrators. Negotiation of the terms and conditions of the new system are close to conclusion, but the new program is detailed and hard to understand in its early phase of implementation. In addition, faculty input into administrator evaluation will become part of the overall system within 18 months. Making the system work is a major task that cannot afford to be shunted aside during a transition. Ensuring that the faculty and administration will be actively involved in key details, including the identification of “district determined measures” of student performance, is an important priority for stakeholders.

Caring for Constituencies at Risk. The diversity of the school is bolstered in part by the presence of the METCO program and by addressing the concerns of students at risk. It was noted that many students represent the full spectrum of emotional, social, learning, economic, racial and linguistic constituencies. Many are often overlooked as to their needs in a highly competitive secondary school. There were several comments that the Superintendent/Principal should lead the effort to attend to the needs of these students.

Preserving a Rich, Flexible Curriculum. As the district prepares to implement the state-mandated Common Core Curriculum, stakeholders are eager to preserve the ability of the district to maintain the strategies that have created the culture and practice of excellence and success. When questioned about whether state’s educational regulatory bureaucracy posed a threat, local leaders and educators noted that “We can deal with Malden (MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education or DESE). It’s the community that needs to be educated about how important this is.”

Special Needs of the Student Body. Students live in a highly stressful and intensely competitive environment. They confront issues of sexuality, substance abuse, and social pressures from home and community. These become issues for teachers, administrators and families to address. Several responders see the role of the Superintendent/Principal as being an advocate and activist in working with students in these areas. This also includes bullying which the faculty understands and addresses when it can, but which students and teachers see as an ongoing issue that is a priority.

IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES

- Ensure a year of progress during the transition.
- Making the unification of the principalship and superintendency work effectively.

- Maintaining good relationships with the two towns in general, local officials, and town meetings. and this includes being visible in Lincoln and Sudbury.
- Help lead the technology funding vote coming in the fall.
- Being a strong advocate for the school, faculty, and students, particularly on behalf of a stronger school budget.
- Be a leader in creating an appropriate balance between the school committee, administration, faculty and community leadership.

CHALLENGES

- To be a courageous leader with the strength to convince others to follow and to go into the community to ask for and win support for the schools.
- Address financial issues that have put services to students at risk.
- Making the relationship with the towns work effectively.
- Halt the erosion of the culture of collaboration.
- Taking care of the students and people at risk.

POLLING QUESTION: IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

An additional question was raised to on-line survey takers to determine the importance of employing an interim superintendent-principal who had experience as a teacher or educator with direct contact with students. To this question, 69.5% see experience as an educator as “very important,” 24.6% describe it as important but not a disqualifier, and 5.8% see it as “not important.”

SKILLS, ABILITIES AND PERSONAL QUALITIES

In this category, individuals were asked to describe the personal qualities they have observed over the course of their careers or their lives that would benefit the school and district. This is not designed to be a commentary on any particular leader or administration.

- A visionary and courageous leader in the presence of compliance-oriented state regulators.
- A strong communicator who can educate the community and win support for the school and its budget.
- A leader who is comfortable speaking with the faculty.
- An individual who communicates with “clarity” and focus.
- A really good public speaker who can attract and hold the attention of an audience.
- An ethical leader who can win and keep the support of the staff.

- Ability and willingness to delegate. Staff desire and expect to be involved in school decision making and preserving the strengths of the school.
- Knowledgeable about the role of the coach and mentor for faculty.
- A role model for students.
- A leader who will honor the history and traditions of the school.
- A principal who understands the priorities and needs of students as well as their interests in those activities that help build school spirit.
- A collaborative leader with listening skills.
- An empathetic leader who will understand what the district has experienced over the past 5-7 years.
- Although district finances and operations are now in good hands, the Superintendent/Principal must have a working knowledge of budget and finance.

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. What do you know about the history of this school?
2. How would you oversee an effective evaluation for administrators?
3. How would you balance the roles of superintendent and principal?
4. How are you most often misunderstood?
5. What is your understanding of shared leadership and share with us your sense of the positive and negative elements of it?
6. Who have you had as mentors and why are they important to you?
7. If you could create a school, what kind of school would it be?
8. How do you balance the needs of your various constituencies? Can you give examples?
9. What is your philosophy about adolescent drug and substance abuse?
10. Please give some examples of how you have dealt with conflict.
11. Please name 2-3 things that have shaped your vision as an educator.
12. Do you see any special challenges and opportunities in the new educator evaluation system? How have your own professional experiences guided your views about evaluation?