



To: The Tewksbury School Committee

From: Kenneth L. DeBenedictis, Ed.D., Executive Search Consultant

Re: Superintendent Search Focus Group Report

Date: December 23, 2009

On December 1, 8, 9, 10, 14 and 18, 2009, I conducted seven focus groups: Board of Selectmen, Town Manager and Department Heads, parents, senior citizens, secondary staff, elementary staff and the Leadership Team. The following report includes the priorities identified by each focus group and the detailed suggestions generated by each of those groups.

In the focus groups, individual brainstorming, consensus development and priority ranking activities took place and a set of recommendations developed around responses to two discussion topics: 1) The new superintendent should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences and 2) The following challenges and issues need to be addressed within the first six to twelve months in the position.

The members of each focus group were open about their concerns and their hopes and aspirations for the district. In reviewing the process, it is very clear that each group was focused upon issues pertinent to Tewksbury. It is also evident that there were shared priorities from group to group and distinct priorities specific to certain groups.

The report begins with an executive summary which represents a composite of those items given the greatest emphasis in discussions. The executive summary is followed by the responses and priority rankings generated by each focus group.

I believe that the information provided by the seven constituent groups will be helpful to all involved in the screening process for the new superintendent. The information should also provide a rich resource to the new superintendent as part of transitional and entry planning.

Many people were involved in the focus group sessions and I am very appreciative of their interest and enthusiasm. The Tewksbury School Committee is to be especially commended for its efforts in organizing these discussions and in supporting all other components of the search.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Superintendent Search**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences:

Not ranked in priority order

- Possesses exemplary leadership skills. A highly intelligent individual with an advanced degree. Is a visionary who has been successful in working with administrators and staff in developing a vision of what could be in place 3-5 years from now and has the prerequisite skills to accomplish the goals. Works with the school committee, administrators and staff to identify concrete objectives and builds plans to closely monitor and measure progress. A strategic leader who has the ability to collaborate with a number of constituent groups; encourages participation and welcomes involvement. Knows and successfully processes accountability; is able to assess need and can engage others to make decisions about next steps in planning; knows how to use data and can apply it to learning and teaching. Knows how to communicate results and can evaluate success of any new modification or initiative. Is adept at problem solving and can be an out-of-the-box thinker; a creative mind. Politically savvy, but not impacted by politics; stays professional and focuses on students who drive all decisions. Has exceptional delegation skills and makes certain that those who are delegated responsibility are prepared to handle assigned tasks. Supports the values of consistency and coordination of learning and teaching PreK-12; promotes high standards and holds people accountable to reach those standards. Models outstanding leadership skills and behavior for other administrators; supportive of their growth. Recognizes the value of community groups working together; acknowledges accomplishments. Isn't hesitant in identifying district shortcomings and focuses attention on district need.
- Highly developed personal and communication skills. A dynamic, highly involved, caring, sensitive and compassionate administrator. Someone who believes in the mission of the district and quickly commits to supporting students through enabling and encouraging staff. Someone who can step into Chris McGrath's shoes and continue the dedication and love that she consistently demonstrated. Experienced with successful communication practices; welcomes input, very open and approachable; values opinions of others; strong integrity. Articulate, charismatic; skillful in developing staff and community relations, a collaborator. There is genuine passion for the mission of the position and the role of the schools. He/ she works at creating the big picture, but at the same time knows the details. He/she, however, is not a micromanager. High visibility everywhere and welcoming accessibility; a sense of humor and an easy smile. His/her decisions are not politically motivated, but made in the best interests of children. A community engager; easily interacts with town officials and values benefits of

working together. A staff morale booster who recognizes student and staff successes and champions their continued efforts.

- Successfully practices community outreach: highly visible; involved, welcoming, enthusiastic. Someone who is politically wise and can connect; values collaboration with other town departments and works towards consensus in decision making. Immediately establishes collaborative and cooperative working relationships with new leaders in town (i.e., town manager and police chief). Organizes communication tools to connect with the community; welcomes and solicits opinions and incorporates thoughts and ideas into the overall plan for the schools.
- PreK-12 experienced: classroom teacher to central office and system wide responsibilities. There is evidence of efforts in previous responsibilities that have made differences in children's lives. Comes with strong recommendations and references that describe previous district success. Understands the value of coordination and consistency of instruction within and between the three levels: elementary, middle and high school. Experienced with curriculum development, budget organization, special education, technology connections and facilities management. Outstanding negotiations and consensus building skills. Experienced with school construction projects; skilled at mobilizing the community to work together to plan and organize the new high school proposal. Knows how to make tough decisions concerning the budget with a special ability to support those impacted by decisions. Experienced in identifying potential alternative funding sources.

While no candidate can possess all of the qualities and experiences noted above, considering candidates who best match the profile during the screening and interview process, will help the screening committee recommend a strong group of candidates to the school committee. The profile will also assist the school committee in selecting the candidate who is best suited for the position.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position:

Not ranked in priority order

- Building community relationships. Become highly visible, develop trusting relationships with townspeople, particularly town officials; validate teachers and the successful instruction that they provide; celebrate the successes of the schools; become familiar with students by visiting the schools and attending activities. Energize and excite the community. Communicate with townspeople through e-mails, notices, mailings, school visits, parent forums, superintendent coffee hours, etc.
- Organize a strategic vision for the district. Review the current strategic plan to compare with personal observations and information that is gathered. Identify educational priorities by reaching out, engaging and assessing. Identify strengths and needs and organize a plan to include all stakeholders. Map a strategy for improvement; create long and short-term calendar. Examine and organize funding needs; build a plan to monitor, evaluate and report. Examine coordination and consistency of curriculum and instruction within the grades and between the schools; provide support to align as needed. Assess the facilities of the district and support the current initiatives to build a new high school.
- Examine the budget development process and seek ways to successfully communicate with the community about need. Identify the budget needs of the district, assess the ability of the town to pay and work collaboratively with all stakeholders to build and organize a defensible and understandable budget. Be accountable for expenditures and regularly report budget status. Search for alternative funding strategies, i.e., increased state funding, grants, donations, etc. School restructuring/reconfigurations may have occurred by the end of the 2009-10 school year. Assess needs of those impacted by changes and prepare appropriate support as necessary. If the contract difficulties with the professional staff are not resolved by the end of the 2009-10 school year, look for ways to bring closure to the issues by reaching common ground on differences. Begin to plan for contractual negotiations for the following years.
- Assessing curriculum and instruction. Determine if needs of all children are being met by program offerings; evaluate administrators and staff to determine professional growth needs; assess professional development to align objectives with improvement goals; work with professional staff so that they are held accountable to the high standards of the district. Examine special education to determine its success and needs. Work with parents and staff to determine success of communication and agreement; attend to questions or issues that surface.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Board of Selectmen
(7 participants)
December 1, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (not in priority order):

- School experience at the administrative level: central office.
- Educationally credentialed; at least a Masters Degree.
- Budgeting experience; creative, out-of-the-box thinking a must.
- Strong management skills.
- People involvement abilities.
- Solid references.
- Accountability.
- Collaborative, shared decision making expertise.
- Delegation strengths: knows how to delegate; recognizes that delegation requires support for those delegated responsibility.
- A self-starter/highly motivated/energetic.
- Can take constructive criticism and use it to self-improve/self-motivate.
- Respond to emergencies with confidence that the staff can work together to resolve.
- Strong communication skills with everyone.
- Effectively use all technology skills for management, curriculum, instruction, assessment and public relations.
- Politically savvy with professional boundaries.
- A visionary; can identify what could be in the future with appropriate resources.
- Authentic budgeting abilities; focuses on actual needs, not wish lists.
- Supportive of staff efforts to focus on student, that's what the position is all about.
- Outstanding negotiation and consensus building skills: thick skin/indefatigable/tireless in the pursuit.
- Exhibits passion for the position and joy in district accomplishment.
- A charismatic presence.
- Supportive of athletics and the arts.
- Special education experienced; knows regulations and seeks approaches to provide for needs while being cost efficient.
- Actively seeks creative ways to support unfunded mandates.
- The community educator.

After reviewing the list of indicators, the group decided to not consolidate the listing. They did, however, agree that there were several apparent categories within the list: Leadership, Personal Strengths, Specific Skills (budgeting, collaboration, for example), and Experience.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Review all job descriptions and policies.
- Examine the budgeting process and begin planning to forward one focused on needs by Town Meeting.
- Develop a comprehensive mission and vision for the schools: engage and involve the community constituent groups to identify needs, plan strategically for the future, create a calendar and dig into funding approaches.
- Connect and immerse himself/herself with town leadership and develop supportive/collaborative working relationships.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Town Manager and Department Heads
(11 participants)
December 8, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (not in priority order):

- Experience in communities both larger and smaller than Tewksbury.
- Open and honest with a sense of humor; open to new ideas.
- A team player who collaborates with town leadership and the various departments; the school department cannot work independently of the town or have a sense that all focuses around it. Works in most collaborative ways with the Town Manager.
- Finds win-win: builds to consensus.
- A long-term vision with the flexibility to adjust to the current economic conditions.
- A capacity to identify alternative funding sources.
- Skilled in sharing resources within the community and outside the community as well.
- Someone with a successful career track: classroom to central office with increasing system wide responsibility.
- Possesses a strong business background: budget issues will make the job very challenging.
- A history of dedication to the community; becomes a part of the community; is visible everywhere.
- Lives within proximity of Tewksbury.
- Highly regarded by peers.
- Courageous: initiating and following up in the face of opposition; particularly in decisions involving greater efficiencies in the district.
- Politically savvy, but not a politician.
- Will provide a long-term commitment to the town.
- Compassionate for individuals. Supportive of new ideas and encourages those ideas to root.
- Sincere/empathic/real/transparent.
- Highly experienced with two way communication: welcomes opinions/receptive to ideas and provides follow up. Delivers what is promised.

Following the review of the listing, the group decided not to categorize them because of time considerations. They did, however, agree that all indicators could be organized in the following way: a leader who can provide vision development, identify goals and purposes of the district, who possesses outstanding communication skills, believes in and practices collaboration and successfully experienced funding issues and human resources management.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Provide more creative thinking about the budget; seek alternative funding; reduce the budget by providing greater efficiencies.
- Look at the budget 3-5 years from now and begin preparing for economic conditions. Service levels must be reduced.
- Study school usage and determine if spaces are being used efficiently. Are there ways to restructure that would decrease costs to the town?
- Investigate what is causing some of the students to leave the district for private or technical schools.
- Not be afraid to make tough decisions even in the face of opposition; particularly in reduction of services.
- Develop a positive, collaborative working relationship with the new town manager.
- Work with the state legislators to impress upon them the financial needs of the community.
- School safety teams connect with town safety personnel to assure continuation of safe environments for students.
- Work on the use of school buildings for the town side after school hours and during school breaks.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Community
(21 participants)
December 9, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (in priority order):

1. Leadership. Establishes high performance standards for everyone. Reacts quickly and professionally to high pressure situations. Provides high motivation; people want to do what needs to be done. Consistency in decision making: the same rules apply to all. Effective customer service attitude and makes that a required approach for all staff. Fiscally responsible for the town's money. Can bring resources and revenue to the district. Accountable for himself/herself and will hold administrators accountable. School administrators in turn will hold the staff accountable. Results oriented; driven to evidence of success with improvement over time. Capacity to make change. Administrative controls are in place through established protocols and procedures so micromanagement by the superintendent is not necessary. Has confidence in staff to delegate responsibilities; knows how to support those delegated with tasks. Skillful in prioritizing, multi-tasking and follow through. A long-range planner and strategic thinker; skillful in helping the community envision impact of school efforts 3-5 years from now. Willing to try new approaches; a risk taker. Has the strong interest and desire to learn the history and culture of the town and the laws and regulations of the state.
2. Work experience. Experience as an educational administrator. Diverse experience: not education alone; consider private sector or not for profit background. Possesses a financial background; understands the economic conditions and the impact on the community. Successful at team building and delegating. Proficient with technology: curriculum, instruction and all phases of management. Knows the legal aspects of education: federal, state and local. Has a history of success in improving instruction and pupil progress and can relate to and describe that success. Human resource experienced; skilled in hiring at all levels, promoting growth and firing when necessary. Collective bargaining experienced from the management side. Knows the NEASC process and can provide support and necessary direction for the high school assessment process. Building project experienced; knows how to collaboratively work with building project team members: architect, project manager, construction supervisor, building committee members.
3. Personal beliefs/skills. Someone who has strong confidence so he/she can be an effective advocate for the schools. A capacity to see total town funding; focuses on a town budget, not just one for the schools. Possesses intelligence, common sense, integrity. Ethical and high moral standards. A creative thinker with out-of-the-box ability; an innovator. Willing to try new approaches; a risk taker.

Thick skinned. Approachable, receptive, welcoming; highly visible; truly enjoys kids; comes with a fresh outlook. Capable of making tough decisions, even if others aren't happy with the decision; not caving in to pressures. Inspirational; models exceptional capacity to lead; and passionate, energetic, enthusiastic. Willing to be out in front; to be the PR specialist. Admits when mistakes are made and can fix them; learns from mistakes so will take more appropriate action next time. Superintendent is a parent or a teacher and can bring that experience to the table. Accountable for himself/herself and will hold others accountable. Enjoys challenges and is committed to excellence. Lives within proximity of Tewksbury. Sufficiently experienced to handle the demands, has the energy to complete all responsibilities and will provide a commitment to spend time in the position.

4. Communication. Communicates successfully with everyone by using all available means to engage in two-way communication. Exceptionally skilled in public relations and knows the right approaches to use with the varied constituent groups.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Get the new high school built.
- Develop a long-range plan by including all constituencies in assessment of the district; identify the school district's current level of success by using accurate baseline data as a foundation for action planning.
- Develop a comfortable working relationship with all administrators and other leaders in the schools.
- Reassess block scheduling.
- Spend time in the schools; become highly visible; get to know programs and activities.
- Create a web-based program people can sign up to receive, where a report to the community is available describing progress in meeting school district goals.
- Assess the effectiveness of school principals.
- Assess special education: examine the quality of the program, determine its success in aligning with state and federal requirements, examine its success in meeting the requirements of IEPs and compliance issues, and increase parent involvement in the program.
- Spend time examining the budget process. It has some unique qualities with budget committee and town meeting involvement, and all steps need to be clearly understood.
- Look at parent involvement in the schools. Parents as partners PreK-12 is a desired outcome.
- Present himself/herself with confidence as himself/herself, not as a Chris McGrath facsimile.
- Any district restructuring acted upon during 2009-10 will need to be supported so that all affected are comfortable with arrangements/decisions.

- Examine community partnerships to access possible resources/donations/grants/awards to ease financial commitment of town.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Senior Citizens
(4 participants)
December 10, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (not in priority order):

- Previous central office experience.
- Credentials: degree/license.
- An attractive and welcoming personality that is well received by the town.
- Work closely with the town side of Tewksbury; collaborative relationships will go a long way especially with town leadership.
- Listens well, receives ideas and welcomes suggestions.
- Available with high visibility.
- A history of success in previous positions.
- Live within proximity to the town.
- A good sense of humor.
- More intergenerational relationships that encourage involvement by the town's seniors; experienced in developing programs with children which encourage active participation.
- Possesses an extensive knowledge of building projects.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Introduce himself/herself to senior citizens.
- Become involved with all groups in town: parents, students, civic groups.
- Visit all schools and personnel.
- Work at bringing the community together; collaborative approaches, not confrontational discussions.
- Look at funding issues and provide balance with the town in appropriations.
- Examine maintenance issues of the schools and attend to facilities requiring attention.
- Work with others to assess the needs of the schools; develop an improvement plan and share with the community.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Secondary Staff
(4 participants)
December 14, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (not in priority order):

- Experience as a superintendent or assistant superintendent; past success is critically important.
- Has taken the time to begin to learn about the town – its strengths and needs.
- A belief in an open-door policy; is accessible and has a flexible approach; approachable and welcoming.
- To be compassionate; to be like Chris McGrath, a hands-on superintendent.
- An active listener; attentive to concerns.
- Has a developing awareness of Tewksbury's problems: there are significant issues with teacher contracts.
- Has the skill set and the strength to work with the school committee to develop clear understandings about roles and responsibilities.
- An independent person who can support principles and beliefs; must demonstrate strength with this quality.
- Refocusing capacity to keep target on students and learning; to place attention of business practices in its proper perspective.
- Exceptional communication skills; practices two-way communication.
- A support of shared decision making; encourages active involvement and recognizes contributions of others.
- A people person who understands the importance of highly developed clarification skills.
- Possesses an advanced degree.
- Able to admit mistakes and learn from them.
- Technologically skilled.
- Special education background; knows rules, regs and compliance mandates.
- A wealth of budget experience.
- An active interest in working collaboratively with town leadership.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Work on the teachers' contract.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of the school committee, the superintendent and school leaders.
- Look at the possibilities of school restructuring. If decisions are made during the 2009-10 school year, support the decisions by helping those effected to transition to new arrangements.
- Assessment of strengths and needs of the district and work with others to action plan; a collaborative effort with all stakeholders is mandatory in this initiative.
- Connect with constituent groups by developing trusting relationships and following up and following through.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Elementary Staff
(3 participants)
December 14, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (not in priority order):

- Someone who believes in the value of an open-door policy.
- Classroom experienced.
- Recognizes the educational experience and contributions of the staff.
- Not a micromanager.
- A personable, approachable, family oriented professional.
- Experienced with the issues of special education.
- Provides an emphasis for all students, not just on those who excel.
- A recognition that all schools are important; someone who can bring all buildings together.
- Develops a positive working relationship with the PAC's.
- High visibility; involved with students and faculty, not just a manager.
- Possesses a positive, enthusiastic, energized attitude.
- Not afraid to take a stand for staff: teachers and support staff, and willing to back them up.
- Need someone to bring all constituent groups together because morale is an issue.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position (not in priority order):

- Negotiate a contract with the professional staff.
- Find new funding to support the district: use creative, out-of-the-box thinking to help solve the budget crisis of the district. During this process, some tough decisions will be made.
- Develop well developed marketing strategies with others to reverse the town's negative image of teachers.
- Support the construction of a new high school.
- Need to coordinate instructional materials with curriculum demands. Many materials need to be replaced or updated.
- The four elementary schools need to better coordinate efforts and consistency.
- Staff morale needs attention. Some focused attention by the superintendent is essential.

- Assess all components of the district by working with others to identify strengths and needs. Develop a strategy to continue and enhance “success stories” and correct issues requiring attention. What is best for kids should drive decision making.

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Focus Group Summary Report**

**Leadership Team
(20 participants)
December 18, 2009**

Topic #1. The new superintendent of schools should have the following characteristics, skills and background experiences (in priority order):

1. Personal abilities. Someone with a strong sense of humor; possesses humility, empathy, patience, energy. Be mentally tough and have loyalty for the administrators. Compassionate and understanding. Self-reflective so he/she can learn and grow from experiences. Experienced as a teacher to school administrator to central office with system-wide responsibility. Good memory capacity with faces, names and experiences and can connect them. Honest. Possesses a strong work ethic. Decisive, adaptive with a sense of perspective. A multi-tasker, thick skinned and resilient. Will commit to the position. Someone with the wonderfully supportive personal approaches of Chris McGrath.
2. Leadership capacity. Collaborative, particularly with the leadership team. Someone skilled in developing and cultivating trust. Possesses currency in best practices; proactive. Labor relations expertise. A believer in equity for all. A team builder. Enjoys connections with professional organizations outside of the district. Politically savvy, but not a politician. Models excellent leadership as Chris does. Has a capacity to envision "what could be" – a visionary. Treats the vision as more than just a nice statement: it frames purpose, programs and activities. Effective at building consensus. A motivator: causes others to want to continue the quest. Knows how to establish priorities. A mediator and facilitator. Has high visibility everywhere. Values all employees equally. Skilled at delegating; knows how to support individuals who are delegated responsibility. Emergency management skills; calm under pressure. Outstanding organizational skills; a master at time management. Treats and respects all courses, programs equally; knows how to balance and support.
3. Strong communication skills. Open mindedness, approachability; an active listener. Articulate with creative thinking abilities. Models professional appearance. Someone with strong writing skills. A positive relationship builder with all groups; encourages active participation and values contributions.
4. Curriculum and instructional strength. Student centered; central to driving decision making. Technologically literate. A strong sense of global awareness; works with others to incorporate that understanding in learning and teaching. A constant learner; models for others the value of expanding knowledge, understanding and appreciations. Understands special education and skilled at successfully providing for student need while considering efficiency in approach.

5. Business and finance abilities. Budget expertise; a creative out-of-the-box thinker. A highly developed business sense with an eye on impact on the community. Emergency management skilled. Construction project oversight capacity and experience.

Topic #2. The following are the immediate challenges and tasks the new superintendent should focus upon in the first six to twelve months in the position:

- The high school project.
- A tough budget climate is here; work collaboratively with others to examine issues and arrive at recommendations.
- Professional and support contracts are expiring; need to think creatively about resolving potential issues and concerns: salaries, benefits, etc.
- Possible restructuring or reconfiguration of the schools could be done in 2009-10. The new superintendent needs to be prepared to encourage and support potential major paradigm shifts for the town.
- Establish a working relationship with the school committee, the new town manager, the new police chief and town leadership.
- Connect with the leadership team and maintain the success of collaborative leadership and decision making.
- Assess the strengths and needs of the district by collaboratively engaging with all stakeholders and organizing and articulating a strategic plan.
- Administrative hiring: interim positions exist and full-time individuals need to be identified.
- Special education: consensus development could benefit the district – parents and staff.
- Capitalize on district strengths because there are many: trumpet them and celebrate.