

# Memorandum

To: Watertown School Committee  
From: Glenn Koocher, MA Association of School Committees  
Date: January 22, 2017  
RE: Report of Focus Groups for Superintendent Search

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MASC conducted ten focus groups with a total of 66 residents and stakeholders at which several questions were posed and open discussion were encouraged. Those questions were:

1. What are the strengths of Watertown and its public schools that should be preserved and protected during a transition in the superintendency and should be cultivated going forward?
2. What are the areas for growth, development, improvement and change?
3. What are the characteristics you would find essential in your next superintendent?
4. What other comments or concerns do you have?
5. What questions would you like to pose to the candidates

In addition, an on line survey with open response capability asked residents to identify their priorities and label them as more or less important to them. A copy of the outcomes of that report is being provided. Two hundred twenty four people responded of whom 71% were parents, 19% were faculty members, and 10% were town officials or others. Several responders wore more than one hat (i.e., teachers who reside in the town).

The survey results also mirrored the comments from those who came to the group meetings. General summaries of the life session responses are listed below, but they are not the only responses. Please note the ranked summaries attached that were taken from on-line survey that reflect the rankings given remotely.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

It is clear that Watertown benefits from a supportive parent and community base. Parents and teachers are proud to live here and appreciate the diversity, convenience, quality of life, and culture. They also commend the public schools and its faculty in general and are pleased but with many strong recommendations for building upon success, addressing students who may fall through cracks, addressing morale, and preparing for what many describe as a fast paced and changing social and economic climate.

While they are content, they are not complacent and many comments reflected high ambition for their children. There was a general sense that the district cares about its children and wants them to

maximize their potential, but that they will also pay attention to their social and emotional wellbeing and look out for their “spirit so that we can create good learners, but also good people when they grow up.”

The district is in transition following the retirement of Superintendent Jean Fitzgerald in October 2016. The transition was begun with some measure of divisiveness as is expected in any change of leadership, but the leaders in Watertown have addressed the change by moving forward and projecting optimism for its students. However, stakeholders have come together during the transition and offered many constructive observations about building on the past and meeting challenges of the next 5-10 years.

Responders point to a diverse community that is in social transition as property values increase, the tenant population grows, and the small town feel to Watertown may be vulnerable as people “discover” it. Several participants noted that more economically advantaged people are moving into the area and making decisions about where to live and whether to utilize public, parochial, private, or charter schools. They note that some of these newer residents will carry their goals and aspirations for the children with them and may introduce more intensity to the parent demands.

Watertown is well situated close to access to major roadways, has public transportation to most of metropolitan Boston through the network of bus routes, a successful and popular center of town, activities for children, and the advantages of “being in the center of things without being the center of things.” There is a meaningful share of the population and faculty whose roots are in Watertown

## **STRENGTHS**

There was wide acknowledgment that the diversity of the community is one of its great strengths and the ability of the faculty and community residents to encourage cohesiveness as a town has made this a genuine asset.

Parents and teachers themselves spoke consistently about the work of the teachers and, to the extent that they are known to the average citizen, the administrative team. During the period of interim superintendency, residents and faculty have been outspoken in their praise for the current school chief and have cited superior communications skills, visibility, organization and management skills, and a parent friendly culture.

Responders pointed to the various activities and collaboration with town social services providers to support the students.

People appreciated the relatively low class sizes which are the result of conscious decisions to focus on the classroom environment and on learning in particular rather than the glitz of new building and impressive architectural improvements. (See below).

Teachers also noted that in some cases, the district administrative team and school building leaders have worked to implement the state’s voluminous burden of regulatory mandates in ways that work for educators. Massachusetts has a highly detailed and prescriptive educator evaluation system that uses over 1,000 pages of rules, regulations, matrices, guidelines, models, advisories, and directives to instruct

administrators in how to evaluate teachers. Watertown seems to have figured out a way to make this all work.

Several responders pointed to changes in the central office and the addition, over the past year, of new leaders in special education, personnel, curriculum/instruction, and budget/operations as signs that the district will continue to grow stronger.

Participants point to two student-centered changes that are positive: the expansion of one-to-one chrome books for students and the phase in of a Spanish language program in the lower grades that will, if plans continue, to feed into middle school foreign language instruction. Many teachers and parents are strongly supportive of these programs.

### **AREAS FOR GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT, AND CHANGE**

Capital Improvements. There is universal agreement that the next superintendent will need to implement an aggressive school capital improvement effort. The schools are generally older buildings, although there have been strategic renovations to some parts over the last three decades. It is likely that the student population will grow and expansion, renovation or new construction will be valued. Elements of the high school and middle school show artifacts of Depression era construction.

Communications. Many responders addressed communications and public relations. The district does not have a separate function for reaching out and informing the public about day to day events nor does it have a strategic plan that is working to make the stakeholders aware of the good things, priorities, and needs of the Watertown Public Schools. What has been successful is the effort of the interim superintendent to be visible and active in the town. A popular leader can create the appearance of success, which is a good first step; however, this initiative must be sustained.

Data. Several persons mentioned the need to develop a consistent and universal system to gathering and using data including financial, student, and programmatic information.

Standards and Expectations for Students. Parents were diverse in their expectations and demands for their students. Some felt that Watertown should push for even higher standards while others expressed concerns for students as the targets of those who would push them harder to provide workers for certain occupations and professions in demand at this time. Still others want a superintendent to “remember the value of creativity, including imagination, strategy, and building or executing the idea into reality.”

Intergenerational and Multi-Cohort Support. Very helpful comments were made about the importance of maintaining the support of older Watertown residents and, at the same time, promoting civic engagement and awareness in students about an intergenerational compact that links seniors in town with students in school. Responders were, in several cases, concerned about losing the generational support at both ends.

Vocational and Technical Education. A lengthy discussion took place at one focus group about the value of vocational and technical education in Watertown. It will be important for the school committee and the next superintendent to discuss how Watertown should address the needs of those students who would benefit from access to these programs. A discussion might include joining a regional technical school district, expanding opportunities internally, or working on tuition agreements with other schools to provide access to vocational training that provides another post-high school option.

## **THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT**

In responding, people were asked to fall back on their life and professional experiences and not to base their expectations for a superintendent in comparison with the current or past leaders, but in the best leaders they have encountered.

Person of Principal and Conviction. “I want a person who stands for something beside themselves,” said one participant to a room full of agreement. They urged the search committee to probe to determine what really matters, and “what *really*” matters.

Communications. As one responder noted, “I have three requirements of our next superintendent. That (s)he be a superior communicator with extraordinary personal skills; second, that (s)he be a superior communicator with extraordinary personal skills; and third (repeat here.). Parents and teachers seemed united in this priority, although many teachers warn that being a good speaker and a nice person is only the prerequisite to other important and essential characteristics.

Staff at all levels recognize the importance of sharing information internally as well as externally.

Sense of Humor. Given the levels of stress and concern among the school committee, there were many calls for a superintendent with an appropriate sense of humor.

Vision. While this issue is raised frequently during superintendent searches, it is particularly important in a community like Watertown where its long time residents and families stay longer than in other places. In other words, people plan on being in Watertown ten years from now and want to see the fruits of the seeds planted for programs, services, and capital assets. Many parents want the candidates to articulate a clear plan for how they would plan and implement a strategy for this. (Of special interest was the skepticism related to a formal strategic plan, as some knowledgeable parents noted that many of these plans lie on shelves and are never actually implemented.)

Students and Student Concerns. There were several detailed comments about having a superintendent who puts the value of testing in perspective and who will take on those who want to emphasize to an inappropriate degree the value of testing scores as a single or most important standard.

Wellbeing of Students. There were many comments about the social and emotional wellbeing of students. There is always the danger that concern for students who are overwhelmed with pressures of school, social life, family life, and the environment around them will work itself into a tired cliché. Responders want to see genuine concern for students and to attempt to achieve a proper balance for those who believe, as many do, that Watertown could ratchet up the level of rigor in the middle and

upper grades. The most articulate of the parents noted that there is no prescriptive strategy to achieve this, but that the superintendent should keep these concerns in mind at all times.

Responders would like the superintendent to respond to concerns of students who do not feel safe in the current political environment, including not only the general population, but students vulnerable to loss of services, supports, and immigration status.

Fairness and Consistency. It was noted that superintendents and principals make many decisions every day and are often asked to be flexible enough to be reasonable. Responders would like to see the candidates respond to how they would be fair and equitable in setting priorities and making decisions. Part of this would be “an overarching sense of professionalism.”

Supportive of School-Based Management. This includes an understanding for the value of the role of principals in school leadership, distributive leadership, and school and student-centered decision making. There were insightful comments about allowing school faculty to take ownership of their schools and, along with it, demonstrate a great sense of commitment to success.

Visibility in the Community and in School. Teachers welcome visits from the superintendent and the parents and school leaders want the superintendent to be a featured representative of the public schools in academic and civic events. One person responded that, “in an era when young people and a lot of adults have given up on the political process and aren’t following local issues, the superintendent should be leading the effort to get everyone paying attention.

Finance and Budget. Responders appreciate the presence in the district of a top notch financial and personnel administrator. This was repeated in discussions. They see the district benefitting from consistent leadership. However, they emphasized the importance of a school leader who can plan, implement, manage, and explain how the school budget was developed and what it means in terms of district priorities going forward. The superintendent, and not subordinates, should be in front of the parents and citizens giving clear answers in context to student growth and learning success. This was not necessarily a criticism of anyone, but it was an aspiration articulated regularly during the discussions.

Personifies a Commitment to Lifelong Learning. In a fast changing world where skills can become out of date quickly and requirements to learn new content will always be with us, responders want a superintendent who demonstrates such a commitment him/herself to continuing to grow intellectually, socially, and culturally.

Cultural Proficiency. There were several well stated calls for a superintendent who understands the importance of cultural proficiency, including the many elements of diversity that are not always considered (as left handed persons frequently explain).

Special Education. Superintendents relate to special education in many ways, but it was clear from speaking with advocates for special education that they want a superintendent who not only knows the law and regulatory requirements, but who also sees the children at the center of the education plan.

Watertown cultivated a very successful reputation in special education and, in some respects, it has paid a price by being attractive to parents with children with special needs. There are cost implications of this, but parents also cite concern about preserving quality, appropriateness of services, concern for students, and accessibility to parents as key. This is the case although there appears to be a higher than average number of students on individual education plans.

Working with the School Committee. Parents and teachers spoke of their concerns about both the superintendent and the school committee knowing and respecting the roles and responsibilities of each other.

### **PROPOSED QUESTIONS POSED BY FOCUS GROUP ATTENDEES**

How have you handled relationships with the media in your professional career, and how has your strategy changed over time?

What do you know about Watertown, and what would inspire us?

How would address initiatives already in motion?

How have you related with social and civic as well as artistic organizations in the community.

How can we make our kids not only good students, but also good citizens and good humans?

What have you done to exploit in a positive way the diversity in our community.

How would you make Watertown a model of what a successful diverse town could be in terms of civics and civic engagement, academics, integration of our agencies and resources, and life in general?

How have you mobilized political interests to support the schools?

What is your experience with the bargaining process and what do you think about the value of interest based bargaining ?

RANKED AREAS OF PRIORITY BASED ON ALL SURVEY RESPONSES

<u>PRIORITY</u>	<u>AVERAGE</u> (1=Highest / 5=Lowest)
1. Educational Leadership	1.27
2. Quality of Instruction	1.44
3. Staff Faculty Morale	1.63
4. Ensuring Students are College and Career Ready	1.63
5. Academic Standards	1.64
6. Curriculum Development	1.74
7. Communications with Parents	1.84
8. District Improvement Planning	1.85
9. Financial Management	1.87
10. Strategic Planning	1.90
11. Communications with the School Committee	1.90
12. District Goal Setting	2.08
13. New Facilities Construction	2.13
14. 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Technology	2.17
15. Professional Development	2.18
16. Managing Changing Enrollment	2.23
17. Staff Evaluation	2.23
18. Facilities Management	2.25
19. Public Relations and Communications	2.28
20. Town and Community Relations	2.31
21. Collective Bargaining/Employment	2.41
22. Student Assessment	2.44

## RANKED SKILLS FOR THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT

<u>CHARACTERISTIC</u>	<u>AVERAGE (1=Highest / 5=Lowest)</u>
1. Supports Staff	1.34
2. Retains Competent Staff	1.34
3. Communications Skills	1.38
4. Attracts Superior Staff	1.38
5. Respect People's Values	1.39
6. Inspires Other	1.45
7. Improving District or Social Wide Academic Performance	1.64
8. Developing and Implementing Short/Long Term Strategic Plans	1.73
9. Working with Diverse Constituencies	1.75
10. Understands Community Relations	1.79
11. Supports Arts Education	1.80
12. Personnel Administration Skills	1.82
13. Developing and Assessing Curriculum	1.82
14. Experience with Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Science (STEAM)	1.86
15. Organizational Skills	1.87
16. Builds Innovative Partnerships	1.92
17. Success Working with the School Committee	1.96
18. Experience with Programs for Social and Emotional Learning	2.00
19. Experience as a Principal	2.00
20. Understanding of Special Education	2.00
21. Experience Visiting Classrooms/Schools	2.04
22. Personal Interest in Professional Development/Life Long Learning	2.08
23. Budget and Financial Skills	2.11
24. Crisis Management	2.18
25. Knowledge of Experience in the Classroom	2.29
26. Central Office Experience	2.42
27. Collective Bargaining/Interest Based Bargaining Skills	2.44
28. Grantwriting/Obtaining Outside Funding	2.46
29. Use of District Wide Data Systems	2.48