

# **The Woodbridge School District Superintendent Search Leadership Profile**

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September 2022

## **SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP PROFILE**

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### **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 Woodbridge 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>
Woodbridge Teachers	September 12	2:30 or 3:30	Rotunda
Parents/Guardians/Community	September 8	6:30	ZOOM
Non-Certified and Support Staff	September 8	3:30	Rotunda
Town Elected Official/ Staff	September 7	6:30	ZOOM

This Leadership Profile presents findings from these focus groups, interviews, and an online survey conducted in August-September 2022. The consultants spoke with 27 individuals, including parents, teachers, administrators, non-certified/support staff, elected officials, and members of the Woodbridge Board of Education.

In total, 72 Woodbridge residents and staff completed the online survey. In conducting the interviews and 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 Beecher Road School and the Woodbridge community which could affect future leadership requirements, they asked about the qualities, characteristics, experience, philosophy, and skills most desirable in the next superintendent. The Woodbridge Board of Education will use these results as it considers its applicants in order to find the best possible match for Woodbridge at this time. The consultants are presenting their findings to the Board of Education without revealing the identity of any individual contributor.

The Woodbridge 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 Marsha DeGennaro, Administrative Assistant-Superintendent's Office, for her help publicizing the opportunity to participate, and to interview and focus group participants and survey respondents whose commitment to the schools and Town of Woodbridge was evident as they offered perspectives.

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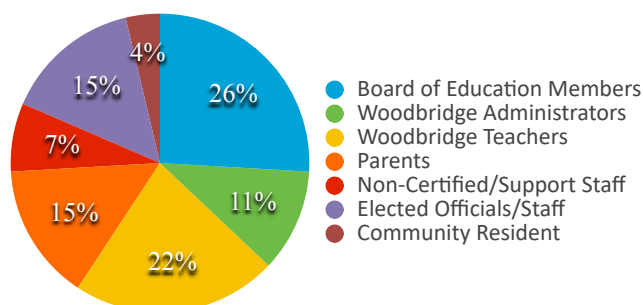
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### Data Collection

In total, 99 individuals participated through interviews, focus groups, and the survey. The data collected do not constitute a scientific sampling, but a representation of the Woodbridge School District 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.

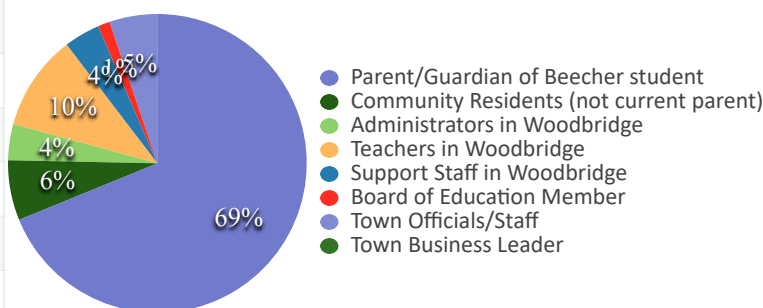
#### Interview and Focus Group Participants

PARTICIPANTS	27	%
Board of Education Members	7	25.9%
Woodbridge Administrators	3	11.1%
Woodbridge Teachers	6	22.2%
Parents	4	14.8%
Non-Certified/Support Staff	2	7.4%
Elected Officials/Staff	4	14.8%
Community Resident	1	3.7%
	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



#### Survey Responses

PARTICIPANTS*	72	%
Parent/Guardian of Beecher student	53	68.8%
Community Residents (not current parent)	5	6.5%
Administrators in Woodbridge	3	3.9%
Teachers in Woodbridge	8	10.4%
Support Staff in Woodbridge	3	3.9%
Board of Education Member	1	1.3%
Town Officials/Staff	4	5.2%
Town Business Leader	0	0.0%
	<b>77</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



\*Please note that survey participants identified themselves under multiple categories so numbers add up to more than 72.

## Strengths of Woodbridge and its Beecher Road School



Woodbridge's new superintendent will find a number of areas of strength which are passionately supported in this district. The following, beginning in order of most cited, emerged through an analysis of interview, focus group, and survey responses: The district's staff; the program and academic successes; a strong community; families; and funding and facilities.

## Staff

Participants (63) in interviews, focus groups, and the survey overwhelmingly identified the staff of the Woodbridge School District as its greatest strength. Beecher Road School's teachers are caring, capable, deeply committed and dedicated to their students and each other. They prioritize student need and work collaboratively to deliver a very high quality of instruction and learning. "Everyone has a great attitude and no one is afraid of hard work."

Staff support a cohesive team culture and a sense of school as family. Each team has many different strengths. The school leadership “has always valued teachers coming with ideas,” supporting a spirit of creativity and innovation. Staff members seek to continue to learn and are highly reflective, constantly analyzing their practice.

## Program and Academic Success

Overall, 63 individuals also cited some aspect of Beecher Road's program and academic success as a significant strength. The school community values the focus the district places on the whole child, not data points, though they also consider data. The result is that Beecher Road is "not a cookie-cutter school," but allows greater freedom to its educators to find the resources to meet each child's needs, "helping them develop as successful human beings." Staff credit being a "single school district" with allowing that uniqueness and the latitude to implement innovative learning models. Their attention to the arts, emotional intelligence, well-roundedness, and academic excellence allows students to "flourish as life-long learners with critical thinking skills."

Some particular aspects of the program that received mention are the district's commitment to reasonable class sizes, the multi-age grouping (MAG) program, the many specials, and after-school offerings valued as part of educational excellence. The district enjoys an excellent collaboration with the Woodbridge Recreation program, reinforcing opportunities for children to grow and excel.

Of the 63 who noted strength in program, 27 mentioned the district's excellence in academics and broad desire to give students "a great foundation to help them achieve good outcomes." They cited Woodbridge's "reputation and legacy [as] a top district" and "striving for academic achievement."

## The Community

Participants (49) identified an involved, strong, close community as a major strength. This “nice, smart, intellectually diverse community” supports Beecher Road School “in the center of a close-knit community.” Even “many non-parents remain committed to the education system.” The town values the importance of a strong school district to attract families. In addition, people return to raise families in Woodbridge. “Many members of the community were Beecher students at one time.”

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## Funding and Facilities

According to 14 participants, community support for school funding and facilities is a strength of the district. Since the district is not eligible for most grants because of town wealth, the town itself has committed to supporting the system.

The school is situated on a beautiful campus with significant green space. A recent upgrade of the HVAC system provides a “safe air quality environment.” Beecher Road School is unusual as a PK-6 district that provides the community with a pool. The town is beginning to consider how to address other capital needs of the school.

## Families and PTO

Participants (13) also cited strong parental support for the school. Overall, the parent community values and supports education. The PTO is generally a big support, recently providing extraordinary resources: \$50,000 to fund a “STEAM Dream.”

**Other**

Several other areas had a handful of mentions by participants. Eight (8) mentioned the diversity of the community, student body, and parents and the importance of that diversity to the community. Five (5) cited students and their tremendous social capital. “Kids are great and make everything awesome.” Three (3) mentioned Beecher’s welcoming, inclusive environment. Finally three (3) mentioned the current Board of Education that works well together and is high functioning.

## Challenges Facing Woodbridge School District



The next superintendent will also grapple with some significant challenges when taking the helm of the Woodbridge School District. As is often the case, areas cited as strengths are viewed by others as challenges. The most cited challenges, in order, were staff issues; learning, curriculum, and performance; leadership issues; finance; diversity; enrollment and facilities; and relations with other districts in the region.

## Staff Issues

Staff were the most cited strength of the district, and staff issues were also the most cited challenge, identified by 42 participants. Woodbridge staff, like those in nearly every school district in Connecticut and the nation, have experienced morale and other issues as they have coped with COVID and recent political turmoil. Though the district has a track record of staff retention, they have lost 38 staff members in the past 18 months and are “still scrambling to build knowledge bases” and find the “caliber of people we lost.” These losses come at a time of “teacher burnout” and “ongoing teacher shortages and attrition.” Mentioned by several was the loss of a long-term STEAM teacher who served as a partner to many teachers.

District staff used to enjoy significant autonomy and a high level of initiative in their work. The last few years, they felt substantial erosion in that autonomy, causing staff to feel “under a microscope” and unsafe to try new things

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and take risks. There were high levels of absenteeism, few substitutes to fill those roles, and the reassignment of staff to cover for those absent, creating that much greater pressure on everyone. A culture that had felt like family deteriorated under recent leadership. Practices, such as eating meals together, were eliminated. Staff also lost meaningful professional learning and a diminished professional development budget. As a result, they felt far less encouraged to grow.

Finally, Woodbridge has five administrators total, with two serving as building leaders (principal and assistant principal) and three in Central Office (Superintendent, Director of Business Services and Operations, and Director of Special Services), also in the same building. Since the district is comprised of only one school, there are natural boundary issues between running the school versus running the district, but that distinction is an important one to honor.

### **Learning, Curriculum, and Performance**

Though many participants found program overall or some aspect to be a point of strength, 32 found some area of Woodbridge's performance to pose a challenge. Twelve (12) specifically identified the challenge of maintaining academic quality and the "growing range in academics" given expanding student needs, especially in a post-COVID climate.

Any small district with a slim administrative staff struggles to employ a robust system of curriculum development. There currently is not one individual assigned to curriculum development, and though staff, especially through teacher specialists, has worked hard to stay current and introduce best practices, the system itself needs attention, according to a number of participants. One described the curriculum as "reactive...not streamlined... not visionary." In addition to shoring up Woodbridge's own system, the district needs to coordinate with the other districts feeding into Amity, the regional secondary district. The new assistant superintendent in Amity has begun to invite such alignment work.

A third major challenge in this area is special needs, according to 12 participants. Coming out of the pandemic, there is an "explosion" in students requiring special services, creating a significant draw on resources. The one director conducts over 350 Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings a year. A challenge for the new leader will be to "bring balance and sensitivity to what is necessary for both [ends of the spectrum], special education and those who excel." Also needing attention will be the SRBI process, according to participants.

### **Leadership**

Central Office will have seen a total turnover in administrators this past year. Participants (30) named administrative leadership as a big challenge. The size of the district means there are single individuals with large areas of responsibility, and they are all seen as overworked. Given recent turnover, there has been a loss of a knowledge base.

The district needs "strong leadership that can bring together the town, parents, teachers, and the Board of Education." In the existing culture, it is "difficult to make changes that benefit the students." Staff and others want leaders who "include [them] in the process... talk with them," and don't dictate from above. "If people respect you, they will get behind you. If not, you have grief and confrontation."

Of the 30 who cited a leadership issue, 14 identified the need to follow clear chains of command. "We need a superintendent, not a super principal," and we need that leader to collaborate, but "allow the principal to do her job." The new leader will need to clarify boundaries and decision-making processes, avoiding micromanaging.

### **Finance**

Though funding and facilities were cited as a strength by many, 27 participants cited tight budgets, especially going forward, as a challenge for the new leader. They cited fiscal constraints that will require significant thought and communication about how education is delivered. Several cited good communications between the town and the

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schools, with leaders working together and seeking consensus and the need for such transparency to continue so decision makers can plan for the future and trust information received.

### **Diversity**

Once again, an area cited as a strength was also perceived as a challenge by 24 participants. At the heart of this challenge is “a diverse group of parents/children with different views about what school should be during this time in our history.” The leader will be challenged with “navigating and growing in diversity and inclusion with all the opinions and tensions that come with that conversation right now.” As in many other communities nation-wide, the topic of diversity/equity/inclusion/belonging has become contentious, leaving some feeling marginalized and others feeling misunderstood.

### **Enrollment and Facilities**

Though a number of participants expressed support for a large PK-6 school in one building, others (15) expressed concern about the capacity of the building to support a growing enrollment. One suggested that making middle school grades 6-8 (now grades 7-8, and part of Amity) would allow Beecher to reduce enrollment and give students a longer middle school experience. In most towns, a student population of the size of Beecher would be spread among two or three schools, with several more principals. The building, largely constructed in 1971, also has capital needs that will need to be addressed and funded.

### **Relations with Other Districts in Region**

A small number of participants (9) pointed to the district’s relation with Region 5 (Amity) as an area of challenge. Of those, some would like to see the role of superintendent merged. Others would like to see sharing of some central services. Some want to see communications with Region 5 improved, including coordination of curriculum and expectations. The new Amity Assistant Superintendent is taking steps to address the coordination issue.

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### Desired Expertise and Qualities in a New Superintendent

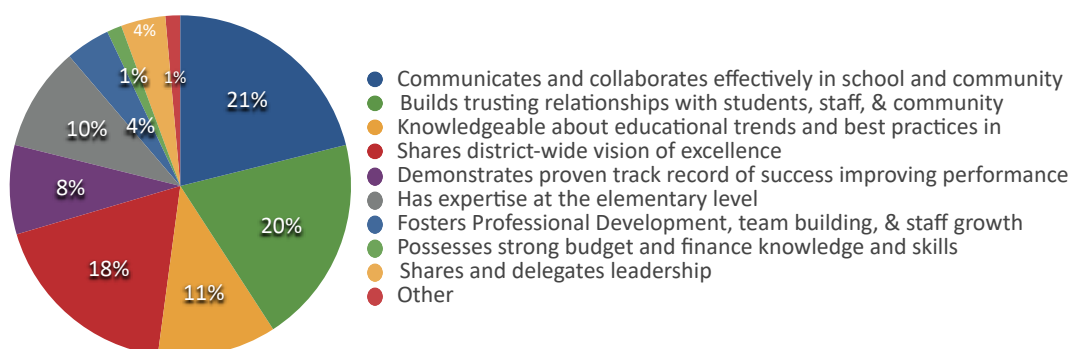
What would be the most important expertise and qualities in a new superintendent to tap the Woodbridge School District's strengths and meet their challenges? An analysis of survey responses yielded the following:

#### Expertise

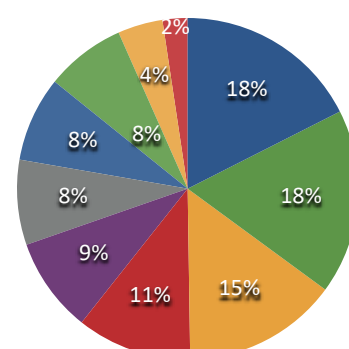
Survey respondents ranked four of the nine areas of **desired expertise** in a new superintendent significantly higher than the other skills. The **first choice** of participants was *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community* (21.1%), followed by *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* (19.7%). *Shares district-wide vision of excellence and innovative instruction* came in third, at 18.3%. If we look at respondents' **top three choices combined**, we see some shifts: *Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community* is now tied with *Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, and community* at (17.5%). Now in third place is *Knowledgeable about educational trends and innovative best practices in instruction* at 14.7%.

DESIRED EXPERTISE IN NEW SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Communicates and collaborates effectively in school and community	15	21.1%	12	17.1%	10	14.3%	37	17.5%
Builds trusting relationships with students, staff, & community	14	19.7%	13	18.6%	10	14.3%	37	17.5%
Knowledgeable about educational trends and innovative best practices in instruction	8	11.3%	17	24.3%	6	8.6%	31	14.7%
Shares district-wide vision of excellence	13	18.3%	3	4.3%	7	10.0%	23	10.9%
Demonstrates proven track record of success improving performance	6	8.5%	5	7.1%	8	11.4%	19	9.0%
Has expertise at the elementary level	7	9.9%	6	8.6%	4	5.7%	17	8.1%
Fosters Professional Development, team building, & staff growth	3	4.2%	6	8.6%	8	11.4%	17	8.1%
Possesses strong budget and finance knowledge and skills	1	1.4%	4	5.7%	11	15.7%	16	7.6%
Shares and delegates leadership	3	4.2%	4	5.7%	2	2.9%	9	4.3%
Other	1	1.4%	0	0.0%	4	5.7%	5	2.4%
Totals	71	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	211	100.0%

First Choice Expertise



Top Three Choices





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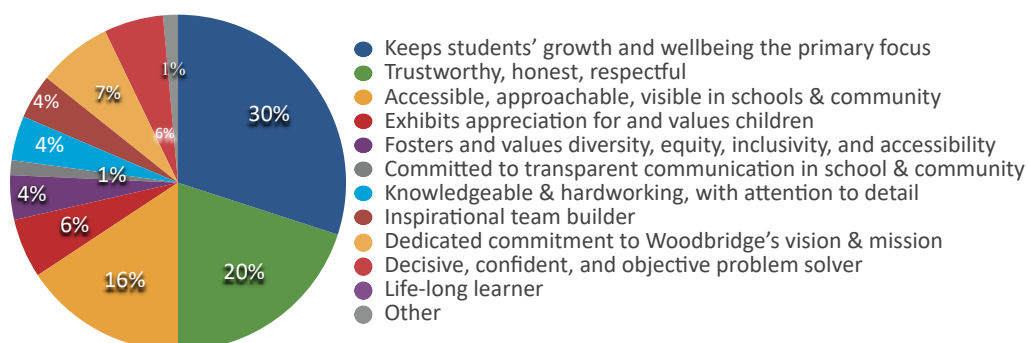
### Qualities

In addition to the leadership characteristics and expertise identified in the prior section, Woodbridge survey respondents reflected some clear preferences for **qualities** desired in a new leader. The top **first choices** respondents identified were *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* (30%), *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* (20%), and *Accessible, approachable, and visible in schools and community* (15.7%).

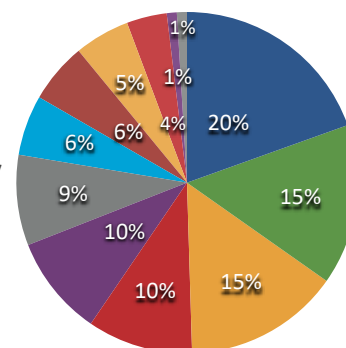
These areas lead in the "top three" category, as well. *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* accounts for 19.5% of the top three choices, with *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* in second place, at 15.2%. In third place, *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* now accounts for 14.8%.

DESIRED QUALITIES IN SUPERINTENDENT	#1	%	#2	%	#3	%	TOP 3	TOP 3
Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus	21	30.0%	14	20.0%	6	8.6%	41	19.5%
Trustworthy, honest, respectful	14	20.0%	7	10.0%	11	15.7%	32	15.2%
Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community	11	15.7%	12	17.1%	8	11.4%	31	14.8%
Exhibits appreciation for and values children	4	5.7%	7	10.0%	10	14.3%	21	10.0%
Fosters and values diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility	3	4.3%	8	11.4%	9	12.9%	20	9.5%
Committed to transparent communication in school and community	1	1.4%	9	12.9%	8	11.4%	18	8.6%
Knowledgeable & hardworking, with attention to detail	3	4.3%	4	5.7%	5	7.1%	12	5.7%
Inspirational team builder	3	4.3%	4	5.7%	5	7.1%	12	5.7%
Dedicated commitment to Woodbridge's vision & mission	5	7.1%	2	2.9%	4	5.7%	11	5.2%
Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver	4	5.7%	1	1.4%	3	4.3%	8	3.8%
Life-long learner	0	0.0%	1	1.4%	1	1.4%	2	1.0%
Other	1	1.4%	1	1.4%	0	0.0%	2	1.0%
Totals	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	210	100.0%

First Choice Qualities



Top Three Choices



Needless to say, all of these qualities and skills are essential in a leader, yet they point to the prioritized needs of the Woodbridge School District at this point in time. This profile will explore these areas of expertise and dimensions of leadership, integrating perspectives garnered through interviews, survey comments, and focus groups.

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

Woodbridge's successful superintendent will need to bring many skills and talents to the role. An excellent and honest communicator, the leader will work hard to learn about the school and community, valuing and committing to build on its past successes. This individual will seek first to understand, taking the time to listen very carefully to each individual, validating them and their perspectives.

The leader will be a warm, open presence with students, staff, parents, and the community communicating well while understanding and respecting the chain of command.

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

The new leader will have some healing work to do to regenerate a caring, affirming culture. The leader will appreciate what Beecher Road School has accomplished through the years and build upon that. The successful superintendent will be a team builder focused on collective problem-solving, tapping into the wisdom and experiences of the staff and parents. Kind, compassionate, and committed to wellbeing of children and staff, the leader will inspire confidence in staff that they are safe to stretch and innovate. Staff will be assured that they will be able to get through the challenges of the day.

The leader will have a high level of emotional intelligence and recognize emotions in others. This thoughtful leader will take responsibility for the well being of students, teachers, and administrators. That leadership and collaborative spirit will incline staff to stay at Beecher.

This individual will understand the importance of establishing appropriate boundaries, working with administrators to clarify decision-making lanes.

### ***Knowledgeable about educational trends and innovative best practices in instruction***

The successful leader will share the district's priorities, including a growth mindset, valuing the whole child, the arts, play, and physical education. Very helpful to the new leader will be experience in the PK-Grade 6 world or an ability to relate their experience to the challenges young students and families are facing today. In addition, knowledge of a learning spectrum from special needs to gifted and talented would be important. In addition, savvy about data collection and analysis to drive decision-making, and an understanding of educational technology will be important. In addition, the district would benefit from a leader with understanding of equitable educational practices.

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

The district's new leader will listen and learn first, then help the system to mold a clear vision. Open-minded, forward-looking and progressive, the new leader will understand how to develop a team to move toward a shared vision. The leader will work with the other schools in the region to determine the best interest of Woodbridge students as they move into the Amity district.

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

The new superintendent will have a great temperament with children, seeking to know students, their families, and teachers personally. All actions will be rooted in what's best for the students.

The leader will cultivate in staff a non-defensive, curious approach to students and families from all cultural backgrounds, seeking to ensure each child enjoys a sense of belonging and joy of learning.

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

Woodbridge will demand transparency and honesty from the superintendent. This individual will value, respect, and support all children, staff, and families, balancing needs with openness and integrity. The leader will engage others' wisdom, assuming all want what is best for students, and be willing to have hard conversations, providing follow-through and consistency in dealing with difficult issues.

The successful leader will be committed to speaking the truth in every exchange.

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

Finally, this patient, thoughtful, understanding leader will be very present and engage students, staff, and the community, seeking to understand them and their perspectives. Present at school and community functions where students are present, this highly relatable individual will lead with warmth and humanity.