

Upper Darby School District Final Report

Upper Darby School District {UDSD} Superintendent Leadership Qualities Survey & Focus Groups Data Analysis



Provided by Delaware County Intermediate Unit
November 19, 2018

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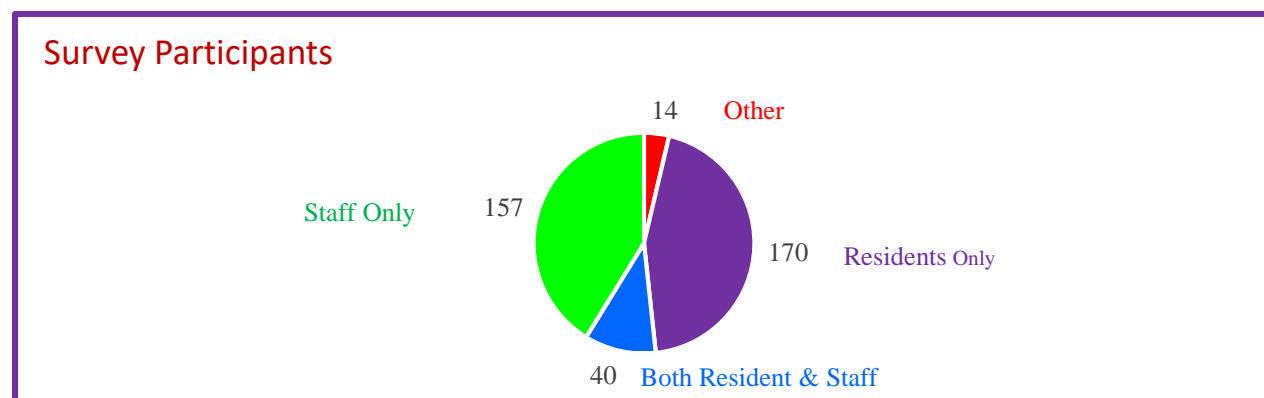
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Overview

The Delaware County Intermediate Unit, as the search consultant, conducted a survey and focus groups throughout the months of September and October 2018 with school administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and guardians, students, and the community at large. The goal of the process was to seek feedback from the stakeholders on the qualities needed for the next superintendent of the Upper Darby School District (UDSD). In addition, the input gathered from constituents of UDSD assists in shaping the development of a Leadership Profile for the next superintendent of schools.

Survey Overview

The purpose of the survey was to solicit feedback on the essential leadership competencies for the next superintendent of the UDSD. Community and staff were able to access the survey online. Copies of the survey document were available at each of the fourteen schools. In total, 383 individuals participated in the survey. The breakdown of the 383 participants are as follows:



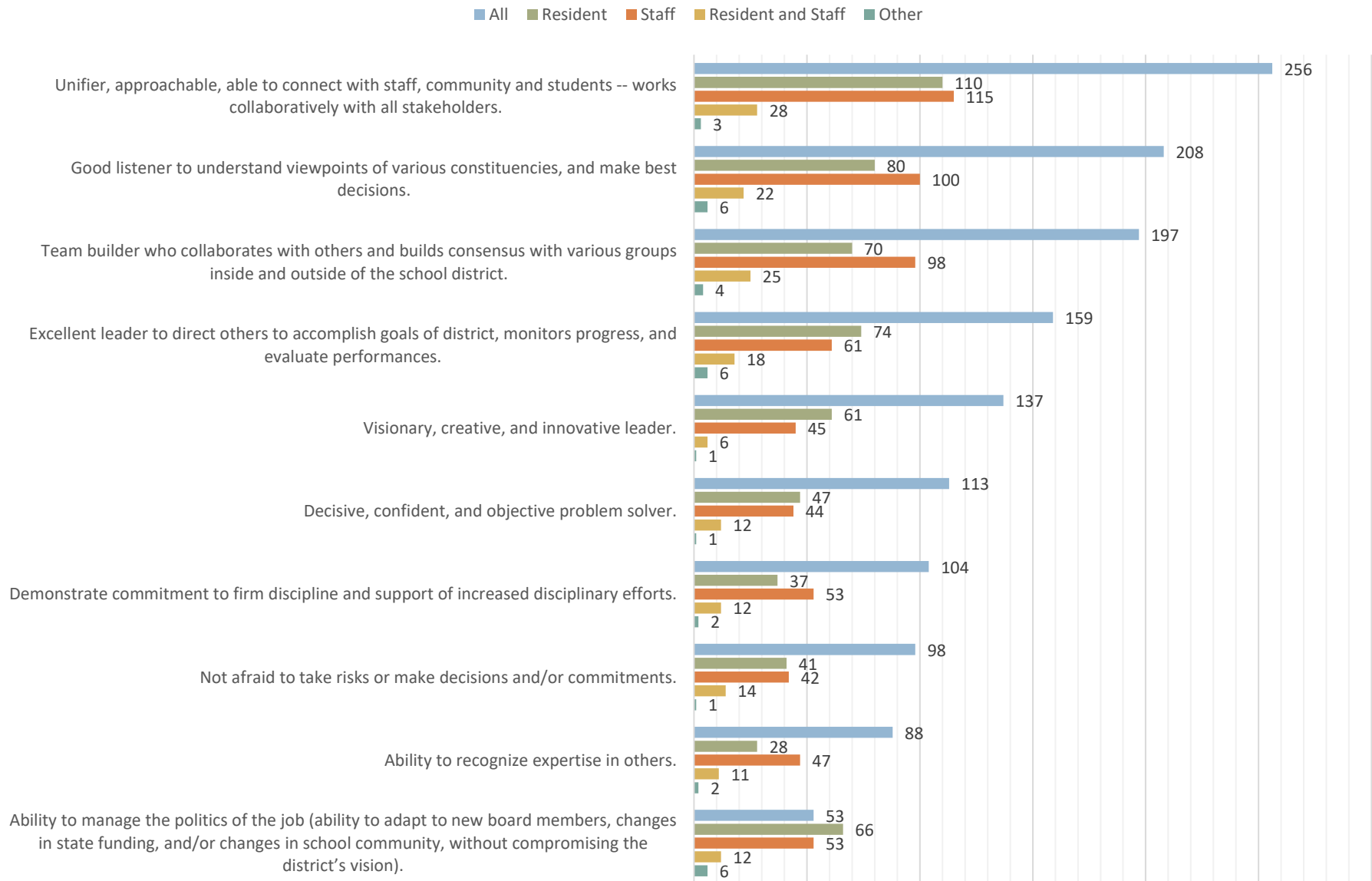
The survey consisted of six questions whereby a participant identified qualities from a potential list of options, and three questions were open-ended. The survey questions were:

1. What administrative leadership skills should our next superintendent possess?
2. What ethics and core values should our next superintendent possess?
3. What dimensions of district leadership and management should our next superintendent possess?
4. What dimensions of community of care and supports for students should our next superintendent possess?
5. What areas of financial management and operations are most important for our next superintendent?
6. What areas of expertise are most important for our next superintendent?
7. What do you consider to be the three (3) most significant strengths of the Upper Darby School District?
8. What do you consider to be the three (3) most important issues or challenges facing the Upper Darby School District?
9. Other comments.

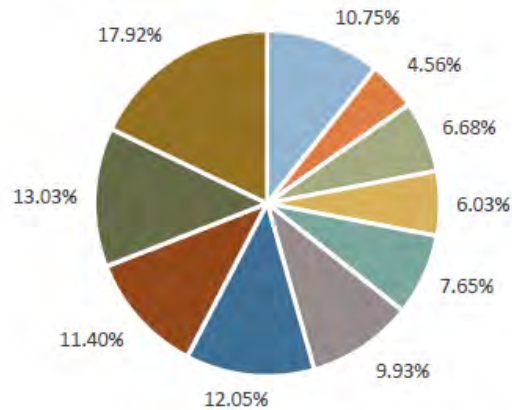
The survey results are presented on the following pages.

Question 1

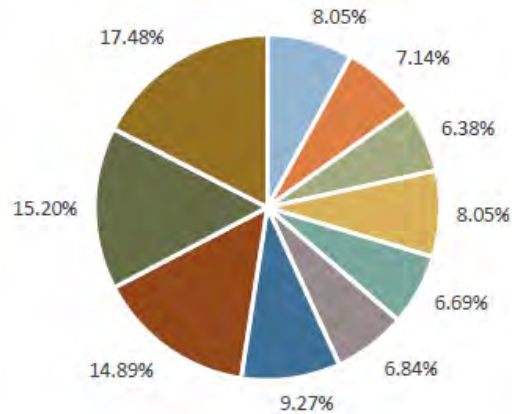
What administrative leadership skills should your next superintendent possess?



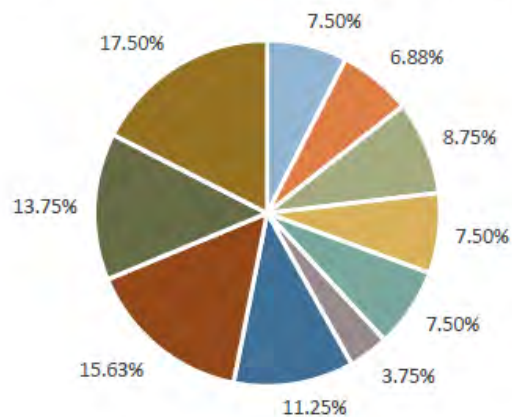
Resident Subgroup Responses



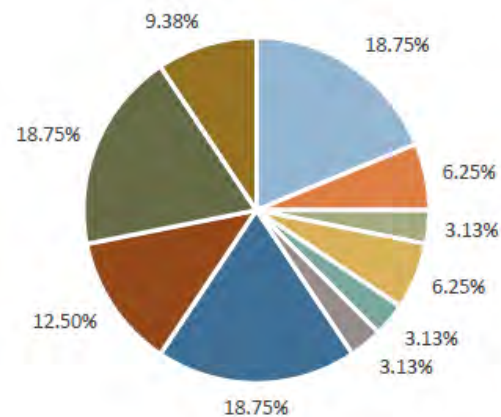
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses



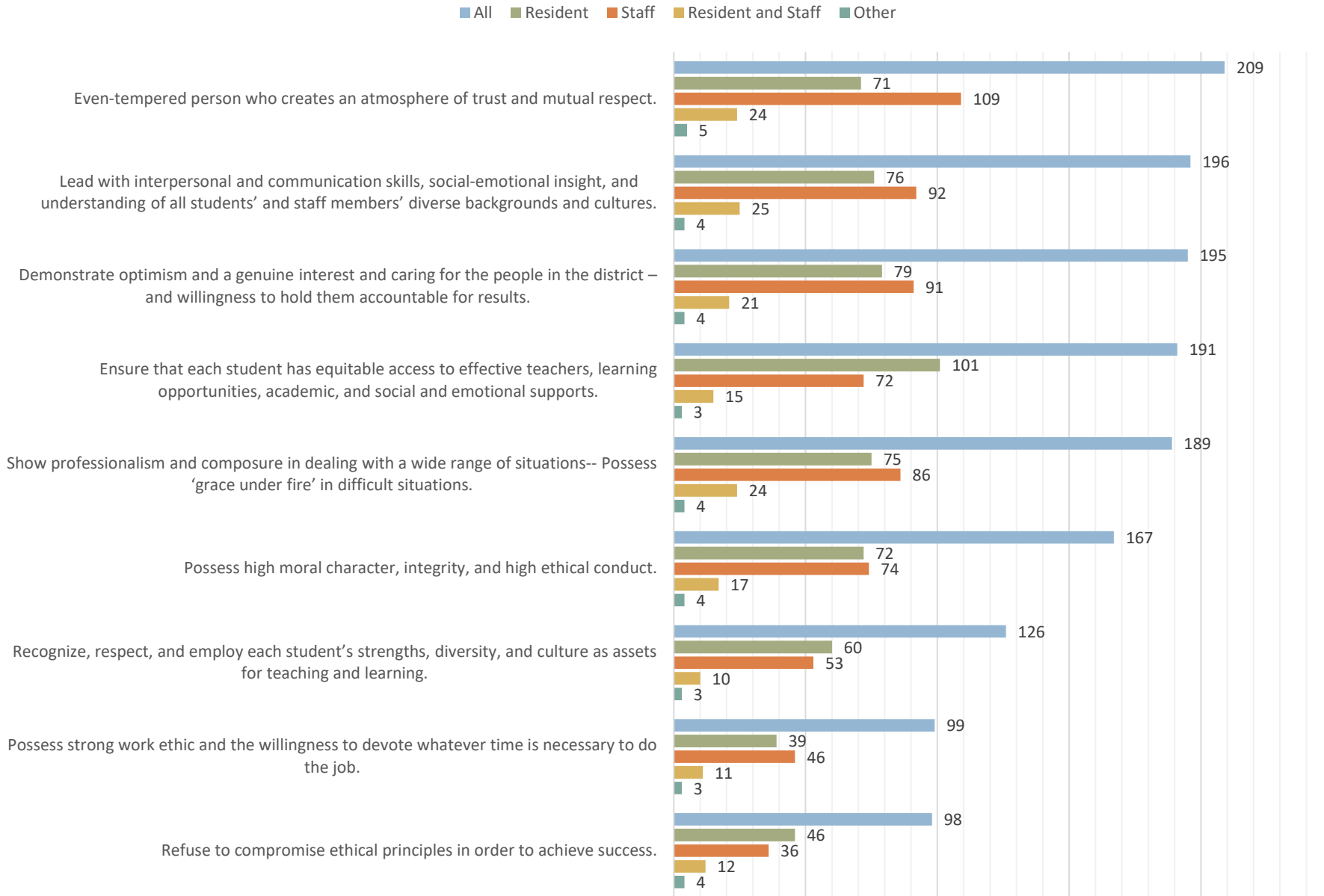
Other Subgroup Responses



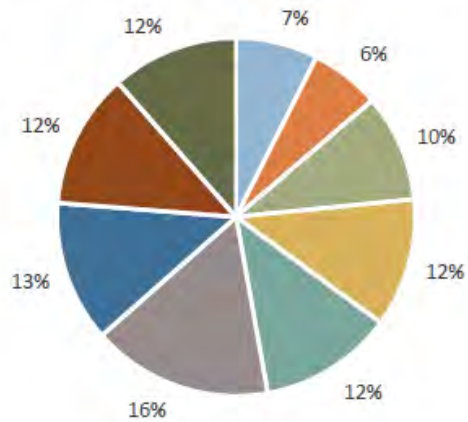
- Ability to manage the politics of the job (ability to adapt to new board members, changes in state funding, and/or changes in school community, without compromising the district's vision).
- Ability to recognize expertise in others.
- Not afraid to take risks or make decisions and/or commitments.
- Demonstrate commitment to firm discipline and support of increased disciplinary efforts.
- Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver.
- Visionary, creative, and innovative leader.
- Excellent leader to direct others to accomplish goals of district, monitors progress, and evaluate performances.
- Team builder who collaborates with others and builds consensus with various groups inside and outside of the school district.
- Good listener to understand viewpoints of various constituencies and make best decisions.
- Unifier, approachable, able to connect with staff, community and students – works collaboratively with all stakeholders.

Question 2

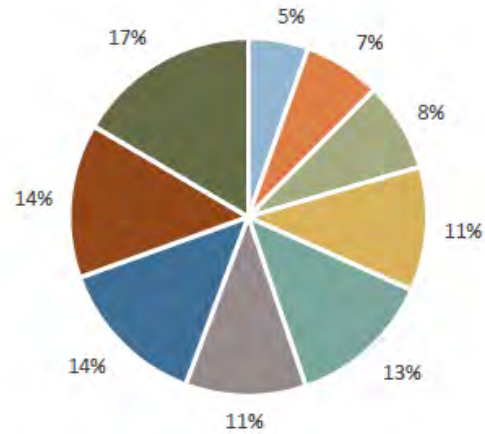
What ethics and core values should your next superintendent possess?



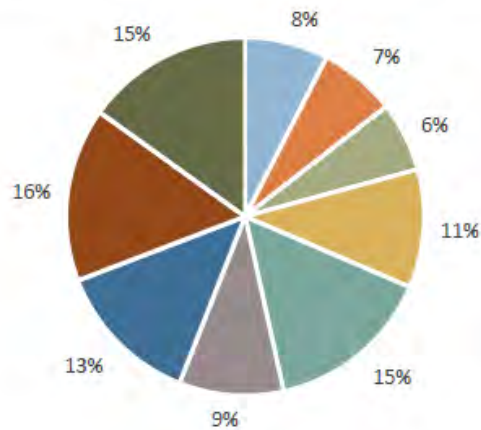
Resident Subgroup Responses



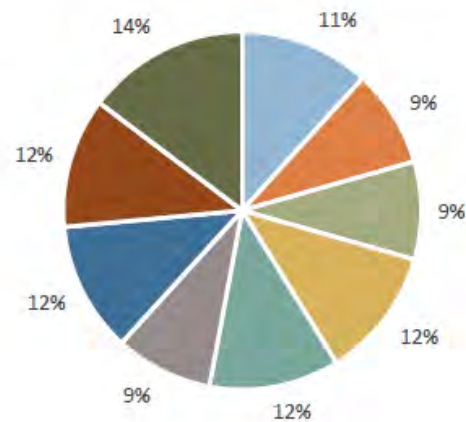
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses

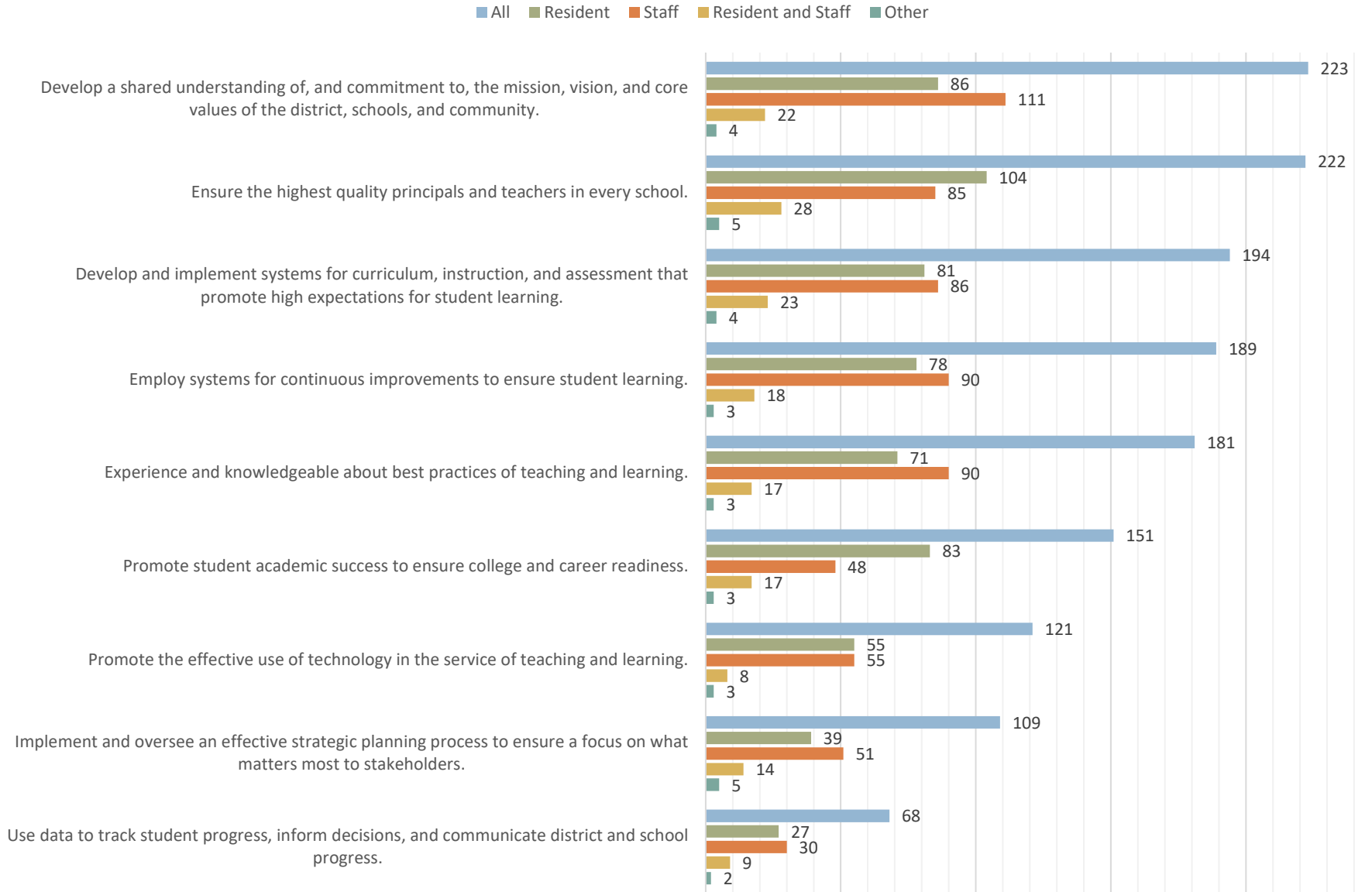


Other Subgroup Responses

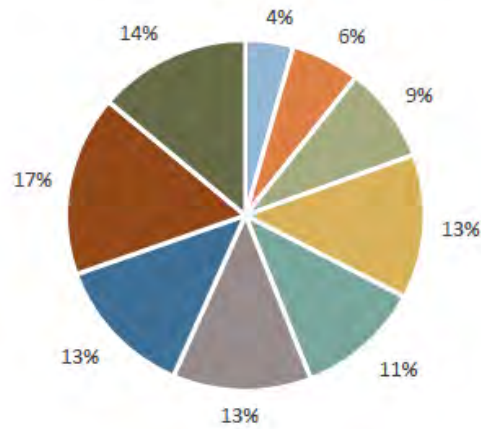


- Refuse to compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.
- Possess strong work ethic and the willingness to devote whatever time is necessary to do the job.
- Recognize, respect, and employ each student’s strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning.
- Possess high moral character, integrity, and high ethical conduct.
- Show professionalism and composure in dealing with a wide range of situations-- Possess ‘grace under fire’ in difficult situations.
- Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic, and social and emotional supports.
- Demonstrate optimism and a genuine interest and caring for the people in the district – and willingness to hold them accountable for results.
- Lead with interpersonal and communication skills, social-emotional insight, and understanding of all students’ and staff members’ diverse backgrounds and cultures.
- Even-tempered person who creates an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect.

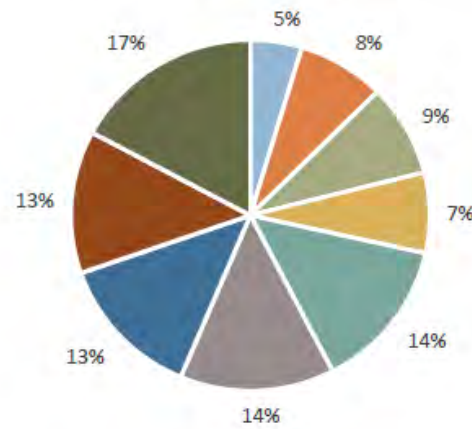
Question 3 What dimensions of district leadership and management should your next superintendent possess?



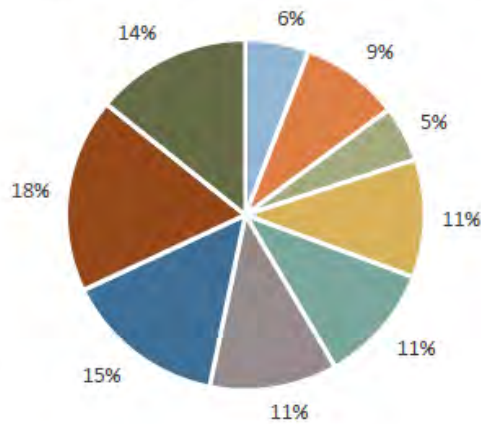
Resident Subgroup Responses



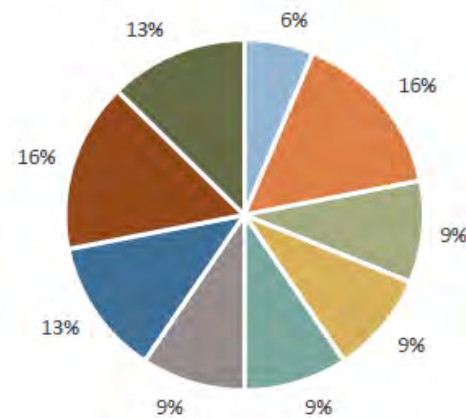
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses



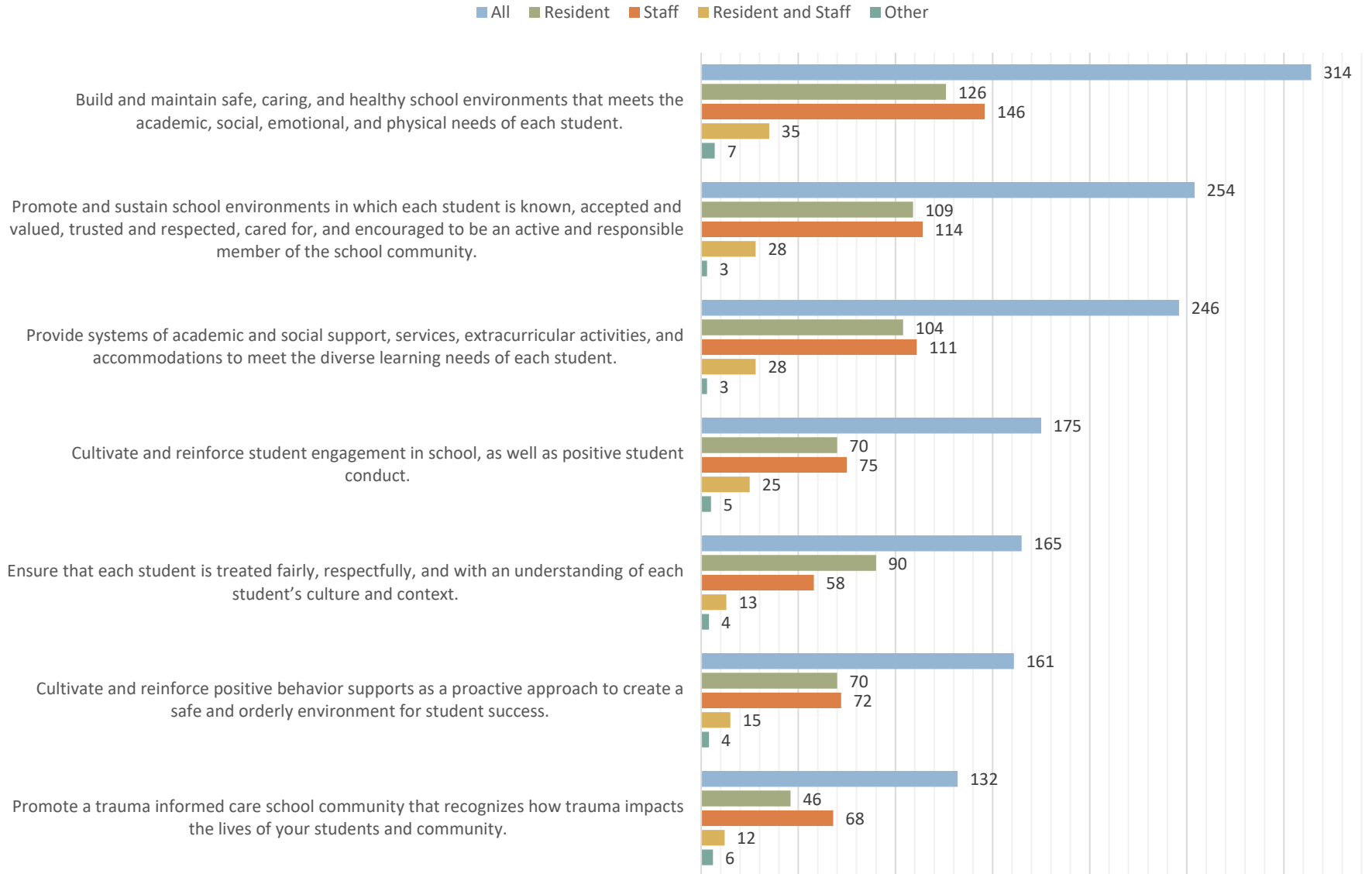
Other Subgroup Responses



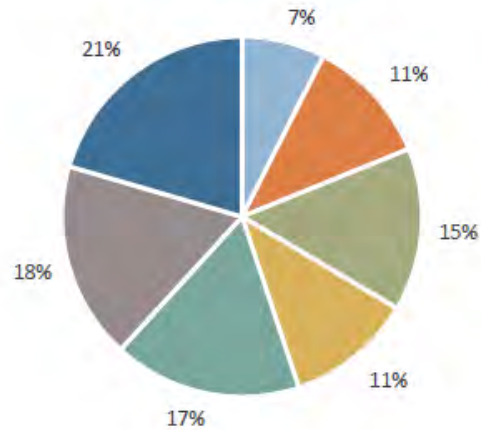
- Use data to track student progress, inform decisions, and communicate district and school progress.
- Implement and oversee an effective strategic planning process to ensure a focus on what matters most to stakeholders.
- Promote the effective use of technology in the service of teaching and learning.
- Promote student academic success to ensure college and career readiness.
- Experience and knowledgeable about best practices of teaching and learning.
- Employ systems for continuous improvements to ensure student learning.
- Develop and implement systems for curriculum, instruction, and assessment that promote high expectations for student learning.
- Ensure the highest quality principals and teachers in every school.
- Develop a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the mission, vision, and core values of the district, schools, and community.

Question 4

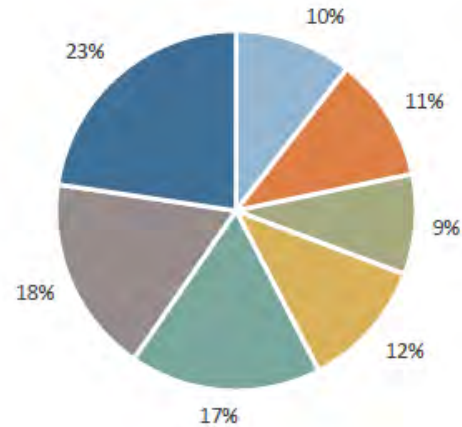
What dimensions of community of care and supports for students should your next superintendent possess?



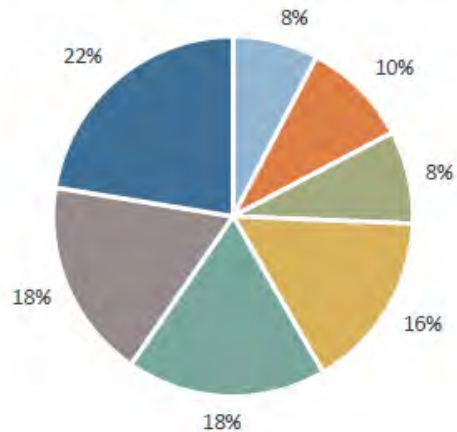
Resident Subgroup Responses



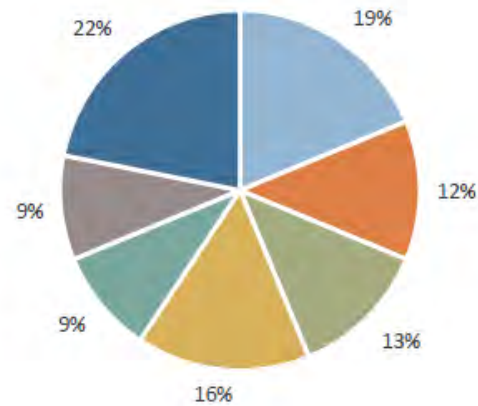
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses



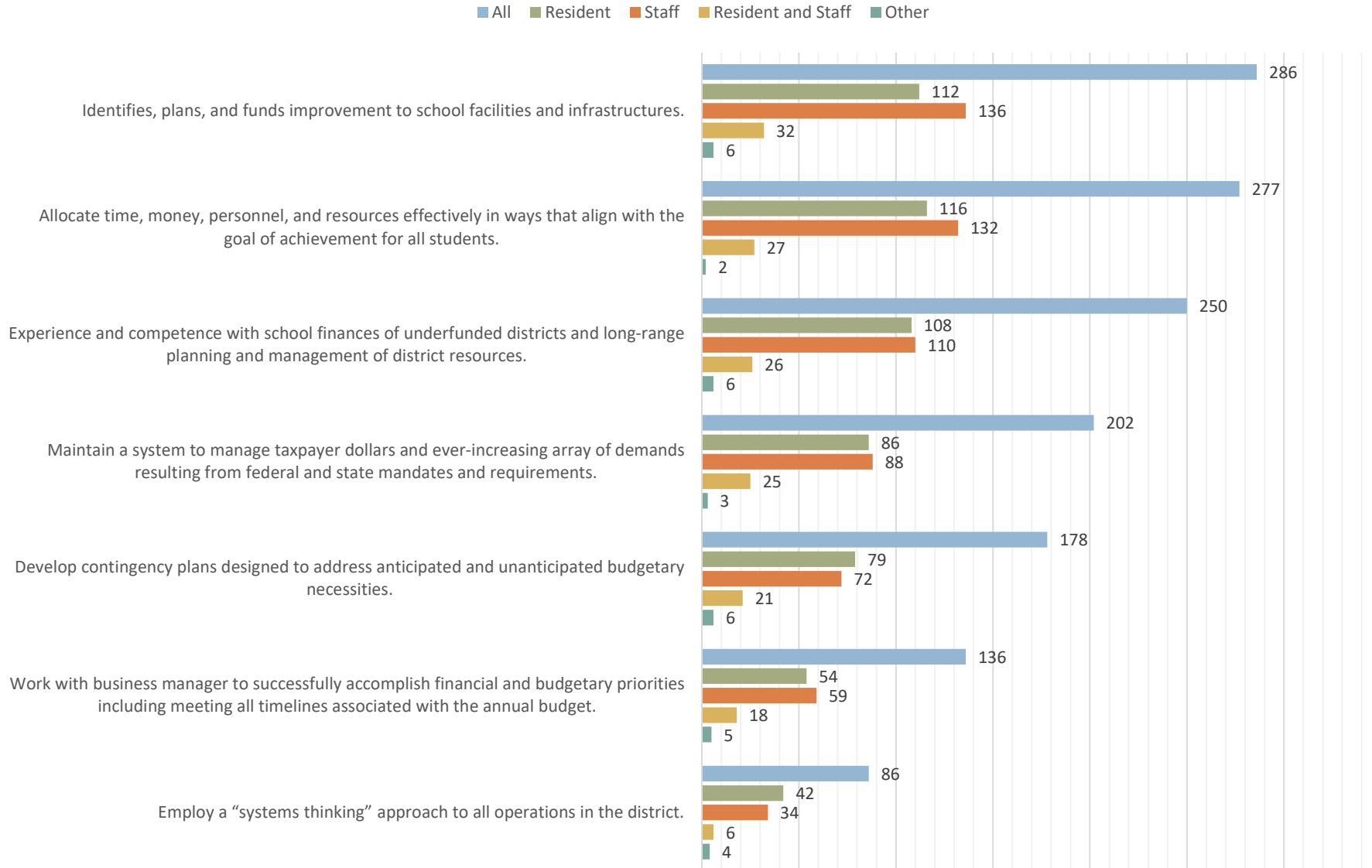
Other Subgroup Responses



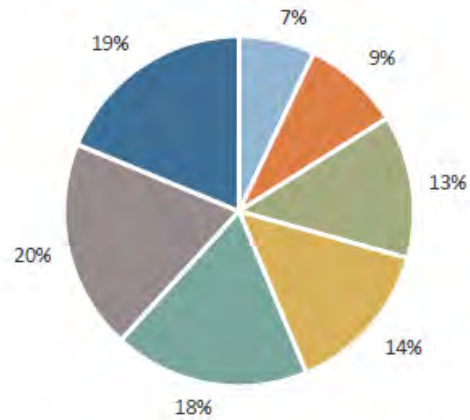
- Promote a trauma informed care school community that recognizes how trauma impacts the lives of your students and community.
- Cultivate and reinforce positive behavior supports as a proactive approach to create a safe and orderly environment for student success.
- Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student's culture and context.
- Cultivate and reinforce student engagement in school, as well as positive student conduct.
- Provide systems of academic and social support, services, extracurricular activities, and accommodations to meet the diverse learning needs of each student.
- Promote and sustain school environments in which each student is known, accepted and valued, trusted and respected, cared for, and encouraged to be an active and responsible member of the school community.
- Build and maintain safe, caring, and healthy school environments that meets the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of each student.

Question 5

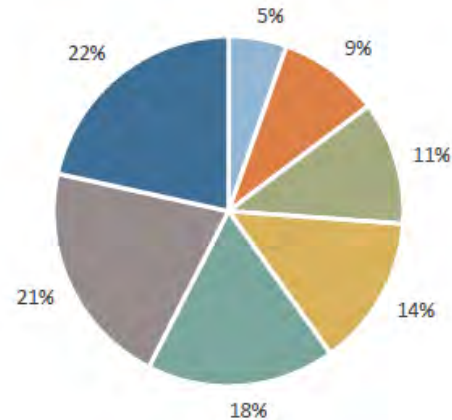
What areas of financial management and operations are most important for your next superintendent?



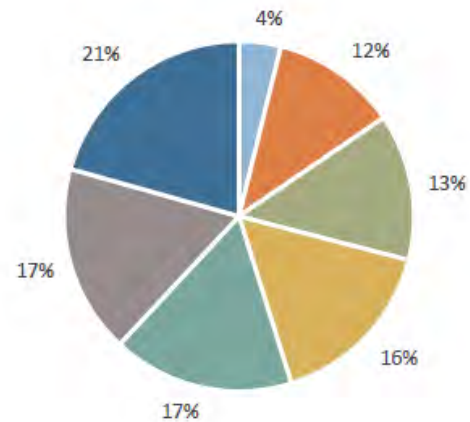
Resident Subgroup Responses



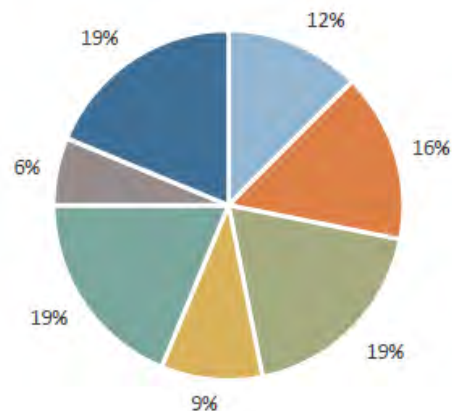
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses



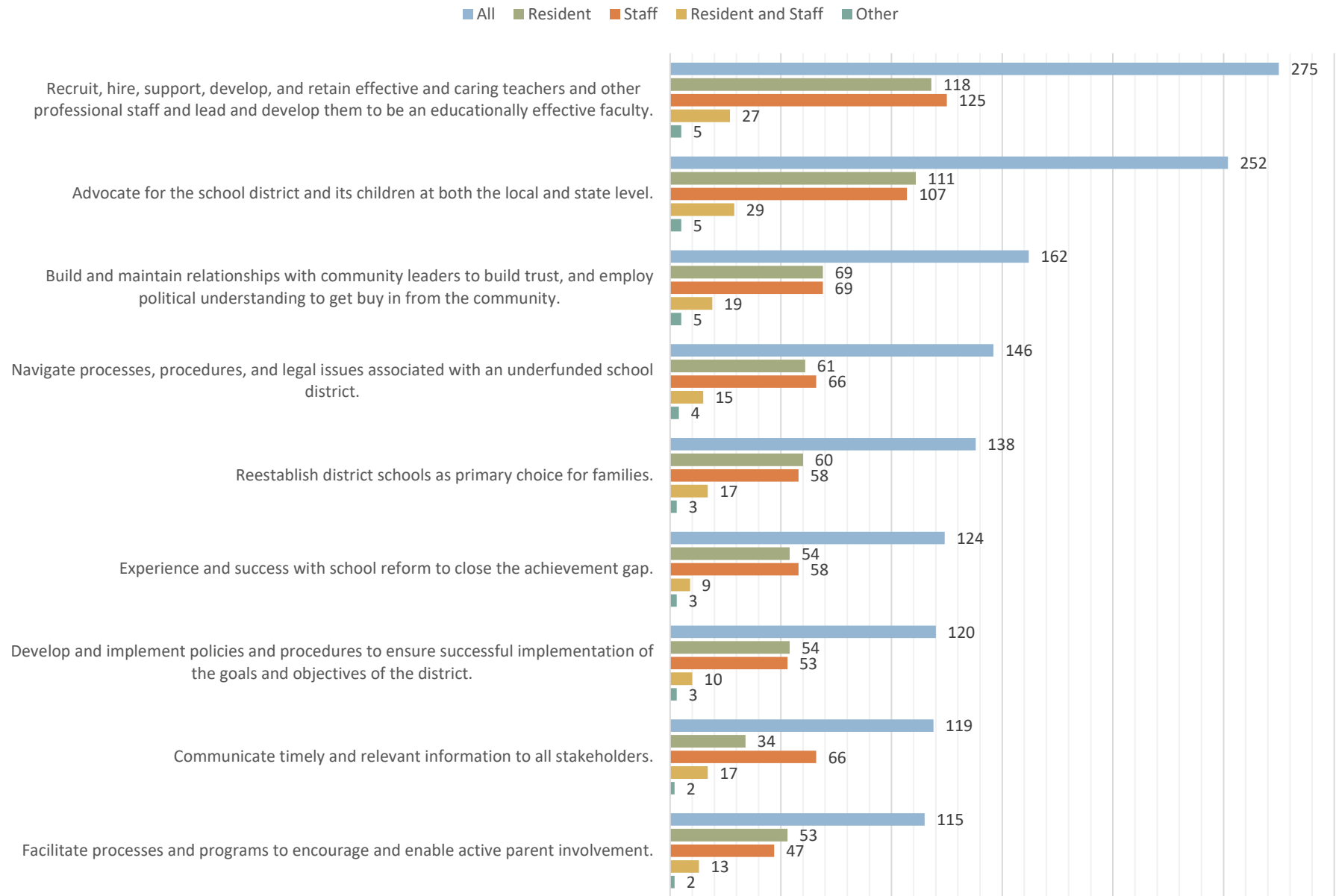
Other Subgroup Responses



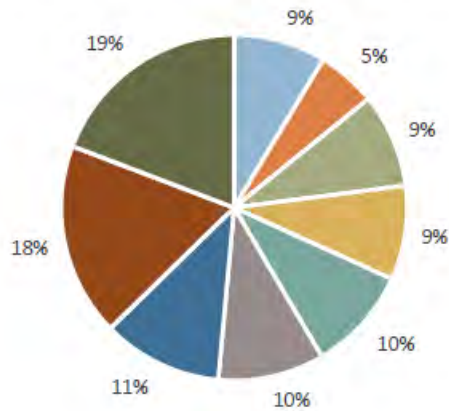
- Employ a “systems thinking” approach to all operations in the district.
- Work with business manager to successfully accomplish financial and budgetary priorities including meeting all timelines associated with the annual budget.
- Develop contingency plans designed to address anticipated and unanticipated budgetary necessities.
- Maintain a system to manage taxpayer dollars and ever-increasing array of demands resulting from federal and state mandates and requirements.
- Experience and competence with school finances of underfunded districts and long-range planning and management of district resources.
- Allocate time, money, personnel, and resources effectively in ways that align with the goal of achievement for all students.
- Identifies, plans, and funds improvement to school facilities and infrastructures.

Question 6

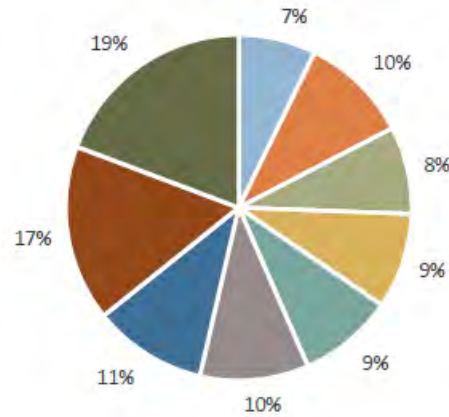
What areas of expertise are most important for your next superintendent?



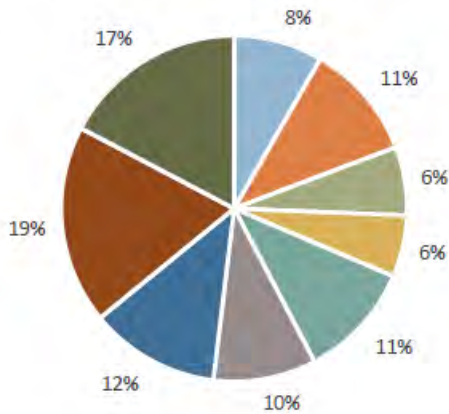
Resident Subgroup Responses



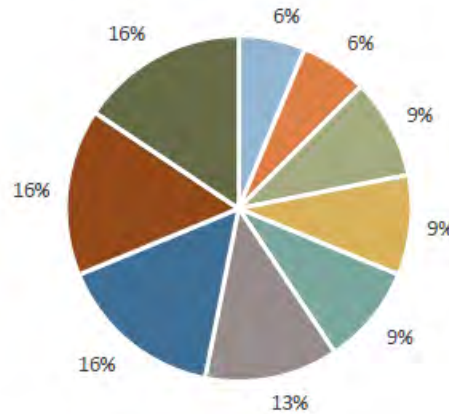
Staff Subgroup Responses



Resident and Staff Subgroup Responses



Other Subgroup Responses



- Facilitate processes and programs to encourage and enable active parent involvement.
- Communicate timely and relevant information to all stakeholders.
- Develop and implement policies and procedures to ensure successful implementation of the goals and objectives of the district.
- Experience and success with school reform to close the achievement gap.
- Reestablish district schools as primary choice for families.
- Navigate processes, procedures, and legal issues associated with an underfunded school district.
- Build and maintain relationships with community leaders to build trust, and employ political understanding to get buy in from the community.
- Advocate for the school district and its children at both the local and state level.
- Recruit, hire, support, develop, and retain effective and caring teachers and other professional staff and lead and develop them to be an educationally effective faculty.

Survey Open-ended Questions

Questions 7 through 9 provided the participant an opportunity to give his/her response to an open-ended prompt. The data are presented in themes compiled by the search consultant. The themes are presented in no particular order.

Question 7 explored the three most significant strengths of the Upper Darby School District. The top three themes reported were:

Theme One: The diversity of the student population, residents, staff, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and varied backgrounds and experiences of the community and neighborhoods.

Sample response comments:

- Our diversity is a great contribution to making the district one of the few, which represents the real world.
- With many differences, backgrounds, beliefs and views, we have the opportunity to use it to the advantage of all who will embrace it.
- A key strength is the diversity of our community.
- The cultural diversity of our community and the way we work and live together.
- Our rich blend of cultures.
- Diverse student population representing a wealth of different countries.
- Diversity is proven to improve outcomes in the workplace and the community.
- Arts program facilitates the understanding between cultures.
- Rich cultures of all our families.

Theme Two: The variety and rigor of curricular, support programs, and extracurricular offerings afforded to students enrolled in the school district.

Sample response comments:

- There were many comments commending the arts and music programs in the district as follows:
 - Excellent music program.
 - Our performing arts center.
 - Great arts programs.
 - Amazing music program.
 - Well known for our music and arts programs.
- Strong curriculum.
- Advanced Placement opportunities.
- Wide range of classes.
- Educational program allows students to emerge ready for college and careers.
- Our secondary guidance program supports postsecondary planning and personal goal setting for all students.
- Reading support services for elementary students.
- High quality education and opportunities available for students.
- Quality of the academic programs.
- Supports students with disabilities in inclusive settings.
- An array of supports for students with special education needs.
- Athletic programs.

- Many electives for students.
- Great extra activities involving parents, kids, and staffs of the district.

Theme Three: Talented and supportive staff who care about the students, families, and the school district.

Sample response comments:

- Hardworking and caring teachers, administrators, and support staff.
- Dedicated and caring teachers.
- Supportive and knowledgeable teachers.
- Teachers and principals are our strength.
- Great and dedicated educators.
- Good Board leadership.
- Caring and experienced leadership.

Question 8 explored the three most important issues or challenges facing the Upper Darby School District. The top four themes were (in no particular order):

Theme One: The need to develop and fund a plan to improve school facilities.

Sample response comments:

- Overcrowded schools.
- Updating the facilities and school safety.
- Conditions and poor quality of school buildings and the lack of space in the schools.
- Improving facilities to keep with the current times.
- Not enough room for our students; poor conditions of our schools.
- Old playgrounds and athletic fields.
- All school bathrooms need to be updated.
- Deteriorating and uncleanliness conditions of the buildings and classrooms.
- Lack of new infrastructure to more impoverished schools in district.

Theme Two: The need to create safe and orderly school environments.

Sample response comments:

- Safety and the learning environment.
- Establish a culture that promotes emotional safety based on shared vulnerability.
- Improving security.
- Safety of students on buses and around the school.
- Keeping children engaged and actively participating in school and after school events.
- Reputation of schools: Stop the focus in our community on the negative press – for every negative story there should be three positive stories.
- Lack of support for students with severe emotional needs resulting in safety issues for staff and other students.
- Behavior problems and lack of resources to deal with them.

Theme Three: The need to recruit, hire, and retain highly qualified staffs for the district.

Sample response comments:

- Need to retain good teachers.

- Have staff that are as culturally diverse as our student population.
- Staff feeling overworked and underpaid.
- Make the staff feel appreciated.
- Teacher turnover and loss of positions.
- Retaining of excellent teaching and administrative staff we do have.
- Losing high quality teachers.
- Teacher shortage and how to retain teaching staff.
- Principal turnover nearly every year, making continuity nearly impossible.

Theme Four: The need for additional funding streams, equitable spending district-wide, and advocacy to support additional revenue and funding for UDSD.

Sample response comments:

- UDSD faces underfunding of schools.
- Class sizes too large.
- New funding sources needed.
- Inequitable distribution of resources between schools.
- No money to implement state and federal mandates.
- Limited funds for an overpopulated district.
- Underfunding at the state level.
- Schools are understaffed.
- Challenging the state's unfunded mandates and testing.
- Financial constraints are the most important issue – it overshadows anything in the district.
- Upper Darby taxes are frequently raised, yet there does not seem to be more resources within the schools to enhance the instruction we are able to provide.
- Class sizes are increasing each year after year, yet schools are not hiring more teachers and supports to handle these increases.
- Keeping taxes down.
- The current funding formula works against UDSD in almost every way. UDSD is largely residential which puts a tremendous tax burden on people who live in the district.

In addition to common themes, there were additional data that are important to communicate. There were multiple comments made that students are attending the UDSD from outside of the district. Comments were centered on how this increases the fiscal challenges to the school district and residents want to know what is the district doing to deal with this perceived issue. Further, comments centered on improving the reputation of the UDSD. Responses focused on negative press and perceptions of district. Responses also included that there are many celebrations and positives of school district that should be celebrated through good public relations. As one put it, there is a “lack of faith in how good this school district is; we need a champion who believes in our strengths but acknowledges challenges”.




Question 9 provided participants an opportunity to share other comments that may not have been addressed in the survey. Participants expressed the same themes as stated in questions 7 and 8. In addition, comments included pride in the school district. Further, there is a need to promote the

many positives the district has to offer while helping to provide solutions for the challenges. There is a desire for the next superintendent to be there for the “long haul”.

Focus Group Overview

Focus groups were conducted throughout the month of October 2018 with school administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and the community at large. A total of nine focus groups were held.

The purpose of the Focus Group Discussions was to:

-  Explore the strengths and challenges of the Upper Darby School District;
-  Review key issues to be addressed over the next year and beyond; and
-  Determine the critical skills required of the next superintendent.

Listening to the opinions of stakeholders provided a wealth of information and insight. At each focus group, participants were asked to respond to five prompts:

1. What is important for a new superintendent to know and understand about the Upper Darby School District and community?
2. What do you see as the three greatest challenges of the UDSD?
3. What are the three essential skills or characteristics that a superintendent must have to be successful in UDSD?
4. What do you see as the first step a new superintendent needs to take in order to lead our school district?
5. What additional information would you like to communicate to the next superintendent to best prepare him/her in this critical role?


The same prompts were asked of each focus group (administrators, professional staff, support staff, parents, guardians, students, and five community groups). The data from the focus groups and survey are being used for the development of a Leadership Profile, representative of the qualities and skills identified as being necessary for the next superintendent.

Focus Group Summaries

The data from these sessions are reported as common themes across all stakeholders, and additional feedback that was important to communicate.

Important for a New Superintendent to Know about the Upper Darby School District & Community

The first area explored was *what is important for a new superintendent to know and understand about the Upper Darby School District and community?* Overall, amongst all stakeholders, several key issues emerged. The superintendent needs to:

-  Embrace the size and diversity of the UDSD. Celebrate, recognize, and welcome the great strength diversity brings to the district. Understand the community is made up of many cultures and ethnicities and has over 50 languages spoken. The district has a range

of socio-economics from wealth to poverty within its boundaries. Part of the community comprises a transient population.

- ✚ Understand the political landscape and the history of the UDSD and its impact on the district and the community.
- ✚ Celebrate the community pride that exists and recognize the many strengths of Upper Darby even though there are challenges.
- ✚ Be a good communicator and listener and be visible within the community and schools.
- ✚ Be a good leader of a strong team and be able to delegate. The district is very large and it is not possible for the superintendent to do it all. He/she needs to empower the leadership team to support and lead the work of the district while keeping a pulse on what is accomplished and assist in problem-solving as necessary to keep the district moving towards its vision.
- ✚ Tackle the many facilities issues from overcrowding to outdated facilities, playgrounds, and athletic fields. Try to preserve the architecture in some of the buildings, as it is spectacular. Be able to address redistricting if necessary.
- ✚ Need to address the hiring and retaining of high quality teachers, administrators, and support staffs.
- ✚ Recognize the fiscal challenges and the underfunding of the district at the federal and state levels. Need to be creative in generating dollars for the school district. Understand the impact higher school taxes has on the community.
- ✚ Be committed to UDSD for the long term. Community and staff want a superintendent who will lead the district for many years.

In addition to common themes, there were additional data from various stakeholder groups that are important to communicate.

The superintendent needs to have a good foundation and knowledge of curriculum and instruction and social and emotional learning. It is important to value academics, the performing arts, extracurricular activities, and varied course offering and the impact these have on students. Furthermore, there needs to be an understanding that our children come from varied backgrounds and some children need supports for emotional issues.

Recognize the school district is both urban and suburban.

The superintendent needs to address safety in schools including prevention and consequences or accountability for behaviors of students.

The district seems to lag behind with technology and technological advances due to financial constraints.

There are many wonderful things to celebrate about the UDSD, but there is a perception issue as well that casts a negative light. It seems the negative things that occur in the district get publicized rather than all of the good.

Greatest Challenges Faced by the Upper Darby School District

The second prompt explored feedback on stakeholders' thoughts on *what do you see as the three greatest challenges that we face as a school district?* Overall, amongst all stakeholders, three challenges were discussed at each of the focus groups. They were:

- ✚ The financial struggles of federal and state underfunding while also experiencing a high rate of school property taxing. The superintendent will need to be an advocate for increased funding but will also need to explore supplemental financial resources to support district programs and possibility for building projects.
- ✚ Personnel challenges and the need to recruit and retain high quality teachers, administrators, and staffs. Comments were made by parents, staff, and students there seems to be a high rate of turnover at the district. Community would like the teaching staff to reflect the diversity in the community.
- ✚ Overcrowding of buildings and classrooms and the need for updated facilities. The district needs a comprehensive facilities plan to address the issues to ensure all communities are treated equitable.

In addition to common themes, there was additional data from various stakeholder groups that is important to communicate.

Parents and the community expressed the UDSD must prepare students both academically and socially and to graduate with the necessary skills to further their education or enter the world of work.

Staff expressed a need for improved culture and climate of schools and would like additional supports. Staff believe there are discipline issues at schools that need focus.

Staff expressed the need for improved morale amongst the facility. Staff want to feel valued and respected.

Parents and community expressed all students should have access to a rigorous curriculum.

Parents were passionate for arts and music programs at UDSD. These programs must be celebrated and should not be eliminated.

The district needs to address the issue and/or perception that students are attending the UDSD who are not residents in the district.

Although diversity is a key strength of the district, there is a perception that challenges are also associated with a district that is so diverse. The district needs to address educational issues associated with poverty, high rates of English Language Learner, and increasing needs of students presenting with backgrounds of trauma.

There seems to be a unilateral perception that the negative stories of the district get publicized and the many wonderful offerings at the district and good new stories take a back seat.

Essential Skills and Characteristics of Successful Superintendent


The third prompt explored the *essential skills or characteristics that a superintendent must have to be successful in UDSD*. Across all focus groups, there were common responses. Focus groups communicated that the new superintendent needs to have the following characteristics and skills:

- *Leadership* – set vision, change agent and manages change, good manager, good people skills, collaborator, builds trust, team builder, decision maker, big picture but detailed oriented, risk taker, strategic, can identify talent, supportive of administrators and teachers, and ability to stay focused.
- *Community Commitment* – visibility, actively engages in community partnerships, understands community history, can work with all segments of the community, able to develop relationships with staff, parents, community, Pennsylvania Department of Education, and businesses.
- *Experience* – knowledgeable about education and best practices in a large urban/suburban district, knows about students and their needs, familiar with curriculum/instruction/assessment, student focused with a passion for children, and experience managing a district of this size.
- *Political Savviness* – understands the politics of Upper Darby and can work well with the community, community leaders, legislators, school board of directors, and staff. It is essential the superintendent understands the history of the district.
- *Communication Skills*– a good and active listener, encourages dialogue, discussion and transparency, and keeps all stakeholders informed.
- *Visionary* – forward thinking, innovative, creative, and will be accountable.
- *Personable* – approachable, moral and ethical, thick skinned, motivator, good listener, persistence, thoughtful, humble, can balance, and stands up for beliefs and UDSD children.
- *Patience and Understanding*- it is going to take time to move any initiative forward.
- *Problem Solver*- synthesizer of information to create solutions to achieve outcomes desired.
- *Decision Maker*- able to make the hard choices.
- *Commitment*- devoted to district, steadfast in commitment of continuous improvement, and longevity with the district.

Additionally, the next superintendent needs to have keen emotional intelligence, be firm but fair, fearless, highly ethical, and a courageous leader. He or she needs to understand how to promote the positive image of district and improve public relations.

First Steps Superintendent Needs to Take to Lead District

The fourth prompt explored *what does one see as the first step a new superintendent needs to take to lead our school district*. The themes were the same among all stakeholders. They were:

-  The new superintendent should get to know all aspects of the district by conducting needs assessments and hearing from the community (hosting listening sessions, getting out into the community, forming his/her own opinions), and then developing a plan that engages all stakeholders.

- ✦ The superintendent needs to create a shared vision with stakeholder involvement that will guide the work of the district.
- ✦ The superintendent needs to be visible.
- ✦ The superintendent needs to understand the facilities challenges of the district and develop a comprehensive facilities plan.
- ✦ The superintendent needs to develop a plan to recruit and retain quality teachers, administrators, and support staffs.
- ✦ The superintendent should review and evaluate curriculum and course offerings to ensure rigor and access to all students regardless of needs.
- ✦ The superintendent needs to establish working relationships within the school community and with key stakeholders, community, and the school board.

Communications to Prepare Superintendent for this Critical Role

The final prompt of the focus groups asked for *additional information one would like to communicate to the next superintendent to best prepare him/her in this critical role*. The various stakeholders provided the following:

- ✦ All stakeholders want the next superintendent to be committed to the district and stay with the district for years to accomplish the goals set forth and to strengthen the district's ability to provide high quality education for all students.
- ✦ Parents, students, and staff value and have great pride in the performing arts programs offered at UDSD.
- ✦ This position is a big job – need to hit the ground running and work hard. It will not be easy but can be very rewarding.
- ✦ There is a strong sense of community. Parents will be an asset and advocate for the superintendent if he or she values their voice, is honest, and transparent.

Conclusion

All stakeholders recognize, understand, and appreciate the strengths and challenges of the district. There is real pride amongst the community and staff of the value the UDSD provides to students and the community at large. There are great things occurring within the district, which need to be communicated and celebrated publically. The next superintendent needs to be a strong advocate for what your children and community need from a school district.