

## **School District of Beloit**

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

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#### **Background**

For the purpose of the Superintendent Search process, focus groups and interviews were held on November 17-20, 2020. The purpose of the focus groups and interviews was to assist in developing a collective Superintendent profile and to identify key assets of the district and the community for the recruitment of candidates for the position.

The process involved interviewing groups and, in some cases, individuals. Eighteen opportunities for input were provided. In all cases, the following questions were asked:

- What is unique or special about the School District of Beloit?
- What are the challenges facing the district?
- If you could improve one thing about the district, what would that be?
- What key changes might the district/community face over the next five years?
- What strengths and skills should the next Superintendent possess?
- What are the short-term (one year) expectations and long-term (three years) expectations for the new Superintendent?
- What are the selling points of the school district and the community?
- What advice would you give the new Superintendent?
- Do you have other comments you would like to share?

The following summary is provided from the focus groups and interviews. The report follows the questions that were asked during this process for stakeholder input.

#### **Summary Report**

The School District of Beloit and the greater community were identified as unique and very special places. Highlighted was the fact that Beloit is a very diverse, relatively small interconnected city with many urban assets and a strong sense of community. A family metaphor was used a number of times to describe this uniqueness.

The very positive aspects of community and school district diversity were mentioned repeatedly. The staff of the district have been described as uncompromisingly committed to the children and to their work. Numerous child-centered programs exist in the school district and there are many community partnerships that have been established in service of the children.

School facilities and the opportunities they provide have been described positively. The size of the district was mentioned as being unique in that it was felt that the work on behalf of children is scalable in a district of Beloit's size.

Clear challenges were identified by participants. Overall, there exists the view that inconsistent executive level leadership in the district has created numerous problems and challenges. This inconsistency is perceived to have led to communications problems with a lack of clear expectations and a consistent vision for the district. Related to this, there also exists a need to rebuild trust and to heal and to rebuild confidence.

An additional challenge lies in the area of ensuring a focus on equity within the district. Within the area of equity, there exists a call for a greater focus on opportunity gaps and what the district will do to address these gaps. A clear set of strategies for improving achievement and student behavior was also called for.

The new charter school was also identified as a key challenge as it relates to the potential additional loss of students and state aid. Called for was a need to develop strategies to improve student achievement as a key means to retain families in the district. Also emphasized was the need for the Superintendent and overall leadership in the district to be unapologetic in their advocacy for the children and the school district.

The loss of staff of color was mentioned as a key challenge with the need to have specific strategies for the recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce. Relative to the diversity within the district, the need for a sustainable staff training programs to develop cultural competency was emphasized.

The need for the Board to more unified and less divisive was also highlighted as a challenge as was the need for the Board and Superintendent to work well with each other. As part of this collaborative work, the need for a revised Strategic Plan was highlighted.

Identified areas for improvement include the following:

- Ensuring student learning and student achievement as the main focus within the district.
- Trust building work with staff.
- A revised Strategic Plan.
- A plan to address enrollment loss.
- Ensuring transparency in leadership.
- A plan with consistent implementation to address cultural competency and implicit bias.

- Strategies to recruit and retain a diverse workforce.
- Improving communication between the district administration and the schools.

An additional area of focus was on the key changes that might occur in the district and community over the next five years. Highlighted here was the new charter school and the need to be clear advocates for the district and its children as this school is being implemented, especially as it relates to the loss of student enrollment and its impact on funding. As part of this, a more defined focus on the improvement of student learning and achievement is viewed to be helpful in to further stall the loss of students. Also mentioned was to increase the focus of the district on equity work. The recruitment and retention of staff of color was discussed as part of this work.

Highlighted a number of times was the needs the pandemic have created and the related need to support children and families and staff. It is also viewed that this is creating opportunities to learn about and implement new digital learning opportunities that could continue post-pandemic. The newer population of Latino families and children was also identified as a key change the district will need to continue to be respond to.

The need for a contemporary strategic plan was noted. While there are a number of partnerships in the district, also shared was the need for more explicit partnerships aimed at specific needs such as in the area of safe and accessible transportation.

A critical need as part of this process was to identify strengths and skills the next Superintendent should possess. Numerous leadership themes were identified through this process and they include:

- A leader who is good communicator especially with listening skills.
- A leader who is collaborative.
- A leader with good interpersonal skills and who is personable, approachable and knows how to establish relationships supportive of the work.
- A leader who creates an improvement agenda with people.
- A leader who is culturally competent and very interested in cultural diversity with the courage to have equity-related conversations, including not being uncomfortable with these conversations.
- A leader who is strong yet livable.
- A leader who is able to focus on community building.
- A leader with experience.
- A leader with integrity and honesty.
- A leader who works with people to establish a vision and mission for the school district.
- A leader who serves as a community leader.
- A leader who is empathic.
- A leader who has a mindset of continuous improvement.

- A leader who is a supporter of staff.

Another area of focus was on short-term (one year) and longer-term (three year) expectations for the new Superintendent. For the first year, key themes include the need to listen and learn about the district and community and to develop and build back the right types of relationships that will allow the superintendent to focus on key improvements for the students. Trust building was felt to be critical as was not making big changes in the first year.

It is felt important that the Superintendent get to know building leaders and to know her/his directors. Specific to this area, is the need to focus on the relationship between district leaders and school leaders. An additional key theme was stabilizing the district in the first year allowing defined changes to occur when this is accomplished. Also felt critically important was to address pandemic-related needs and the fall-out from the pandemic. Another identified theme was the need to be transparent in the leadership of the superintendent. Several inputs also centered on the need to develop a plan in response to the new charter school's opening while being a steadfast advocate for the district. The number and quality of partnerships with the district was also emphasized.

Some felt it was important to develop the strategic plan in the first year with others feeling it was a longer-term objective.

For the longer term, key expectations include the idea of growing the district back and attracting new families and children. A key theme for longer-term expectations include a strong focus on learning improvements. It is also hoped that the Superintendent has engaged the community and can stand with confidence as priorities are worked on.

Overall, the sense was the first couple of years need to be well balanced with learning about the district and community and taking action.

Key selling points for the district and community include a very positive perception about the district's and community's diversity and a mixing of different perspectives. There exists a view that the community is very giving, tight knit with a small-town feel. The proximity to large cities was also mentioned as an asset. Community assets such as the revitalized downtown were identified as positive.

Within the district, staff commitment to the children was identified as a selling point as were programs like dual language immersion, Advanced Placement courses, and vocational educational programs. Also highlighted was the community's resiliency and ability to rebound and rise to challenges. Key to the work of the Superintendent is a view that there exists great opportunity to make a difference for the children of the community.

In terms of advice people would give to the new superintendent, it is felt very important that the Superintendent listen to stakeholders before initiating changes. The following were additionally mentioned:

- Focus on connecting with people and building relationships.
- Be open and transparent.
- Be visible.
- Avoid being pulled by different community factions.
- Have the courage to do the right things for students.
- Demonstrate empathy.
- Keeping an open mind.
- Be prepared for negative comments.
- Do not make abrupt changes.

Finally, participants were offered the opportunity to provide any other comments. It was felt important that the Superintendent is committed to the district and what comes with it. Having strong social justice perspectives and being culturally competent was felt very key. Also mentioned was the need for the board and superintendent to have a productive, responsive working relationship. Reinforced was the need to have a strong focus on the improvement of learning and achievement. The need for the Superintendent to get connected to the community was also felt very important. Having an open heart and an open mind was viewed as critical for the new Superintendent.