



# LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT

Somerset Hills School District, New Jersey



November 2022

## HISTORY/BACKGROUND

Somerset Hills Public School District (SHSD) is a regional school district serving students from Bernardsville, Far Hills, and Peapack-Gladstone, along with students from Bedminster who are sent to the district's high school as part of a sending/receiving relationship. There are approximately 1,800 students attending three schools; Marion T. Bedwell Elementary School, Bernardsville Middle School, and Bernards High School.

The governance of the SHSD is a regional Board of Education composed of ten unpaid elected members who work closely with the Superintendent. There are six representatives from Bernardsville, two from Peapack/Gladstone, one from Far Hills, and one representative from Bedminster. The number of Board members from each area is determined by the percentage of the total school community their town/borough represents. Board members are school community representatives, which means they represent the entire school community, not just the area in which they were elected and reside.

The location of the schools is in Bernardsville, NJ. Bernardsville was originally a section of Bernards Township known as Vealtown. In 1840, Vealtown became Bernardsville, named after Sir Francis Bernard, Colonial governor of New Jersey from 1758 to 1760. Located in the northernmost part of Somerset County, the borough includes some of the last vestiges of the Great Eastern Forest.

During the Revolutionary War, the Vealtown Tavern, now known as the John Parker Tavern, was used regularly by soldiers during the 1779–1780 winter encampment at Morristown. After the Civil War, many wealthy and prominent New Yorkers moved into the area, first as summer visitors, then later as permanent residents of the Bernardsville Mountain. The Gladstone Branch of the existing railroad line was built through Bernardsville in 1872 and played an important role in the borough's development. The Gladstone line, whose five o'clock train was appropriately nicknamed "*the millionaire's special*," as it was direct route to Penn Station, allowed those who built grand estates in Bernardsville to commute to the city on a daily basis rather than only visit their families on weekends. Bernardsville became an independent municipality until 1924, when it split from Bernards Township. {source: [bernardsville.org](http://bernardsville.org)}

The mission of The Somerset Hills School District is to provide an authentic and balanced learning experience for each student by harnessing the power of innovation and an engaged community to create thoughtful and impactful global citizens.

The Board of Education is looking for a strong, experienced instructional leader who understands the teaching and learning process, is an effective communicator, is innovative, and a relationship builder. The new superintendent will be courageous, collaborative, transparent, and committed to providing a student-centered approach to teaching and learning while working to improve the overall achievement levels of all students.

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) in November 2022 for the new superintendent of the Somerset Hills School District. The data contained herein were obtained from input the HYA consultants received when they met with individuals and groups in either individual interviews or focus group settings and from the results of the online survey completed by stakeholders. The surveys, interviews, and focus group meetings were structured to gather input to assist the Board in determining the primary characteristics desired in the new superintendent. Additionally, the stakeholder interviews and focus groups collected information regarding the strengths of the District and some of the challenges that it will be facing in the coming years.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It should be stated that the data are not a scientific sampling, nor should they necessarily be viewed as representing the majority opinion of the respective groups to which they are attributed. This caution is in no way intended to diminish the importance of the input that was provided by each stakeholder, but rather to put all of the data points into perspective.

The draft of the desired characteristics is provided under separate cover.

## PARTICIPATION

The numbers of participants, by stakeholder group, in the two methods of data gathering are listed below: *Not all focus groups were disaggregated for the on-line survey.*

Group	Personal Interviews or Focus groups	Virtual Focus Group/Survey
Board	10	
Building Administrators	10	
Central office administrators	3	
SHEA Leadership	4	
Municipal Gov't	0	
Non-Affiliated/Central Admins	8	
HS Staff	7	
MS Staff	0	
Elem Staff	3	
Staff		61
HSA Leadership	3	
Town Hall	31	50
Parents		236
Students		
High School	10	4
Middle School	6	
Subtotal	95	334
TOTAL	429	

**STRENGTHS OF THE DISTRICT**

Among the most frequent strengths perceived and discussed by focus group participants and during interviews, as well as reflected in the survey, is the strong academic performance and reputation of the school district. This includes the highly dedicated staff, the scope of the academic programming offered to students, the strong programs for students with special needs, the number of extracurricular opportunities for students, and the personalized educational experience described by many members of the school community.

The highly engaged and passionate residents provide for a strong sense of community in the district. Even though the Somerset Hills School District spans four municipalities, the "small-town feeling" allows all stakeholders to engage and feel valued in the school community. The relatively small population and family-like feel created in each school allows for students to enjoy individualized support in caring atmospheres. Keeping the average class size low, even in the face of financial constraints, is a priority and results in positive and personalized learning environments for the students. Participants in the focus groups consistently mentioned the great students and families that make up the district. Keeping this robust commitment to student success and a strong sense of community will be priorities for the new superintendent.

The Somerset Hills School District has dedicated and hard-working staff members, including outstanding teachers, administrators, and members of the support staff. Many staff members are also residents who send their children to the schools, which adds to their commitment to the overall educational program. The teachers are described as strong and caring. Teachers and staff focus on providing a high-quality education and the tools for academic success balanced with a commitment to the well-being of each student. Additionally, the high quality of the special education program is mentioned as a source of pride for many in the district.

The district offers a wide variety of curriculum options, academic offerings, and extracurricular programming for the students in well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing buildings and facilities. There exists a great sense of pride in the schools. The diversity of the student body is viewed as a strength of the district. All students are encouraged to participate in athletics, music, arts programs, and many clubs. There is a concerted effort to make sure that every student finds opportunities to participate in athletics or extra-curricular activities in order to keep the level of student engagement consistently high.

Despite the challenges presented in the following section, the Somerset Hills School District has significant foundational pillars on which to continually improve. These include a history of academic excellence including a wide variety of programming, dedicated and supportive staff, robust programs for students in athletics/extracurricular activities, and an engaged and supportive student body and community. It was evident in the focus groups and in the results of the survey that the stakeholders have an overall desire to enhance the already positive

reputation of Somerset Hills School District while preparing students to be academically and socially prepared for the future.

### CHALLENGES AND ISSUES FACING THE DISTRICT

While the relatively small size of the district and schools leads to a family-like atmosphere for learning in which the individual needs of students can be addressed, it also results in fewer specialized programs and staff members who have more areas of responsibility than in larger districts. Ensuring that the students in the SHSD have a wide variety of opportunities as well as support from experts are ongoing concerns expressed by the stakeholders.

It was noted during individual interviews and focus group sessions that over the last two years factions have developed between community stakeholders and groups, district leaders, board members, and staff as a result of concerns related to the pandemic, curriculum, and the perceived quality of the overall academic program. Board of Education meetings are attended by vocal stakeholders who are concerned generally about the current state of education, as well as upset with specific aspects of local educational programs. Transparent communications, the ability to balance competing interests, mitigating the high level of frustration that currently exist, and demonstrating unwavering commitment to the students will be areas on which the new superintendent will need to focus. Finding common ground between individuals and groups while keeping the focus on moving the district forward for the students are challenges that the new superintendent will face.

As expressed in focus group discussions and reported in the survey, there exists common concern for the schools to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Ensuring that all students, even those recently assimilating to the community or who have special learning needs, have the opportunity to thrive is a priority on which the new superintendent will be expected to unify school and community resources to achieve. Focusing on vulnerable populations while working to enhance the overall academic performance of all students are ongoing challenges on which the superintendent will be expected to demonstrate leadership.

Similar to the situation facing most school districts as a result of societal and pandemic-related tensions, recruiting highly qualified staff to fill open positions, as well as retaining the current staff will be ongoing concerns on which the new

superintendent will need to focus. The results of the survey and comments by participants in the focus group sessions indicate that building a positive environment for teaching and learning remains a concern. Working to improve staff morale, facilitating constructive dialogue around curricular issues, addressing concerns expressed by the local collective bargaining unit, and promoting the positive aspects of the schools will be areas of focus for the new superintendent.

Improving the general academic performance of the students is a concern expressed by many stakeholders during focus group sessions and on the electronic survey. Specifically, identifying and improving the areas of student achievement that result in higher district rankings is a challenge that the new superintendent will face. Collaborating with the staff and Board to define and measure student success and working to ensure that everyone has the technology necessary to excel will be priorities for the new superintendent. Providing innovative ideas and motivating the staff to provide quality programming to achieve measurable results of student performance will be crucial to the success of the new superintendent.

## CONCLUSION

HYA and the Board intend to meet the challenge of finding an individual who possesses most of the skills and character traits required to meet the needs of the district. The search team will seek a new superintendent who can work with the Somerset Hills Board of Education and stakeholders to provide the leadership needed to continue to raise academic standards and student performance, while meeting the unique needs of each of its students.

The search team would like to thank all the participants who attended focus groups meetings or completed the online survey and staff who assisted with our meetings, particularly Jinnee DeMarco who organized the Focus Group meetings, assisted in the promotion and communication with stakeholders, and managed the search team's time in the district.

## VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUP/COMMUNITY SURVEY SUMMARY

The SHSD Community Feedback Survey was completed by 334 stakeholders electronically. The two largest stakeholder groups represented in the survey were 236 Parents of Current Students (70.7%) and 61 Staff Members (18.3%). Community members made up the third most populous stakeholder group with 50 respondents (15%). Finally, 4 Students responded to the survey (1.2%).

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of potential challenges facing the district, the one that is most important for the new superintendent to address. The four highest priority challenges identified by respondents are as follows:

- Improving Student Achievement: 34.4% of respondents indicated that this challenge is most pressing
- Meeting the Needs of an Increasingly Diverse Population: 21.6% of respondents indicated that this challenge is most pressing
- Continuing to Build a Positive Educational Climate: 18.9% of respondents indicated that this challenge is most pressing
- Continuing and Enhancing the Positive Reputation of the District: 10.5% of respondents indicated that this challenge is most pressing

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of strengths of the district, the one that needs to be the primary focus for the new superintendent. The four highest priority strengths identified by respondents are as follows:

- Strong Academic Performance of Students & Reputation of the District: 47.3% indicated this should be the primary focus of the new superintendent
- Professional and Dedicated Staff: 17.1% indicated this should be the primary focus of the new superintendent
- Well Rounded Students: 15.6% indicated this should be the primary focus of the new superintendent
- Comprehensive Curricular Offerings: 11.7% indicated this should be the primary focus of the new superintendent

Respondents were asked to choose the one characteristic they would most like to see in a new superintendent. The four characteristics that were most commonly identified were:

- Instructional Leader who understands the teaching and learning process: 29.3% indicated this is the most important characteristic for the new superintendent to possess
- Effective Communicator who will ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the issues facing the district and establish opportunities for constructive feedback: 20.7% indicated this is the most important characteristic for the new superintendent to possess



- Innovative Leader who will bring new programs and ideas to the district: 19.8% indicated that this is the most important characteristic for the new superintendent to possess
- Relationship Builder who will establish trusting and positive relations with individuals and organizations: 17.1% indicated this is the most important characteristic for the new superintendent to possess

## SUMMARY OF COMMENTS FROM FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS, INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS, & PUBLIC FORUM

The structure of the focus groups was open, allowing for participants to build upon each other's comments. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions.

- What do you consider the greatest current strengths of the district and what strengths do you wish to see maintained and/or expanded?
- What do you consider the greatest immediate challenges for the district and what do you consider the greatest challenges over the next three years?
- What are the 3 - 5 most desired characteristics that you believe the next superintendent will need to possess in order to succeed and to take the district to the next level of success?

Individual interviews were conducted in the same manner for members of the Board of Education. To conclude each session, the HYA consultant asked if the participant(s) have any recommendations for specific candidates who should be notified of the process.

It should be emphasized again that the data are not a scientific sampling, nor should they necessarily be viewed as representing the majority opinion of the respective groups to which they are attributed. Items are included if, in the consultants' judgment, they warranted the Board's attention. This caution is in no way intended to diminish the importance of the input that was provided by each stakeholder, but rather to put all of the data points into perspective. To achieve this, raw data is provided in an unfiltered manner.

The results of the interviews and group meetings are compiled into a single document based on the interviewer's interpretation of the responses. These results will be presented to the Board of Education and then utilized for recruiting and candidate evaluation purposes. Given that permission was not overtly granted, the

names of individuals recommended as an executive leader of possible interest will not be shared in this document. The HYA consultants will try to contact those suggested and notify each about the process.

The summaries from community forums, focus group meetings, and individual interviews are reported to the Board and will be used to assist in its deliberations regarding the desired characteristics of the successor superintendent.

\*\*\*\*\* End of Public Document\*\*\*\*\*