



LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT

South Orange Maplewood
School District
February 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) in January and February 2024 for the successor superintendent of the South Orange Maplewood Public School District. The data contained herein were obtained from input the HYA consultants received when they met with individuals and groups in either an interview or focus group setting 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 successor superintendent. Additionally, the stakeholder interviews and focus groups provided information regarding the strengths of the District and some of the challenges that it currently faces and will be facing in the coming years.

The South Orange & Maplewood School District Survey for Superintendent Search was completed by 1875 stakeholders. With over three-quarters of the total respondents, the largest stakeholder group surveyed were parents/guardians of students in the district. Parents/guardians of students in the district represented 85.6% of all respondents. Teachers made up the second most populous stakeholder group at 8% of all respondents. The third largest participant group were community members at 3% of all respondents. It is noted that the top four leadership profile traits selected on the survey are for the most part consistent with interview and focus groups responses.

Regarding the State of the District, the following statements were perceived to be district strengths:

- Technology is integrated into the classroom. (TL)
- The District engages with diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic groups. (CE)
- District schools are safe. (TL)
- The District employs effective teachers, administrators and support staff in its schools. (M)
- The District is working to close achievement and opportunity gaps. (VV)

The top-rated leadership profile characteristics constituents desire in a new superintendent are:

- Recruit, employ, and retain effective personnel throughout the District and its schools (M)
- Foster a positive, professional climate of mutual trust and respect among faculty, staff, and administrators (CE)
- Provide transparent communication (CE)
- Establish a culture of high expectations for all students and personnel (VV)
- Effectively plan and manage the long-term financial health of the District (M)

Participation

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

Group	Personal interviews or focus groups	Online Survey
Board	9	n/a
Building level administrators & supervisors	4	20
Administrative team	6	n/a
Community members	n/a	54
Teachers: Certificated Elementary/Middle/Secondary	16	148
Social Workers and Guidance Counselors	1	n/a
Support Staff/Non-certificated Elementary/Middle/Secondary	n/a	31
Community Leaders & Representatives (including Preschool Leaders)	10	n/a
Collective Bargaining Leaderships	10	n/a

SEPAC	4	n/a
President's Council (PTA)	6	n/a
Parents (all groups from Community Forum)	115	1605
Students - MS/HS	30	17
Total	211	1875

The community survey report and a draft of the desired characteristics are provided under separate covers and are meant to be stand-alone complementary pieces to the Leadership Profile Report.

It should be emphasized 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.

STRENGTHS OF THE DISTRICT

Among the most frequent strengths perceived and discussed by focus group participants and during interviews, as well as identified in the survey, is the diversity, and reputation of the South Orange Maplewood Public School district. This includes an active, invested student body, an engaged parent community, and a highly dedicated staff.

Although South Orange and Maplewood are two towns, they are intertwined through the school district and proudly represent one community. The community's reputation for excellence, diversity, and culture, as well as its geographic location being easily accessible to New York City has always made it a very desirable place for people to live and raise their families.

The South Orange Maplewood community is extremely supportive of their schools and places a high value on education. It is a multigenerational, diverse, active, and vocal community with a high level of participation. It is a tight-knit and cozy community emphasizing belonging which includes an interconnectedness of the neighborhoods and diverse interactions among residents. Parents and community members contribute both time and resources to support students and schools.

South Orange Maplewood School District (SOMSD) is a dynamic school system with high expectations, and a strong commitment to educational growth and equity. The District values

inclusivity, community engagement and academic excellence, and creates a safe and enriching environment for students.

SOMSD values the breadth of students' interests and provides an abundance of programs and courses to meet its students' different needs and interests. SOMSD has great educators who are high quality, hard-working, and passionate professionals. Historically, SOMSD has been a sought after place to work and live.

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES FACING THE DISTRICT

The complex issues the district is facing include academic, equity, personnel, governance, communication related issues/concerns, building upgrades/repairs, and financial resources. The concerns about declining academic performance were voiced as challenges and potential threats to the community's reputation. Concern was expressed that academics have suffered since the pandemic, particularly in elementary grades, and the District has not recovered as quickly as other districts.

While the growing level of diversity was expressed as a strength, it was also identified as one of the challenges for the community and school district. Equity and access were noted as significant challenges related to curriculum. The District is committed to equity; however it has struggled to successfully implement systems and procedures focused on equity and closing achievement gaps, particularly for Special Education (SPED) and English Language Learners (ELL) students. While it was pointed out that Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) work is well underway, implementing the Fergus report recommendations and the Intentional Integration Initiative has yet to reach the full scope, depth, and breadth of implementation throughout the district. Additionally, with its reputation and growing population, providing equitable access to special education programs in each neighborhood school is challenging and a source of concern for some parents. Families who move to SOMSD for special education services are sometimes disappointed and feel the need to resort to litigation as their only means to retain services for their children.

The high turnover, especially in the administrative positions, has created a lack of stability and vision for the district. Frequent turnover has led to inconsistent decision-making and direction. With a revolving door of administrators, it has become challenging to develop and implement long-term strategic plans for the district's improvement and growth.

There is also a need to address teacher relations/morale, school culture, and teacher retention and hiring issues. Teachers lack support and resources as well as high quality professional development opportunities.

Lack of transparency and poor communication have led to erosion of trust, created a divided community, and impacted the overall confidence in the school system. There is a clear disconnect between the stakeholder groups both within the District as well as with the community, which has led to division throughout the community. Concern was expressed during focus groups and individual interviews around the need to unify the District around common goals, build trust among all stakeholders, improve community engagement, and incorporate transparency. Accurate, clear, and consistent communication, along with a long-term vision, are desired to help address and resolve the issues with the District.

Budget allocation and management was also expressed as a concern. Stakeholders questioned how and why certain programs and services are funded over others, as well as how accurately the budget aligns with the resources the District needs. Also, aging buildings that have not been repaired in years have left the District with a financial and operational burden of requiring additional infrastructure and building upgrades/repairs.

Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach.

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 successor superintendent who can work with the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education and all 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, schools, and communities.

The search team thanks all the participants who attended focus groups, meetings, and/or completed the online survey and the South Orange Maplewood Public Schools staff members who assisted with our meetings, particularly Eric Burnside, Paul Brubaker and Dorothy Connors, who organized the search team's time in the district.

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