



LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT



October 20, 2025

Executive Summary: Leadership Profile Report

(Prepared by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates – October 2025)

Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) conducted a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process to develop the Leadership Profile for the next Superintendent of Cary Community Consolidated School District 26. Input was collected through interviews, focus groups, and an online survey open to parents, staff, students, community members, and civic leaders.

Across all sources, stakeholders described a district that is deeply committed to children, values its strong sense of community, and takes pride in its dedicated teachers and staff. Cary 26 is viewed as a welcoming, family-oriented school district where relationships matter and student success is a shared priority.

Key strengths identified include high-quality teachers, small class sizes, and strong programs that balance academic rigor with social-emotional growth. The district's dual language, STEM, and arts programs were praised, along with its fiscal stability and active parent engagement. Many noted that the district's size allows for personal relationships and a "small-town feel" that families value.

Challenges and issues most frequently cited include teacher recruitment and retention, student behavior and safety, communication at Cary Junior High, and gaps in special education and support staffing. Stakeholders also noted concerns about administrative structure, facilities capacity, and balancing technology use with traditional learning. Several respondents expressed a desire for improved transparency, consistent communication, and a more unified leadership climate.

The next superintendent should be a visible, authentic, and approachable leader who engages all stakeholder groups with empathy and integrity. The community seeks someone who is both visionary and grounded — a leader who listens carefully, communicates clearly, and supports staff and students first. Classroom and instructional leadership experience were strongly valued, as was a calm, apolitical style that builds unity and trust.

In summary, Cary CCSD 26 stands at an encouraging moment. The district's strong foundation, dedicated educators, and supportive families position it for continued success. Stakeholders are eager for leadership that preserves what makes Cary special while addressing challenges with fairness, transparency, and collaboration. With stable, student-focused leadership, the district is well poised to thrive in the years ahead.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by **Dr. Ken Arndt** and **Dr. Jane L. Westerhold**, of Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) in August through October 2025 for the new superintendent of Cary Community Consolidated School District 26.

The data contained herein were obtained from input the HYA consultants received when they met with individuals and groups in either individual interviews, focus group settings, community forums, as well as the results of the online survey completed by stakeholders. These sessions were structured to gather input to assist the Board in determining the primary characteristics desired in the new superintendent. Additionally, stakeholder interviews, forums and focus groups collected information regarding the district's strengths and the challenges it currently faces-and, more importantly, those anticipated in the next three to five years.

Description of the District

The district and the Village of Cary are in McHenry and Lake Counties in northeastern Illinois. District 26 covers an area of 12.25 square miles with a current enrollment of 2,395 students, including 434 students with an IEP and 172 students with a 504 plan, and offers education from early learning (PreKindergarten) through 8th grade. The student-teacher ratio is 13:1.

The district serves a student population that is approximately 70-74% White, 19-23% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% Black, and 4% multiracial, with 25% of the students economically disadvantaged and eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The district employs 177 full-time teachers.

The vibrant community of Cary rests outside of Chicago, with many residents traveling via the Metra commuter train line to the city and neighboring suburbs. Cary's residents pride themselves on their strong belief that educating children is of the utmost importance. The Village has a well-maintained and active park district that serves numerous youth sporting organizations and provides opportunities for families and community members to be engaged and active.

Cary CCSD 26 comprises five school buildings: one early childhood center, three elementary schools, and one junior high school. The district stands out for its strong community ties, inclusive preschool programs, and above-average academic performance. For two consecutive years, the district's elementary schools have been named *Project Lead The Way* (PLTW) *Distinguished Launch Schools*, recognizing their commitment to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education.

Community-driven initiatives such as Water Day, Monster Mash, and Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee events create a supportive environment for the district's diverse student body. The district has received significant community support through platforms like DonorsChoose, with

81 projects funded by 111 in-state and 86 out-of-state supporters, enhancing classroom resources and opportunities.

District facilities are well-maintained to ensure a productive, caring environment conducive to learning. A 2024 referendum approved \$20 million in bonds to improve school buildings, reflecting the dedication to maintaining modern, safe and effective learning spaces. The district has received a *Certificate of Excellence* from the Government Finance Officers Association, highlighting its strong financial management practices.

Process

During August, September, and October 2025, HYA Associates conducted a comprehensive data-gathering process that included focus groups, individual interviews, and a community forum. Thirteen targeted focus groups were convened, eight individual interviews were completed, and one open community forum was held for the broader community.

In total, more than fifty stakeholders participated in these sessions. Additionally, 119 stakeholders responded to the online survey, which remained open from September 22 through October 6. The survey provided an additional means for stakeholders to share their insights regarding the district's strengths and challenges, as well as the desired qualifications and characteristics for the next Superintendent.

Online Community Survey

Overall, participants conveyed a deep sense of pride in Cary CCSD 26's close-knit community, dedicated teachers, and unwavering commitment to students. Many respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining transparent and consistent communication, ensuring alignment across schools, and supporting teachers through competitive compensation and professional respect.

The following section summarizes the qualitative themes that emerged from the open-ended survey responses, highlighting stakeholder priorities related to communication, visibility, and engagement with the next superintendent.

Parent Perspectives

Parents highlighted the district's high-quality teachers and meaningful student–teacher relationships as core strengths. Many expressed appreciation for the district's strong sense of community, active family engagement, and balanced curricular offerings, including the arts, STEM, dual language, and social-emotional learning. Parents also valued small class sizes and effective communication—particularly within the elementary schools.

Key challenges identified included teacher pay and retention, citing ongoing turnover and difficulties attracting and retaining top talent. Parents also raised concerns related to student

behavior and school safety, noting inconsistencies in discipline and communication at Cary Junior High. Additional areas for growth included special education supports, facilities and enrollment management, and technology use, particularly regarding excessive screen time and diminished foundational research and writing skills.

When describing the ideal superintendent, parents emphasized the importance of a visible, approachable, and communicative leader—one who demonstrates empathy, integrity, and balanced decision-making. They expressed a desire for an instructional leader with classroom experience who supports teachers, manages finances responsibly, and leads with fairness, vision, and respect for the district's traditions.

Staff Perspectives

District employees described a strong sense of collaboration and professional camaraderie among colleagues. They expressed pride in the district's dedicated teaching staff and ongoing progress in curriculum design, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)/ What I Need (WIN) implementation, and dual language programming. Staff also recognized the administration's efforts to promote communication and collaboration across schools.

Challenges most frequently cited included staff turnover and retention, with uncompetitive salaries and limited support contributing to morale concerns. Employees also highlighted issues with student behavior and inconsistent discipline, as well as special education capacity, including limited paraprofessional support and administrative overload. Several respondents noted communication and leadership gaps, describing the need for stronger alignment between administration and staff, better follow-through, and a greater presence of leadership within classrooms.

Staff identified the ideal superintendent as an experienced educator and instructional leader who listens, collaborates, coaches, and demonstrates genuine support for teachers. Desired qualities included visibility in schools, strong communication skills, accountability, and expertise in instruction and special education. Respondents emphasized the need for a leader who prioritizes staff voice and ensures consistent systems and expectations throughout the district.

Community and Municipal Perspectives

Community and municipal stakeholders praised the district's family engagement, dedicated teachers, and the unique strengths of each school building. They described Cary as a community with strong values, accountability, and pride in its schools.

Their primary concerns echoed those of parents and staff, including teacher burnout and retention, facilities limitations, and curricular debates reflecting broader political and social divisions. Several respondents referenced the need for updated facilities, particularly at Deer Path Elementary, and for greater consistency across schools while maintaining each building's distinct identity.

When envisioning the next superintendent, community members expressed a preference for a collaborative, service-oriented leader who partners effectively with civic organizations and local government. They valued an apolitical, approachable, and authentic communicator—a leader who upholds the district’s values, promotes unity, and balances consistency across schools with respect for their individual cultures.

Communication and Community Engagement Overview

Across all stakeholder groups—parents, staff, students, and community members—communication and engagement emerged as central themes in the superintendent search feedback. Participants expressed a clear desire for a superintendent who is visible, approachable, and responsive, and who prioritizes authentic connections with all members of the Cary CCSD 26 community.

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of transparent, proactive, and two-way communication between the superintendent, staff, and families. They cited the need for timely updates on district goals, decisions, and progress, as well as opportunities for feedback that inform continuous improvement. Respondents noted that regular communication not only builds trust, but also reinforces shared accountability and understanding across the district.

Equally important to stakeholders was the superintendent’s presence in schools and the community. Participants valued leaders who take the time to visit classrooms, attend district and community events, and listen directly to staff, students, and parents. This visibility was seen as essential to cultivating strong relationships, fostering morale, and modeling the district’s commitment to students and families.

Finally, many respondents expressed that engagement extends beyond communication—it involves building and sustaining partnerships with civic organizations, community groups, and local leaders. Stakeholders envisioned a superintendent who serves as a connector, strengthening relationships among the schools, the Village of Cary, and the broader community to advance shared goals and uphold the district’s reputation for collaboration and care.

Key Themes Identified

1. Regular Progress Updates

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in receiving consistent and transparent updates regarding district goals and priorities. Respondents emphasized the importance of clear communication about progress, outcomes, and next steps—particularly in the areas of student achievement, finances, and strategic initiatives. Many underscored that regular communication builds accountability and trust while reinforcing the district’s commitment to continuous improvement.

“Regular communication about the goals the district has made a priority and updates about how we’re meeting them.”

“To see things through, analyze results, and find solutions to challenges along with staff.”

2. Visibility and Public Presence

Stakeholders placed high value on a superintendent who is actively visible and engaged within the schools and broader community. Participants encouraged attendance at school events, community activities, and local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce. Visibility was repeatedly described as a foundation for credibility, trust, and relational leadership.

“Be a public presence. Maintain engagement with us on how things are progressing and how our funds are being used.”

“Join the Chamber, go to district activities whether it be sports or after-school clubs.”

“Visit the schools weekly and build relationships with students and teachers.”

3. Multiple Communication Channels

Respondents highlighted the importance of a multi-faceted communication approach to ensure accessibility for all stakeholders. While email remains the preferred medium for most families and staff, participants also cited the district website, newsletters, social media, and in-person meetings as valuable platforms for keeping the community informed and engaged.

“Email, website, social media, and newsletters keep everyone informed and connected.”

Big Picture by Stakeholder Group

- **Parents** → “Keep great teachers, fix CJH communication and behavior, pay competitively, keep schools safe and inclusive, and ensure the superintendent is present and empathetic.”
- **Staff** → “Retention is the top concern. Support us with student behavior and special education needs. Avoid adding administrative roles without classroom support. We want a leader who has actually taught.”
- **Community Members** → “Partnerships and safety matter. Curriculum must be consistent. Facilities need attention and upgrades. The next leader should be collaborative, apolitical, and community-minded.”

Summary Statement

Stakeholders across all groups emphasized that effective communication and genuine community engagement are essential qualities for the next superintendent of Cary School District 26. Respondents consistently called for a leader who is visible in schools and the community, communicates openly and consistently, and provides regular updates on district goals, progress, and results.

Stakeholders also expressed a desire for multiple, accessible communication channels and opportunities for two-way dialogue. Above all, participants valued authenticity, transparency, and trust—qualities they believe will strengthen relationships, enhance collaboration, and unite the district around shared priorities for student success.

Transition to Desired Superintendent Profile

The collective input from parents, staff, students, and community members informed the development of the Desired Superintendent Profile outlined in the next section. This profile reflects the leadership qualities, professional skills, and personal attributes that stakeholders believe are most critical for guiding Cary CCSD 26 forward with integrity, vision, and stability.

Focus Groups and Interview Participation

Stakeholder Engagement Process

As part of the superintendent search process, HYA Associates conducted a series of interviews, focus groups, and community forums to gather input from a broad range of Cary Community Consolidated School District 26 stakeholders. The purpose of this engagement was to gain a deep understanding of the district's strengths, challenges, and the leadership attributes desired in the next superintendent.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Participants included representatives from every major stakeholder group within the district and community, as outlined below:

- Administration Center Assistants
- Board of Education Members
- Bus Drivers
- Business and Government Officials
- Cabinet Members

- Educational Support Personnel
- Parent Leaders (PTOs)
- Students
- Teachers and Certified Staff
- Union Representatives

The focus groups and community forums were structured to encourage open dialogue, allowing participants to build upon one another's ideas and reflections. Several sessions were held via Zoom to ensure accessibility and broad participation.

During these sessions, participants were asked to reflect on three central questions:

1. What strengths of the district should be retained and built upon?
2. What issues does the district currently face, and what challenges are anticipated in the next three to five years?
3. What personal and professional characteristics are most desired in the next superintendent?

Data Collection and Analysis

The information summarized in this report represents the perceptions of stakeholders identified by the Board of Education or those who self-selected to participate in the engagement process. While the findings do not represent a statistically random sample, the breadth and consistency of responses across groups provide a reliable indication of stakeholder sentiment.

Prior to identifying major themes, HYA Associates reviewed the frequency and consistency of comments within and among stakeholder groups. Repeated ideas and patterns were analyzed to determine the most prevalent strengths, challenges, and leadership qualities.

Items included in this report reflect those recurring themes that, in HYA's professional judgment, appeared with sufficient frequency to merit the Board's attention. These findings form the basis for the District Strengths, Challenges and Opportunities, and Desired Superintendent Characteristics that follow.

District Strengths

Cary CCSD 26 is widely recognized for its strong sense of community and deep commitment to student success. Stakeholders consistently emphasized the district's close-knit, family-oriented culture, where teachers, staff, and parents share a genuine investment in the academic and personal growth of every student.

Recurring strengths identified through focus groups, interviews, and survey feedback include:

- **High-quality teaching staff and meaningful student–teacher relationships** that foster engagement and care
- **Small class sizes** that enable individualized attention and support
- **Engaged families and vibrant parent organizations**, reflected in active PTOs, family events, and strong school–home partnerships
- **Comprehensive curriculum and programming**, including dual language, STEM, fine arts, gifted education, and social–emotional learning initiatives
- **Growing inclusivity** that reflects and celebrates the district’s increasingly diverse community
- **Sound financial stewardship** and an ongoing commitment to maintaining safe, updated facilities
- **Visible community pride** in the schools as a central and unifying feature of village life

District Challenges and Opportunities

While stakeholders expressed deep pride in Cary CCSD 26, they also identified several important challenges and opportunities for continued growth. These themes reflect areas where the district can strengthen systems, enhance consistency, and support both students and staff to ensure long-term success.

Key challenges and areas for improvement include:

- **Teacher recruitment, retention, and compensation**, as ongoing turnover and uncompetitive salaries create challenges in attracting and retaining high-quality educators
- **Student behavior and school safety**, with concerns about inconsistent discipline practices, the impact of disruptive behaviors on classrooms, and the need for stronger administrative support for staff
- **Communication and climate at Cary Junior High**, which stakeholders described as inconsistent, non-transparent, and in need of cultural and relational rebuilding
- **Special education and student supports**, including limited paraprofessional staffing, growing service needs, and insufficient intervention structures

- **Administrative structure and workload**, with calls to streamline roles, strengthen alignment, and increase support for teachers and principals
- **Facilities and enrollment growth**, as population increases create pressure on classroom space, playgrounds, and long-term infrastructure planning
- **Technology use**, particularly around student overreliance on devices, screen time, and the erosion of foundational academic skills
- **Community division and political climate**, reflecting broader societal tensions and a shared desire for balanced, inclusive, and student-focused leadership

These challenges present meaningful opportunities for the district's next superintendent to build trust, strengthen communication, and establish coherent systems that align resources, people, and practices around a shared vision for excellence.

Desired Characteristics for the Next Superintendent

Stakeholders described the ideal next superintendent of Cary CCSD 26 as a **visible, authentic, and community-focused instructional leader**—someone who will honor the district's strong foundation while addressing its challenges with empathy, decisiveness, and integrity.

The following personal and professional qualities reflect the attributes most frequently identified through focus groups, interviews, and the community survey.

Personal Qualities

- **Approachable and personable**, building trust and rapport with all stakeholder groups
- **Ethical, transparent, and student-centered**, consistently acting with honesty and fairness
- **Calm, confident, and empathetic**, demonstrating emotional intelligence and political neutrality in decision-making
- **Grounded in the community**, with a long-term commitment to serving Cary and fostering stability
- **Humble and genuine**, able to connect authentically with individuals at every level of the organization
- **Courageous**, one who demonstrates courage in navigating Board dynamics and difficult decisions while maintaining trust among the Board and all stakeholders

Professional Qualities

- **Experienced instructional leader**, preferably with classroom experience and a demonstrated record of improving teaching and learning

- **Strong communicator and listener**, skilled in cultivating relationships with staff, parents, and community partners
- **Supportive of staff**, balancing high expectations and accountability with compassion and trust
- **Financially prudent**, aligning fiscal decisions and resources directly with classroom priorities and student outcomes
- **Knowledgeable in special education, MTSS, and dual language programming**, ensuring equitable and high-quality opportunities for all learners
- **Visible and present**, regularly attending schools, classrooms, and community events to strengthen relationships and understanding
- **Collaborative and apolitical**, fostering unity among the Board of Education, staff, and the broader community
- **Strategic and forward-thinking**, capable of setting a clear vision for the future while respecting the district's traditions and strengths

The qualities outlined above represent a unified vision from across Cary CCSD 26's stakeholder groups. Collectively, participants seek a superintendent who embodies both vision and heart—a leader who is courageous yet kind, strategic yet approachable, and fully dedicated to the success and well-being of students, staff and the community.

With such leadership, Cary CCSD 26 is well positioned to build upon its proud history and continue its upward trajectory of excellence in education.

Conclusion

HYA Associates respectfully submit this Leadership Profile Report to provide the Board of Education with a comprehensive understanding of the district's current landscape and future leadership needs. This report reflects the insights of Cary CCSD 26 stakeholders regarding the district's strengths to preserve and enhance, the challenges to address in both the near and long term, and the leadership attributes most desired in the next superintendent. It also highlights the priorities stakeholders believe should guide the superintendent's initial months of service and ongoing leadership.

Armed with this wealth of information, HYA will utilize the Leadership Profile to guide candidate recruitment, screening, and due diligence efforts, ensuring alignment with the Board's expectations and community priorities. We are confident that this process will assist the Board in identifying and selecting a highly qualified leader who represents the best possible fit to guide Cary CCSD 26 into the future.

HYA Associates extends sincere appreciation to all stakeholders who participated in interviews, focus groups, and community forums, as well as those who completed the online survey. We especially wish to thank Laura Dorfler, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, and the Cary CCSD 26 staff for their outstanding support, organization, and commitment throughout this process. Their efforts were instrumental in facilitating the successful completion of this engagement.



In closing, HYA remains fully committed to assisting the Board in recruiting and screening candidates who embody the leadership profile and values articulated in this report. The next superintendent must sustain what is most special about Cary CCSD 26—its people, programs, and community pride—while providing the **vision, dedication, and collaborative leadership** necessary to engage all stakeholders in achieving the district’s long-term goals for excellence and success.