



Education Commissioner Leadership Profile Report

January, 2026

Seeking a Commissioner who leads with integrity and courage, communicates transparently, prioritizes students and public education, navigates politics thoughtfully without ideology, brings strong educational credibility, builds trust through empathy and relationships, and combines a clear, practical vision with humility and a commitment to continuous learning.



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**KANSAS STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION SEARCH
LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From December 15, 2025 through January 21, 2026, Hazard, Young, Attea, and Associates (HYA) search team of Past President Glenn "Max" McGee; Vice President, Mike Richie; and Associate, Frank Henderson, had the opportunity to conduct a thorough Engagement Phase that resulted in speaking with more than 200 individuals in interviews, focus groups, and forums and compiling the results of nearly 700 completed online surveys. The purpose of this Engagement Phase was threefold:

1. Identify strengths of the Kansas State Department of Education that could be used to recruit candidates as well as inform them of successful, proven practices and policies that should be sustained.
2. Identify both challenges the next education leader will face as well as priorities that she or he will need to address. These challenges and priorities will be used to identify candidates with recent, relevant experience to tackle them and to form the basis for interview questions, scenarios, and candidate presentations during the interview process.
3. Ascertain the desired qualifications and characteristics the next leader needs to have to succeed as a leader and to serve Kansas' students and educators effectively.

Results are presented in great detail in the following pages but summarized in these next four paragraphs.

Strengths:

The Kansas Department of Education is widely viewed as a people-centered, student-focused agency with deep expertise and strong credibility in the field. Stakeholders consistently identified the knowledge, passion, and dedication of KSDE staff as its greatest strength, noting a culture of service, collaboration, and genuine care for students and educators. The agency is seen as highly responsive, accessible, and relationship-driven, with districts knowing who to call and experiencing KSDE as a trusted partner rather than a "gotcha" regulator. The Commissioner's and Agency's statewide vision has traction among most districts, and they report that KSDE has moved from compliance centered to service and support for statewide continuous improvement while honoring local control. The department benefits from visibility, credibility, and strong connections with superintendents, the State Board, higher education, and legislators, along with effective leadership, outstanding deputies, and a collaborative internal culture. Overall, stakeholders see KSDE as a stable, respected, and forward-thinking agency that combines institutional knowledge, relationship-building, and a clear commitment to serving the whole child and all Kansas communities.

Challenges:

Stakeholders described the Kansas education landscape as operating in an increasingly complex, politicized, and rapidly changing environment that poses significant challenges for the Department and the next Commissioner. The most consistent concern was strained and often adversarial legislative and political dynamics, including misinformation about public education, pressure from vouchers and privatization efforts, frequent leadership turnover, and difficulty advancing policy or funding without sufficient resources. Stakeholders also emphasized funding instability amid declining enrollment and shifting demographics, particularly the ongoing special education funding gap, rural capacity constraints, and the tension between fiscal stewardship and rising expectations for student outcomes. Internally and externally, participants noted the challenge of maintaining coherence and capacity—breaking down silos, retaining staff, building leadership pipelines, and ensuring continuity as new board members, superintendents, and state leaders cycle in. Educationally, there is deep concern about teacher shortages, burnout, classroom behavior, chronic absenteeism, and uneven academic outcomes, alongside the need to refocus on core academics while responsibly navigating emerging pressures such as AI, mental health, and expanding social expectations placed on schools. Finally, stakeholders highlighted a trust and communication gap—between families and schools, the legislature and the agency, and across diverse communities, underscoring the urgent need for clear storytelling, visible leadership, honest acknowledgment of challenges, and sustained relationship-building across Kansas.

Priorities:

Across all stakeholder groups, there is striking consensus on the core priorities facing Kansas education, even where opinions differ on strategies. First and foremost, stakeholders agree that addressing the educator workforce crisis—through improved recruitment, retention, compensation, and preparation pipelines—is foundational, as schools cannot function without qualified, supported adults. Equally urgent is the need to fully fund and strengthen Special Education, which is widely viewed as under-resourced, inequitable, and placing unsustainable strain on students, families, and staff. All groups also emphasize the importance of safe, orderly learning environments, calling for clearer expectations, consistent behavior supports, and attention to student mental health so that teaching and learning can occur. There is broad alignment around strong academic outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy, paired with honest accountability and high expectations without lowering standards. Stakeholders further call for reducing bureaucracy and streamlining systems, freeing educators from excessive compliance and allowing them to focus on instruction. Underpinning all these priorities is the need for strong, visible, trust-building leadership—a Commissioner who listens, communicates transparently, and is present across the state—and a leader who will advocate forcefully for public education while respecting local context, district diversity, and local control. Collectively, these priorities point to a clear mandate: stabilize the workforce, support the most vulnerable students, restore learning conditions, strengthen academic outcomes,

reduce inefficiencies, and lead with credibility and courage on behalf of Kansas public schools.

Desired Characteristics:

Across internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, superintendents, and students, there is strong alignment around a core set of desired attributes for the next Commissioner. All groups consistently emphasize high integrity and strong moral character, coupled with authentic humility and trustworthiness. They want a leader who is an excellent listener and communicator—someone who listens for understanding, explains decisions clearly, and can speak effectively to diverse audiences, from students and educators to legislators and the public. There is a shared demand for a student-centered, educator-grounded leader with deep experience in public education, particularly someone who understands classrooms, districts of all sizes, and the unique context of Kansas. Stakeholders also agree that the Commissioner must be politically savvy but not politically driven, able to stand up to pressure with courage while building relationships across the Board, legislature, and communities. Finally, all groups value a leader who is visible, relational, and present across the state, committed to equity and opportunity for all students, and capable of setting a clear, forward-looking vision while remaining practical, grounded, and focused on real outcomes for Kansas children.

The HYA Team would like to express our profound gratitude to the staff who worked long and hard to schedule the 30 Engagement sessions, to develop the recruitment flyer from initial board interviews, to develop the customized online survey, and to ensure broad statewide access to the survey. Deborah Bremer and Denise Kahler deserve special commendation for their efforts and support.

SECTION ONE: INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, AND FORUMS

During the Engagement Phase, members of the HYA team had the opportunity to conduct numerous interviews, focus groups, and open forums. During the 30 hours allocated in HYA's proposal, the team met with a total of 231 individuals in these sessions, either on site or via video conference. The individuals and groups whom we met with were:

Individual interviews:

All State Board of Education Members

Commissioner, Dr. Randy Watson

Board of Regents, President and CEO, Dr. Blake Flanders

Kansas School for the Blind, Superintendent, Dr. Jon Harding

Kansas Children's Cabinet, Executive Director, Melissa Rooker

Governor's Office Education Staff, Zach Vincent

House Democratic Leader Brandon Woodard

Senate Democratic Leader Dinah Sykes

(Please note that House and Senate Republican leaders were also invited to participate but either declined or did not respond)

State Board of Education General Counsel

Two all-staff forums

Two focus groups with individual Board members invited. These organizations were represented in these two sessions:

School Board members from area districts

- Hays
- Herrington
- Kansas City
- Lansing
- Manhattan Ogden
- Olathe
- Shawnee Mission
- Wichita

Cowley County Farm Bureau

Game On for Kansas Schools

Kansas Black Leadership Council

Kansas NEA

Kansas Policy Institute

Lutheran School Association

Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America

Moms for Liberty Kansas

Stand Up Blue Valley: Families for Our Schools
Topeka Prayer Group
Parents, Retired Educators, and a Professor

Separate Focus Group Sessions

Commissioner Watson's Superintendent Advisory Council
Kansas Early Childhood Recommendations Panel
Special Education Advisory Council
Senate and House Education Committees
KASB
KANAAE
KNEA
KSSA
Kansas Teachers of the Year
Student Advisory Group
USA Kansas Board of Directors

While every group had its own particular interest and area of expertise, for purposes of analysis, we have divided this section of the report into responses from Internal Stakeholders (KSDE Staff), external stakeholders, students (there were 55 participants), and governmental officials (just seven participants). For each of these we are summarizing the following:

- Perceptions of the Strengths of the Department (Strengths)
- Challenges the next Commissioner will face (Challenges)
- Most important priorities for the next Commissioner to address (Priorities)
- Personal characteristics and professional qualifications desired (Attributes)

All groups generally identified the same strengths for the Department. These are listed below. Following that, for each group (internal, external, students, legislators) we have listed the Top 5 summary points to compare and contrast among groups.

PERCEIVED STRENGTHS OF KSDE

1. People-Driven Culture of Commitment and Care

Theme: "The People Are the Strength"

Across every focus group, the most powerful and repeated strength was the quality of the KSDE staff.

- Passionate, mission-driven, and deeply committed to Kansas students
- Strong sense of service, humility, and dedication
- Viewed as welcoming, supportive, and authentic
- High trust in staff expertise and intentions

KSDE is widely seen as a place where people care deeply about students and schools, not just compliance or policy.

2. Strong Relationships, Visibility, and Responsiveness

Theme: "Accessible, Trusted, and Connected"

KSDE is recognized for being visible and present in the field.

- Staff are accessible and approachable
- Districts generally know who to call and feel supported
- Regular school visits, one-on-one meetings, and two-way communication
- Increasing responsiveness over time—often described as "the most responsive it's ever been"

KSDE is viewed as a partner and resource, not a distant regulator.

3. Clear Vision and Strategic Alignment

Theme: "A Shared, Student-Centered North Star"

Most stakeholders pointed to a clear commitment to ALL students as a strength.

- KSDE is focused on all pathways to student success and to their well-being
- The agency shifted from compliance to technical assistance and school improvement

KSDE is seen as strategically aligned and future-focused, not fragmented.

4. Expertise, Institutional Knowledge, and Credibility

Theme: "Deep Knowledge, Real Experience"

KSDE is respected for its professional competence and credibility.

- Strong subject-matter experts and seasoned leaders
- Many leaders and staff with classroom and district experience
- Generally trusted by the field
- Seen as a knowledgeable, non-polarized resource

KSDE's expertise gives it legitimacy and influence across Kansas.

5. Balanced, Supportive Approach to Accountability and Improvement

Theme: "Support First, Accountability Always"

KSDE is widely praised for not being a 'gotcha' agency.

- Focus on school improvement rather than punishment
- Celebrating success while maintaining expectations
- Balances accountability with local control
- Strong work in Special Education, CTE, early childhood, and workforce pathways

The department is viewed as fair, supportive, and improvement-oriented, not punitive.

To summarize, KSDE's greatest strengths lie in its people-centered culture, strong relationships with districts, clear student-focused vision, deep professional expertise, and a balanced approach that supports schools while holding the system accountable.

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

Internal Stakeholders

1. Volatile Political and Legislative Environment

Theme: "Operating in a Highly Charged Political Climate"

The most frequently cited and urgent challenge.

- Hostile or adversarial posture from portions of the legislature
- Ongoing pushback on public education goals and funding
- Limited access to legislative committees and decision-makers
- Misunderstandings or deliberate mischaracterization of KSDE's work
- Election cycles intensifying rhetoric and instability

KSDE must operate in an environment where politics often outweighs policy, and public education is frequently under attack.

2. State Board Instability and Governance Challenges

Theme: "Uncertainty at the Governance Level"

Internal stakeholders expressed concern about Board dynamics.

- Potential turnover resulting in inexperienced or ideologically driven members
- Difficulty achieving consensus or unanimous votes
- Board dysfunction and uneven engagement among members
- Juggling competing agendas and personalities
- Active or pending litigation creating distraction and risk

Board instability poses a risk to continuity, clarity, and public confidence.

3. Internal Capacity, Silos, and Succession Planning

Theme: "Strong People, Stretched Systems"

Despite high staff quality, structural challenges remain.

- Internal silos that create external confusion
- Need for reorganization and clearer internal alignment
- Limited bench strength and succession planning
- High expectations placed on the Commissioner role
- Risk of burnout due to scope, pace, and visibility of the position

KSDE's people are strong, but systems must evolve to sustain them.

4. Rapidly Changing Education and Policy Landscape

Theme: "Leading Through Constant Change"

The environment around KSDE is shifting quickly.

- Federal uncertainty and changing mandates
- New education funding plans and task force recommendations

- Teacher shortages, especially in rural areas
- Large numbers of new superintendents and principals needing support
- Increased demands for adaptability and responsiveness

The challenge is not just change, but the speed and volume of change.

5. Communication, Narrative, and Public Understanding

Theme: "Telling the Story Before Others Tell It for You"

Internal stakeholders see communication as both a challenge and a necessity.

- Need for a more proactive, coordinated narrative
- Ensuring facts and outcomes are clearly communicated
- Countering misinformation and hostile narratives
- Helping legislators, parents, and the public understand what's working
- Making KSDE's impact visible inside and outside the state

Without a strong narrative, others define KSDE's work—and often inaccurately.

KSDE's greatest challenges stem from political volatility, governance instability, internal capacity strains, rapid systemic change, and the urgent need to proactively communicate the value and impact of Kansas public education.

External Stakeholders

1. Political Polarization, Governance Tension, and Public Trust

Theme: "Education in a Politicized Environment"

External stakeholders consistently identified politics as a dominant challenge.

- Ongoing tension between the State Board, Legislature, and communities
- Vouchers and ideological debates overshadowing student outcomes
- Perceived lack of respect for KSDE and public education by some lawmakers
- Difficulty keeping politics out of education decision-making
- Need to rebuild trust between families, policymakers, and public schools

Stakeholders fear that politics—not students—too often drive decisions.

2. Educator Workforce Crisis and Capacity Strain

Theme: "Staffing, Burnout, and the Shrinking Pipeline"

The educator shortage was one of the most urgent and repeated concerns.

- Teacher shortages, especially in rural and specialized areas (SPED, math)
- Burnout, classroom safety issues, and behavioral challenges
- Declining number of students entering the education profession
- Retirement exodus and difficulty recruiting new staff
- Understaffing within KSDE itself

Without stabilizing the workforce, systemic improvement is impossible.

3. Academic Outcomes, Readiness, and Instructional Gaps

Theme: "Achievement, Integrity, and Readiness for Life After High School"

Stakeholders expressed deep concern about student preparedness.

- Flat NAEP performance and gaps in literacy and numeracy
- Students graduating unprepared for college or careers
- Over-emphasis on test scores without addressing root causes
- Need for stronger reading instruction and foundational math skills
- Balancing academic rigor with attention to the whole child

There is a shared belief that Kansas must confront reality and improve outcomes.

4. Funding, Resources, and Demographic Pressures

Theme: "Doing More with Less in a Changing State"

Funding challenges were closely tied to demographics and expectations.

- Inadequate and unstable funding, especially for Special Education
- Declining enrollment is impacting district budgets
- Too many small districts with limited resources
- Implementing legislative mandates without additional funding
- New finance formulas creating uncertainty

Stakeholders worry the system is financially stretched and structurally misaligned.

5. Rapid Change: AI, Policy Shifts, and System Complexity

Theme: "Navigating an Uncertain and Accelerating Future"

Change itself is a major challenge.

- AI disrupting instruction, assessment, and workforce preparation
- Federal policy uncertainty and funding volatility
- Growing multilingual population and increasing student needs
- Constant regulatory changes that interfere with teaching
- Pressure to innovate while maintaining human connection

The system must adapt quickly without losing its core purpose.

External stakeholders see Kansas public education facing its greatest challenges in political polarization, workforce shortages, uneven academic outcomes, funding and demographic pressures, and the rapid pace of change driven by AI, policy shifts, and evolving student needs.

Students

1. Staffing Instability and Adult Support Gaps

Theme: "Losing the People Who Make School Work"

Students repeatedly emphasized how staffing shortages and turnover affect their daily experience.

- Teacher shortages and frequent staff turnover
- Loss of trusted advisors, paras, and support staff
- Inconsistent administrative support for teachers
- Students feel complaints and concerns are sometimes ignored

Students notice immediately when stable, caring adults leave—and feel the impact deeply.

2. Unequal Access to Opportunities (Especially Rural & Low-Income Students)

Theme: "Opportunity Depends on Where You Live"

Access to enrichment varies widely.

- Rural schools have fewer CTSOs, electives, and hands-on opportunities
- Limited access to national conferences and extracurriculars due to cost
- Students often must fundraise for basic opportunities
- Low-income students struggle to afford "extras" that matter for growth

Students see inequity not as theory, but as a daily reality.

3. Insufficient Preparation for the Future

Theme: "We Need Help Getting Ready for What's Next"

Students want stronger preparation for life beyond high school.

- Need better preparation from middle school to high school
- Limited advising and guidance for postsecondary pathways
- Desire for a stronger career, CTSO, and soft-skill development
- Need more support for transitions after graduation

Students are asking for guidance, not just graduation.

4. Learning Environment and Engagement Challenges

Theme: "School Needs to Be More Engaging and Supportive"

Students described learning conditions that interfere with success.

- Too much screen time and phone distraction
- Desire for more hands-on, real-world learning
- Poor facilities, lack of space, and overlooked repairs
- Competition between schools within districts is harming collaboration

Engagement suffers when the environment and instruction don't meet student needs.

5. Recognition, Voice, and Belonging

Theme: "See Us, Hear Us, Value Us"

Students want their efforts and perspectives recognized.

- Lack of recognition for positive behavior and achievement
- Desire for student voice in decision-making
- Teachers and advisors feel underappreciated—and students notice
- Need for stronger communication between adults and students

Students want to be partners in improvement, not passive recipients.

Students identify staffing instability, unequal access to opportunities, insufficient future preparation, disengaging learning environments, and a lack of recognition and voice as the greatest challenges affecting their school experience.

Government Officials

1. Navigating a Highly Politicized and Polarized Environment

Theme: "External Political Pressures are Significant"

- The Commissioner will face intense political pressure, including partisan dynamics, efforts aligned with national agendas (e.g., Project 2025), and attempts to politicize or religiously influence public education.
- Remaining credible, principled, and as apolitical as possible while working productively with a divided legislature will be a constant challenge.

2. Repairing and Strengthening Legislative Relationships

Theme: "Get to Know Us Well and Work with Us Closely"

- There is an acknowledged adversarial relationship between the legislature and KSDE, fueled by mistrust, misinformation, and limited engagement.
- The Commissioner must proactively build relationships, dispel myths about public education, involve more stakeholders in the legislative process, and shift from a reactive posture to a strategic, anticipatory one.

3. Ensuring Sustainable and Equitable Education Funding

Theme: "A New Funding Looms Formula Large"

- Funding challenges abound, including a new school finance formula, chronic underfunding of special education, unfunded mandates, and uncertainty around literacy initiative funding.
- Balancing fiscal realities with the needs of a diverse state—while defending public education against privatization pressures—will be critical.

4. Balancing Local Control with Statewide Policy and Accountability

Theme: "Balance District Autonomy with State Accountability for Results"

- Kansas's strong tradition of local control creates tension with statewide legislation and policy initiatives.
- The Commissioner must navigate this balance carefully, respecting district autonomy while advancing coherent statewide goals in areas such as literacy, accountability, and innovation.

5. Preparing the System for Rapid Change and Future Pressures

Theme: "The Only Constant is Change"

- Officials identified emerging challenges—including AI, school choice expansion, workforce shortages (superintendents and principals), and demographic diversity—as requiring forward-looking leadership.
- The Commissioner must help Kansas move ahead of these issues rather than continually responding after the fact.

Government officials see the Commissioner's role as one requiring exceptional political acumen, proactive leadership, fiscal expertise, and the ability to defend and modernize public education in an increasingly contentious environment.

PRIORITIES

Internal Stakeholders

1. Build Strong, Trusting Relationships with the Board, Legislature, and Field

- Invest time early in aligning with the State Board, including navigating differing viewpoints and building cohesion
- Rebuild trust with the legislature and the Governor through consistent engagement and credibility
- Strengthen relationships with local districts, boards, superintendents, teachers, and principals statewide
- Serve as a visible, steady connector across governance, policy, and practice

2. Establish a Clear Vision (“North Star”) and Actionable Plan

- Work closely with the Deputy Commissioner to develop and execute a clear plan of action
- Set a long-term vision that keeps the agency focused and forward-looking
- Balance momentum with patience—avoiding rushed decisions while keeping progress moving
- Ensure alignment between the Commissioner’s vision, Board priorities, and agency work

3. Be Visible, Present, and Engaged Across Kansas and Within KSDE

- Spend significant time in the field listening to districts, families, educators, and community partners
- Conduct statewide listening and learning tours, including business, industry, and rural communities
- Be visible and accessible to agency staff—walking the building, asking questions, and building trust
- Learn the culture, strengths, and work already underway before making major changes

4. Strengthen Internal Operations, Accountability, and Capacity

- Review and manage major contracts (assessments, MTSS/RTI, school improvement, program evaluation)
- Reduce silos and encourage departments to think beyond narrow scopes
- Build internal capacity, succession planning, and leadership bench strength
- Hold teams accountable to policies and procedures while maintaining a supportive culture

5. Support the Workforce and Core System Priorities

- Address teacher recruitment and retention as a top system priority
- Ensure administrative support for districts and schools
- Educate and partner with SBOE members to improve governance effectiveness
- Prepare proactively for school finance changes and evolving system demands

Internal stakeholders want a Commissioner who leads with relationships, listens first, builds trust across governance and the field, establishes a clear vision with disciplined execution, strengthens internal capacity, and remains visibly committed to supporting educators and districts across Kansas.

External Stakeholders

1. Stabilize and Strengthen the Educator Workforce

- Recruit, retain, and grow educators, including addressing the affordability of becoming a teacher (e.g., paid student teaching, KPERS/Tier 3 concerns)
- Improve working conditions, reduce class sizes and workload, and strengthen administrative support
- Expand leadership pipelines for superintendents and principals through collaboration with associations
- Address educator safety, burnout, and violence toward teachers

2. Rebuild Trust and Change the Narrative of Public Education

- Rebuild trust between families, communities, and public education through transparency and listening
- Change the narrative around public education to counter misinformation and hostility
- Be present, approachable, and visible across Kansas—urban and rural
- Acknowledge challenges honestly while reaffirming the value of public schools

3. Lead with Student-Centered, Evidence-Based Improvement

- Address student behavior, mental health, safety, and chronic absenteeism with clear frameworks and best practices

- Strengthen early childhood education and kindergarten readiness
- Improve academic outcomes using meaningful assessment data without over-testing
- Invest in Special Education and special schools at statutory funding levels

4. Navigate Political Complexity While Advocating for Public Education

- Build and repair relationships with legislators, the State Board, and diverse stakeholder groups
- Educate policymakers on public education realities and the role of KSDE
- Prepare proactively for funding formula changes and broader political dynamics (e.g., vouchers, privatization)
- Advocate for policies that protect and strengthen public education while respecting local context

5. Align Vision, Strategy, and Sustainable Funding

- Confirm, refine, or adjust the state vision and align it with a realistic financial strategy
- Connect policy decisions directly to dollars, staffing, and implementation capacity
- Address declining enrollment and why young people are leaving Kansas
- Ensure transparency and coherence between vision, budget, and outcomes

External stakeholders want a visible, transparent, and politically skilled Commissioner who can stabilize the educator workforce, rebuild trust in public education, improve student outcomes and safety, align vision with sustainable funding, and advocate effectively for Kansas schools in a complex political environment.

Students

1. Stable, Supported, High-Quality Teachers and Staff

- Retain strong teachers, advisors, paras, and support staff who "make the place" work
- Address teacher shortages, staff turnover, and inadequate administrative support
- Ensure teachers are appreciated, supported, and held to high professional standards
- Improve staffing levels for paras, maintenance, and student-facing roles

2. Expanded Opportunities and Equity Across Schools and Regions

- Increase access to CTSOs, advisors, and extracurricular opportunities, especially in rural schools
- Ensure low-income students can participate without excessive fundraising or personal cost
- Expand opportunities for middle school students, including earlier CTSO exposure

- Reduce inequities where some schools have “too much” while others lack basics

3. Stronger Preparation for Life After High School

- Better prepare middle school students for the academic and social demands of high school
- Provide more resources for postsecondary readiness, careers, and life skills
- Develop soft skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork
- Offer financial support for conferences, internships, and career-connected experiences

4. Safe, Engaging, and Well-Resourced Learning Environments

- Create more hands-on, engaging classrooms with less passive screen time
- Address facility needs, overcrowding, and lack of physical space
- Improve attendance supports and respond to the challenges of transient families
- Ensure classrooms are places where students feel supported academically and emotionally

5. Student Voice, Recognition, and Communication

- Listen to students’ and teachers’ visions for their schools
- Improve communication between students, teachers, administrators, and districts
- Respond meaningfully to student concerns and complaints
- Recognize and celebrate “good kids” and positive contributions—not just problems

Students want a Commissioner who prioritizes stable and supported educators, expands equitable opportunities, especially in rural and low-income communities, strengthens preparation for life after high school, improves learning environments, and genuinely listens to and values student voice.

Government Officials

1. Clear, Effective Public Communication

Legislators strongly emphasized communication as a central need.

- Ability to explain complex and sensitive education issues clearly
- Proactive communication that prevents misinformation and speculation
- Speaks plainly to the public, not in “education jargon”

2. Skill in Communicating During Controversy

A recurring concern was how education issues escalate when communication breaks down.

- Able to address controversy calmly and directly
- Prevents crises by explaining decisions early and transparently
- Builds understanding even when issues are politically or emotionally charged

3. Results-Oriented Leadership

Legislators want outcomes, not just process.

- Knows how to move initiatives forward
- Can translate vision into action
- Demonstrates follow-through and effectiveness

4. Compassionate, Human-Centered Leadership

The Commissioner must balance accountability with empathy.

- Understands that education systems are made up of people
- Leads with compassion while still expecting results
- Maintains credibility without being punitive or dismissive

5. Ability to Motivate and Build Confidence

Legislators want a Commissioner who can inspire confidence across audiences.

- Motivates stakeholders toward shared goals
- Builds trust with educators, lawmakers, and the public
- Maintains a steady, reassuring presence during difficult moments

Legislators want a Commissioner who prioritizes clear, proactive communication, manages controversy effectively, improves student outcomes, and inspires confidence across the public and political landscape.

ATTRIBUTES

Internal Stakeholders

1. Visionary, Steady Leadership Without a Disruptive Agenda

Theme: "Set the North Star—Don't Flip the Table"

Internal stakeholders consistently emphasized continuity with clarity.

- Establish a clear North Star vision and keep the agency focused
- Avoid coming in with a pre-set agenda for change
- Learn what is working before ending initiatives or reshuffling structures
- Balance momentum with patience and discipline

The agency wants a leader who guides forward without destabilizing the system.

2. Relationship Builder Across Board, Legislature, and Field

Theme: "Trust Is Built One Relationship at a Time"

Success depends on strong, intentional relationships.

- Build trust with the State Board, Governor, and Legislature
- Engage local districts, boards, superintendents, teachers, and principals
- Foster statewide relationships through listening and speaking tours

- Respect differing viewpoints and bring people together

Internal staff see the Commissioner as the chief bridge-builder for Kansas education.

3. Visible, Approachable, and Human-Centered Leader

Theme: "Be Present—Inside and Outside the Agency"

Visibility and authenticity matter deeply to staff.

- Be visible and accessible to KSDE staff at all levels
- Spend time walking the building and engaging teams
- Travel the state to understand diverse communities firsthand
- Lead with compassion, humility, and respect for staff effort

People want a Commissioner who shows up, listens, and genuinely cares.

4. Politically Savvy Advocate With Backbone

Theme: "Navigate Politics Without Losing the Mission"

Internal stakeholders emphasized strength and resilience.

- Skilled in navigating a complex political environment
- Willing to stand up to pressure and advocate for public education
- Able to work with a diverse and sometimes divided Board
- Makes tough decisions and stands by them with clarity

The agency needs a leader who is steady under pressure and firm in purpose.

5. Experienced Education Leader and Effective Manager

Theme: "Know Schools—and Know How to Run an Organization"

Competence and credibility are essential.

- Recent experience in Kansas public education strongly preferred
- Deep understanding of instruction and classroom impact
- Able to manage a complex agency while leading statewide policy
- Understands contracts, accountability, and operational systems
- Builds internal capacity and empowers leaders across departments

The role requires someone who can lead instructionally and manage organizationally.

Internal stakeholders want a Commissioner who provides steady, visionary leadership; builds trust across the Board, Legislature, and field; leads with visibility and compassion; navigates politics with backbone; and brings deep Kansas education experience paired with strong management skill.

External Stakeholders

1. Deep Kansas Education Credibility and Practical Experience

Theme: "Know Kansas Schools From the Inside"

External stakeholders were clear that credibility matters—and it must be earned through experience.

- Strong education background with experience across levels (teacher, principal, superintendent preferred)
- Kansas district experience strongly preferred; “look in Kansas first”
- Understands urban, rural, and small district realities
- Knowledge of the Kansas system, policy landscape, and how decisions play out locally

External groups want a Commissioner who has walked the walk in Kansas education, not a business-only profile.

2. Politically Skilled, Not Politically Driven

Theme: “Navigate Pressure Without Losing the Mission”

Political conditions were viewed as unavoidable—so skill is essential.

- Legislative and diplomatic savvy; understands public policy and elected boards
- Ability to withstand critics and handle political pressure (“backbone of steel”)
- Builds common ground and manages tension across factions
- Seen as principled and student-centered rather than ideological

Stakeholders want someone who can work the politics without being captured by politics.

3. Exceptional Communicator and Relationship Builder

Theme: “Build Trust Through Clear, Calm Leadership”

External voices repeatedly emphasized trust-building through communication.

- Strong public speaker; proactive communicator with a calm message
- Listener who makes stakeholders feel seen and valued
- Community relationship builder; continues superintendent engagement
- Brings groups together (service centers, higher ed, districts, educators)

Communication isn’t just a skill here—it’s the tool for preventing storms and building confidence.

4. Integrity, Humility, and Service-Oriented Leadership

Theme: “A Trusted Steward, Not a Self-Promoter”

External stakeholders named character as a defining requirement.

- High integrity; “walks the talk”
- Humble, reflective, admits what isn’t working and resets
- Not a stepping-stone candidate; not ego-driven
- Avoids micromanagement; not a lone wolf—builds teams

External groups want a Commissioner who leads as a **public servant** and trusted steward.

5. Visionary Systems Leadership with Evidence and Fiscal Discipline

Theme: “Modernize Wisely—Focus on Outcomes”

Stakeholders want forward-thinking leadership that is grounded and measurable.

- Systems thinker; long-term, structural planning; “declutter the agency”
- Evidence-based decision-making; measures success and holds systems accountable
- Strong fiscal sense—CEO-minded, budget capable, operationally competent
- Commitment to equity, literacy, and student-centered outcomes; recognizes that one-size-fits-all does not work

The expectation is future-focused improvement with real execution capacity, not slogans.

External stakeholders want a Kansas-experienced education leader with high integrity and humility, exceptional communication and relationship skills, political savvy without political agendas, and the systems-and-fiscal capacity to lead evidence-based improvement for all students.

Students

1. Empathy, Respect, and Understanding of Students

Theme: “See Us, Hear Us, Value Us”

Students overwhelmingly want a Commissioner who genuinely understands them.

- Listens actively to students of all ages
- Understands the pressures teens face today
- Respects different lifestyles, backgrounds, and identities
- Values every student and sees schools as family-centered communities

Students want to know the Commissioner **cares about their lives, not just their data.**

2. Visibility, Connection, and Presence Across Kansas

Theme: “Show Up Where We Are”

Students strongly emphasized physical presence and connection.

- Visits schools and communities across the state
- Engages with both small rural schools and large districts
- Understands Kansas geography and local context
- Connects directly with students, not just adults

Trust is built when leaders **show up and spend time in schools.**

3. Real Education Experience and Credibility

Theme: “Know School from the Inside”

Students value leaders who truly understand education.

- Experience in the education field at multiple levels
- Well-rounded educational background
- Respected by educators and communities
- Understands CTSOs, classrooms, and student life

Students want leadership rooted in **real school experience**, not theory.

4. Strong, Courageous, and Adaptable Leadership

Theme: "Lead with Courage and Common Sense"

Students want a Commissioner who can lead through challenges.

- Willing to stand up to complaints and pressure
- Courageous, confident, and resilient
- Open-minded and adaptable to change
- Sets realistic expectations and perseveres

5. Clear Communicator Who Inspires and Includes

Theme: "Talk With Us, Not About Us"

Communication matters deeply to students.

- Communicates clearly across diverse audiences
- Approachable, personable, and respectful
- Willing to learn and stay curious
- Inspires, encourages, and motivates others
- Understands finances and how decisions impact students

Students want a Commissioner who can **explain decisions and inspire confidence**.

Students want a Commissioner who is empathetic and respectful, visible across Kansas, grounded in real educational experience, courageous and adaptable in leadership, and able to communicate clearly while inspiring and including students in the future of education.

Government Officials

1. Political Savvy and Relationship Navigation

Works effectively with both political parties

- Navigates the State Board, legislature, and critics of public education
- Comfortable engaging those not supportive of public schools
- Understands vouchers and broader policy dynamics

2. Strong Communicator and Storyteller

Articulates a clear, compelling vision to the State Board

- Explains education issues to parents and the public
- Tells the story of public schools in a way that resonates
- Communicates clearly during controversy

3. Empathy, Patience, and Listening

- Listens to understand, not to rebut
- Patient and respectful when dealing with parents

- Empathetic, humble, and approachable
- Willing to ask for help

4. Courage, Resilience, and Truth-Telling

- Strong moral backbone
- Willingness and courage to take difficult positions
- Resilient under pressure and criticism
- Maintains steadiness in politically charged environments

5. Practical, Innovative, and Results-Oriented Leadership

- Strong fiscal understanding; connects policy to dollars
- Innovative and flexible thinker
- Problem solver who adapts when conditions change
- Background in education preferred for credibility

Government officials are seeking a politically savvy, empathetic, and resilient Commissioner who can communicate a clear vision for public education, navigate complex legislative dynamics with integrity, listen respectfully to diverse perspectives, speak truth under pressure, and lead with practical, fiscally grounded innovation that delivers real results for Kansas students.

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

Based on feedback from participants in interviews, focus groups, and forums, there are numerous strengths to the Kansas Department of Education and to their relationships with stakeholders. There are also numerous challenges for the new Commissioner, some immediately tangible such as adequate and equitable funding for public education, teacher and staff shortages, a polarized political climate, existential threats to public education, and urgent need to improve student outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

Moreover, while perceptions of the highest priorities and the most desired characteristics and qualifications differ from group to group, from the data above common themes emerge that will inform both the selection of the State Commissioner and the new educational leaders' priorities.

Synthesizing the qualitative data from interviews, focus groups and forums, we identified these "top ten" desired attributes:

1. Integrity and Ethical Leadership

Stakeholders overwhelmingly emphasized honesty, transparency, and moral courage. The next Commissioner must consistently put students and public education first, build trust through ethical decision-making, and resist political or personal agendas.

2. Political Savvy Without Being Politically Driven

All groups want a leader who understands the political landscape, can work effectively with the legislature and State Board, and navigate conflict skillfully—without becoming partisan or ideological. The role requires diplomacy, not politics.

3. Strong, Clear, and Trusted Communicator

The Commissioner must communicate complex issues clearly, calmly, and credibly to diverse audiences—including legislators, educators, parents, students, and the public. Listening for understanding is viewed as just as important as speaking.

4. Deep Experience in Public Education

Stakeholders strongly prefer a Commissioner with real, lived experience as an educator and school leader—ideally including superintendent experience in Kansas. Credibility comes from understanding classrooms, districts of all sizes, and the realities of implementation.

5. Student-Centered, Equity-Driven Mindset

Across groups, there is consensus that the Commissioner must value every student and advocate for equitable—not identical—support across rural, urban, suburban, and high-need communities. Decisions should always be filtered through student impact.

6. Ability to Build Relationships and Unify Diverse Groups

Kansas stakeholders want a connector and bridge-builder, someone who can bring together legislators, board members, educators, unions, families, and students around shared goals. Trust-building and collaboration are essential to system improvement.

7. Courage and Backbone

The Commissioner must be willing to speak truth to power, make difficult decisions, and stand firm under criticism, especially in defense of public education. This includes resisting misinformation, unfunded mandates, and harmful political pressure.

8. Visionary, Systems-Level Thinker

Stakeholders want a leader who can articulate a clear “north star” for Kansas education while also managing complexity. The Commissioner must think long-term, anticipate change (e.g., AI, workforce shifts), and align policy, practice, and resources.

9. Approachable, Humble, and Empathetic Leader

Students, educators, and staff emphasized the importance of humility, approachability, and empathy. The next Commissioner must be visible, willing to learn, open to feedback, and genuinely connected to the people doing the work.

10. Effective Executive and Organizational Leader

This role requires managing a complex state agency, overseeing contracts and systems, and ensuring accountability—while avoiding micromanagement. Stakeholders want a leader who can balance internal operations with external advocacy and execution.

Likewise, our analysis and synthesis of the qualitative data identify these “Top 5” priorities for the next leader to address.

1. Stabilize and Support the Educator Workforce

Teacher and leader recruitment, retention, and burnout are universal concerns, and every group recognizes that without stable, supported educators, student success and system improvement are impossible.

2. Build Trust Through Visibility, Listening, and Relationships

Stakeholders stress building, fostering and in some cases rebuilding trust with the legislature, newly elected state board members and governmental officials is a top priority for the next Commissioner. Trust is seen as the foundation for credibility, cooperation, and forward movement in a polarized environment. Moreover, all want a Commissioner who is visible, present, and engaged statewide.

3. Move from Vision to Action – Especially Regarding School Funding, Literacy, and Numeracy

Stakeholders agree that Kansas needs leadership that can move from vision to impact—not rhetoric. This is particularly true in ensuring sustainable, adequate, and equitable funding. The vision needs to be aligned with sustainable funding and results in improved outcomes in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as improved opportunities and access to programs and services that will best prepare students for life after graduation.

4. Improve Student Learning Conditions, Safety, and Wellness

There is broad agreement that learning cannot thrive without safe environments, strong supports, and meaningful preparation. Specific priorities are for supporting districts and schools with significant student behavior issues that disrupt teaching and learning and for addressing student mental health, wellness, and attendance.

5. Communicate Clearly, Honestly, and Proactively

Unclear, inconsistent communication is viewed as a root cause of conflict, distrust, and stalled progress—while clear, regular communication fosters a shared vision, counters misinformation, eliminates misunderstandings, and keeps stakeholders engaged

Across all stakeholder groups, there is strong alignment that the next Kansas Commissioner must stabilize the educator workforce, foster trust through visible and authentic relationships, lead with a clear and actionable vision that achieves sustainable funding and improved academic outcomes, improves learning conditions and student readiness, and communicate proactively and transparently to unify the system and drive results.

To summarize, Kansas stakeholders are asking for a Commissioner who can improve student outcomes, stabilize the educator workforce, support students with the greatest needs, and lead with transparency and credibility while navigating a complex political environment.

1. Mission-Critical Outcomes the Next Commissioner Must Deliver

Stakeholders consistently expect the Commissioner to drive measurable progress in:

A. Student achievement—especially literacy and numeracy

- Raise performance in reading, writing, and mathematics
- Maintain high expectations and credible accountability
- Use assessment and data systems that are timely, usable, and instructionally relevant

B. Safe, orderly learning environments

- Improve student behavior systems and school climate
- Strengthen prevention, mental health supports, and crisis response
- Ensure schools are safe and supportive for all students and staff

C. Fully supported school funding with special attention to special education services

- Advocate for sustainable, adequate, and equitable funding
- Increase revenue for improving special education supports and staffing needs
- Improve systems for high-need learners, including students with disabilities and multilingual learners

D. A stable, high-quality educator workforce

- Address shortages through recruitment, preparation pipelines, and retention strategies

- Improve compensation and working conditions—especially for hard-to-fill roles and paraprofessionals
- Reduce workload drivers that push educators out of the profession

2. Leadership Characteristics Stakeholders Want

Across all groups, respondents described a Commissioner who is:

- A. Visible and connected to the field
 - Regular presence across Kansas—rural, urban, and suburban
 - Consistent listening, regional engagement, and responsiveness to district realities
- B. Approachable, respectful, and trust-building
 - Open lines of communication with superintendents, teachers, families, and community leaders
 - A leader who listens and follows through—stakeholders want input to matter
- C. Steady and improvement-oriented
 - Continue what is working; avoid “change for the sake of change”
 - Be willing to question ineffective practices and modernize systems when evidence supports it
- D. Credible and Kansas-informed
 - Strong preference for deep Kansas education knowledge and proven leadership experience
 - Ability to work effectively with a State Board and a diverse set of districts

3. Core Competencies the Next Commissioner Must Bring

Stakeholder feedback points to a Commissioner with the following competencies:

- A. Instructional leadership and evidence-based improvement
 - Strong grounding in how students learn and how effective instruction is built and supported
 - Ability to scale proven practices in literacy, numeracy, and school improvement
 - Commitment to multiple pathways for student success (college credit, CTE, alternative pathways), while protecting rigor
- B. Strategic workforce development
 - Proven track record strengthening teacher pipelines (universities, alternative routes, grow-your-own)
 - Ability to address shortage areas with data-driven plans
 - Focus on retention through compensation advocacy, supportive working conditions, and practical professional learning
- C. Systems management and operational excellence
 - Ability to run a complex state agency with clarity, timelines, and accountability

- Streamline reporting, reduce duplication, and modernize KSDE systems so they work for educators
- Establish clear priorities and align divisions to a coherent statewide strategy

D. Sound governance, transparency, and public accountability

- Transparent decision-making and clear communication of rationale
- Respect for legal roles and local control, with fair and differentiated support across district contexts
- Strong financial stewardship, credible budgeting, and public trust practices

E. Political and community leadership

- Ability to navigate polarization without losing focus on students
- Capacity to work with legislators, the Board, districts, and stakeholders across viewpoints
- Public advocacy for Kansas education and for the people who serve students

SECTION TWO: ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

In collaboration with the State Board of Education, HYA developed a customized survey to garner stakeholders' perceptions regarding the priorities they have for the next educational leader as well as the professional qualifications and personal characteristics they believe are important for the state Commissioner to embody. As with the information gathered in the above section regarding individual interviews, focus groups, and forums, the survey results are used to recruit candidates, as the basis for interview questions, and to assist the board and new Commissioner in developing his or her 100-day plan and initial set of annual performance goals.

Stakeholders had the opportunity to participate in the online survey between January 6 and January 20, 2026. KSDE staff and State Board members made concerted efforts to share the link and QR code with stakeholders across the state. As a result, 752 stakeholders responded to the survey and 675 of these respondents completed it, and we received 690 responses to the two open-ended questions. However, the total number of completed surveys and the comments speak well to the stakeholders' interest and engagement in this initial phase of the search process.

By group, the number completing the survey was:

- 125 superintendents
- 97 teachers
- 161 public school employees who are not teachers (includes school and district administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, and the like)
- 109 KSDE staff
- 7 parents/guardians of current students
- 1 student
- 41 elected officials
- 35 resident taxpayers without children currently in school
- 29 other valued stakeholders (21 of whom were in higher education)

601 respondents identified themselves as rural, urban or suburban. Of these, 56% lived or worked in a rural district, 17% in an urban district, and 27% in a suburban district.

Note that this survey was not a scientifically stratified random sampling. The term of art is "survey of convenience," which means that individuals could take it when they chose to do so. Also, respondents could only complete the survey once from one device but could take it from another device. We found no evidence of respondents trying to game the system by completing the survey from multiple devices. Also, because only one student

completed the survey, we did not include that individual's responses in the analysis that follows.

In the discussion of the results that follow, responses marked "No Opinion" were dropped from the particular question and not used in any of the percentage calculations for the quantitative results.

Quantitative Results: Priorities

Part two of the online survey asked respondents to select up to the "Top 5" priorities for the next Commissioner from a list of these twenty choices.

- Continue to collaborate with local districts and higher education to support educator professional development.
- Focus on supporting districts to improve literacy and numeracy for all students.
- Be present in schools and communities to listen, learn, and build trust.
- Address classroom behavior issues and its effect on student learning and teacher retention.
- Ensure the State Department operates efficiently and collaboratively to support all school districts.
- Support students' workforce readiness and career pathways.
- Support school districts' local control while maintaining state accountability measures.
- Increase the number of certified teachers in areas of shortage.
- Address school funding challenges and support sustainable, equitable, and adequate funding.
- Develop new educational opportunities to prepare students for future success.
- Set a clear vision for the Future of Kansas Education.
- Improve communication with all stakeholders.
- Provide guidance for districts to manage the opportunities and threats technology (including AI) poses for education.
- Improve programs and support services for students with special needs.
- Continue efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps.

The choices were in randomized order for every survey.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who selected a listed priority in their Top 5 choices and rank (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) of that priority among the fifteen. For example, looking at the superintendent column 80% of the 125 superintendents responding had "Address school funding challenges, and support sustainable, equitable, and adequate funding" in

their Top 5 priorities. This was the highest percentage, hence the number one ranking for parents.

"Ensure the State Department (KSDE in the table) operates efficiently and collaboratively to support all school districts" was the second-highest priority, with 60% of the superintendents ranking it as one of their Top 5 choices.

Table 1: Ranking and Percentage of Respondents Selecting Priority in Their Top 5 (disaggregated by role)

	Stakeholder Group									
	Super- intendent n=125	Teacher n=97	Admin/ Non-Teaching n=161	KSDE Staff n=109	Parent n=77	Elected Official n=41	Taxpayer n=35	Other Stakeholder n=54	Rural n=335	Urban n=101
Answer Choices										
Collaborate with local districts & higher education to support professional development								2 (47)		
Focus on supporting districts to improve literacy and numeracy for all students.				5 (34)	5 (30)	5 (37)	3 (49)	5 (32)		3 (43)
Be present in schools and communities to listen, learn, and build trust.	5 (42)			4 (40)	5 (30)				4 (36)	
Address classroom behavior issues & impact on student learning & teacher retention.		2 (64)	2 (48)		2 (49)		1 (57)	4 (44)	4 (36)	2 (50)
Ensure KSDE operates efficiently & collaboratively to support school districts	2 (60)			1 (61)		3 (39)	4 (37)	5 (34)	3 (45)	5 (34)
Support students' workforce readiness and career pathways									2 (46)	
Support school districts' local control while maintaining state accountability measures	4 (54)	5 (34)	4 (40)		4 (30)	2 (46)	1 (57)		4 (39)	5 (33)
Increase the numbers of certified teachers in areas of shortage.		3 (37)	4 (40)	5 (34)	3 (39)	3 (39)		2 (47)	1 (71)	1 (67)
Address school funding challenges; support sustainable, equitable, adequate funding	1 (80)	1 (72)	1 (83)	2 (54)	1 (64)	1 (73)	5 (34)	1 (56)	1 (70)	
Develop new educational opportunities to prepare students for future success.					5 (30)	5 (37)				4 (40)
Set a clear vision for the Future of Kansas Education	3 (55)			3 (41)	3 (42)					
Improve communication with all stakeholders.										
Provide guidance for districts to manage technology opportunities & threats										
Improve programs and support services for students with special needs.				3 (37)						
Continue efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps.										

KEY: **Yellow shading** indicates that 50% or more of respondents ranked this priority in their Top 5 choices

NOTE: For easier reading, this table is enlarged and included on a separate page at the end of the full Leadership Profile Report.

Looking at the highlighted cells in the table, the most notable finding is the consistency among most groups in their top rankings. The next leader should clearly focus on:

- Addressing school funding challenges, and supporting sustainable, equitable, and adequate funding, and
- Addressing classroom behavior issues and its effect on student learning and teacher retention.

It is also important to note which responses were selected in the Top 5 by more than half of the eight disaggregated groups of respondents. These three items should also be key priorities for the next Commissioner and the State Board:

- Focus on supporting districts to improve literacy and numeracy for all students.
- Support school districts' local control while maintaining state accountability measures.
- Increase the number of certified teachers in areas of shortage.

Qualitative Results: Priorities

In addition to the 675 participants responding to this prompt, 256 offered comments when asked for other priorities. We analyzed them by group and listed below are Top 5 priorities for each group followed by a synthesis of the commonalities in each group.

SUPERINTENDENTS

1. Continue the Current Direction While Reducing Bureaucratic Burden

Superintendents strongly want **continuity** with Dr. Watson's vision—not a sharp pivot—while **streamlining KSDE requirements**. This includes:

- Merging At-Risk Accountability with Accreditation
- Stabilizing and simplifying KESA
- Reducing duplicative reports, paperwork, and compliance tasks
- Allowing school improvement to be locally driven

Theme: *Stay the course, remove barriers.*

2. Maintain Strong "Boots on the Ground" Engagement and Communication

Respondents overwhelmingly value a Commissioner who is:

- Highly visible statewide
- Accessible and approachable
- Actively listening to superintendents, boards, and regions
- Maintaining regular communication (e.g., weekly Zoms, meetings)

Theme: *Relationships, trust, and two-way communication matter.*

3. Deep Experience in Kansas Public Education—Especially as a Superintendent

There is near consensus that the next Commissioner should:

- Be a Kansan
- Have served as a Kansas public school superintendent
- Understand rural, small, and urban district realities
- Balance local control with state accountability

Theme: *Credibility comes from lived in Kansas school leadership experience.*

4. Strong Advocacy for Public Education and Educators

Superintendents want a Commissioner who will:

- Be a visible, non-partisan champion for Kansas public schools
- Advocate for proper funding and legislative support
- Protect educators and address teacher shortages and retention
- Serve as a buffer between schools and politicized interference

Theme: *Stand up for public education and those who serve students.*

5. Equity, Local Control, and Support for Rural & Small Districts

Respondents emphasized:

- Equitable support across rural, small, and large districts
- Recognition of regional differences (especially western Kansas)
- Respect for local decision-making
- Accountability systems that reflect growth, not just test scores

Theme: *All Kansas students deserve opportunity—regardless of zip code.*

Superintendents want a Kansas-rooted, experienced education leader who will continue the current vision, reduce bureaucracy, stay connected to the field, advocate fiercely for public education, and support local control with equity for rural and small districts.

TEACHERS

1. School Safety, Student Behavior, and Classroom Conditions

Teachers overwhelmingly identify **safety and behavior** as their most urgent concern. This includes:

- Protection from violence and threats (including fear related to immigration enforcement)
- Severe student behavior challenges, particularly in SPED settings
- Anxiety and fear among students and staff
- Need for consistent expectations, accountability, and restorative practices that actually work

Theme: *Teachers cannot teach—and students cannot learn—when schools feel unsafe.*

2. Fully Fund Special Education and Support Those Who Serve Students with the Greatest Needs

Teachers consistently cite **Special Education funding and staffing** as a crisis:

- Chronic underfunding of SPED services
- Overwhelmed SPED teachers and paraprofessionals
- Inequitable and ineffective funding formulas
- Need for stronger support for deaf education and the Kansas School for the Deaf

Theme: *Kansas must meet its legal and moral obligations to students with disabilities.*

3. Competitive Compensation and Workforce Sustainability (Teachers & Support Staff)

Teacher recruitment and retention dominate the feedback:

- Increase teacher pay to reflect workload, professionalism, and inflation
- Improve paraprofessional wages and benefits
- Address rising insurance costs
- Consider student loan relief and financial incentives
- Acknowledge unpaid hours and burnout

Theme: *Kansas cannot retain educators if the profession is financially unsustainable.*

4. Respect for Educators' Expertise, Voice, and Professional Autonomy

Teachers want leadership that:

- Listen to classroom professionals
- Includes teachers in decision-making
- Reduces state and district reporting burdens
- Protects instructional freedom and professional judgment
- Avoids sweeping changes without understanding classroom realities

Theme: *Let teachers teach—and trust their expertise.*

5. Balanced, Well-Rounded Education with High Expectations

Teachers support:

- High academic rigor in literacy and numeracy
- Reasonable class size caps, especially in early grades
- Reduced overreliance on technology and cell phones
- Strong fine arts programs
- Innovation that improves learning—not change for change's sake
- Equitable treatment of rural and urban districts

Theme: *Educate the whole child with rigor, balance, and purpose.*

Teachers want a steady, experienced Commissioner who will prioritize safety, fully fund special education, pay educators and support staff competitively, respect teacher voice, and support rigorous, well-rounded learning environments without disruptive policy swings.

EDUCATORS WHO ARE CURRENTLY NOT TEACHING

1. Address Educator Shortages and Workforce Stability

Non-teachers repeatedly identified **teacher and staff shortages** as the single most critical issue:

- Increase the number of certified teachers in high-need areas
- Support recruitment and retention statewide
- Reduce licensure barriers that add cost without improving quality
- Recognize shortages that impact students, families, and communities

Theme: *Nothing else works if schools cannot staff classrooms.*

2. Fully Fund Special Education and Support Students with Complex Needs

There is a strong consensus that:

- Special Education is chronically underfunded
- Current funding structures create strain on general education budgets
- Students with behavioral and learning needs require consistent standards, supports and accountability

- ELL services also need stronger, more equitable funding

Theme: *Adequate SPED funding is foundational—not optional.*

3. Maintain and Improve KESA While Streamlining Systems and Reporting

Stakeholders strongly support:

- Continuing KESA and the School Improvement Model
- Improving alignment between standards, assessments, and curriculum
- Reducing duplicative data reporting
- Improving KSDE technology systems so platforms “talk” to each other
- Eliminating initiatives that distract from teaching and learning

Theme: *Stay the course—but make systems more efficient and usable.*

4. Transparency, Trust, and Strong Relationships with the Field

Non-teachers emphasized the importance of:

- Honest, transparent decision-making at KSDE
- Meaningful stakeholder input (not performative listening)
- Clear goals and aligned vision
- A kind, approachable, visible Commissioner who visits schools
- Hiring qualified KSDE staff with real content and leadership experience

Theme: *Trust is built through transparency, follow-through, and presence.*

5. Strong Advocacy for Public Education, Safety, and Equity Across Districts

Respondents want a Commissioner who will:

- Be an unapologetic advocate for public education
- Stand up for Kansas schools in a challenging political climate
- Ensure school safety for all students and families
- Recognize differences between rural, suburban, and large urban districts
- Provide equitable—but not identical—support across district types

Theme: *Champion public education while respecting local context.*

Educators who are currently not teaching want a Kansas-connected, student-focused Commissioner who will solve educator shortages, fully fund Special Education, continue and refine KESA, operate transparently, and advocate strongly for public schools and equitable support across all districts.

AGENCY

1. Address Educator Shortages Through Strategic, System-Level Action

Agency respondents repeatedly identify **educator shortages** as the most urgent, statewide threat:

- Increase the number of certified teachers in high-need areas
- Direct resources intentionally toward recruitment and retention

- Reduce unnecessary licensure barriers that increase cost without improving outcomes
- Recognize that shortages affect students, families, districts, and KSDE operations

Theme: *Staffing the system is the prerequisite for all other improvement efforts.*

2. Fully Fund and Reform Special Education and Student Support Systems

There is strong alignment around the need to:

- Fully fund Special Education
- Reduce the strain SPED places on district general funds
- Address behavioral challenges with consistent standards and supports
- Strengthen ELL funding and services
- Ensure that mental health support remains a priority

Theme: *Sustainable funding and coherent support are essential for students with complex needs.*

3. Continue KESA While Streamlining Accountability, Data, and Reporting Systems

Agency respondents strongly support:

- Continuing KESA 2.0 and the School Improvement Model
- Improving alignment among standards, assessments, and curriculum (e.g., KAP and ELA)
- Eliminating redundant reporting and low-impact initiatives
- Modernizing KSDE systems so data platforms communicate effectively
- Increasing efficiency in assessments and documentation (e.g., CTE, graduation requirements)

Theme: *Build on what works—while fixing systems that slow schools down.*

4. Strengthen Trust, Transparency, and Internal Capacity at KSDE

Respondents emphasize the importance of:

- Transparent decision-making and follow-through
- Meaningful stakeholder engagement (not symbolic listening)
- Clear goals aligned to a unified KSDE vision
- Hiring and retaining qualified KSDE staff with content and leadership expertise
- Improving internal culture and reducing staff turnover

Theme: *KSDE must model the trust, clarity, and professionalism it expects of districts.*

5. Advocate for Public Education, Equity, and Safety Across a Diverse State

Agency feedback highlights the need for a Commissioner who will:

- Be a strong, public advocate for Kansas public education
- Protect school safety and understand federal policy and funding realities
- Ensure support is equitable—but differentiated—across district sizes and demographics
- Recognize the needs of underserved and mobile student populations

- Maintain a visible, approachable presence in schools statewide

Theme: Champion public education while honoring Kansas's diversity and complexity.

Agency respondents want a Kansas-connected, systems-minded Commissioner who will solve educator shortages, fully fund and strengthen Special Education, continue and refine KESA, restore trust and efficiency within KSDE, and advocate boldly for public education and equitable support statewide.

PARENTS

1. Restore High Expectations, Accountability, and Classroom Order

Parents most frequently and forcefully raised concerns about:

- Lack of consistent academic and behavioral expectations
- Weak or uneven enforcement of consequences
- Disruptions to learning environments
- A desire to return to strong foundational skills in reading, math, science, and history

Theme: Children cannot succeed without clear expectations, accountability, and safe learning environments.

2. Improve Student Safety, Mental Health, and Support Systems

Parents expressed deep concern about:

- School safety protocols and crisis response
- Gun violence prevention and student protection
- Mental health supports for students
- Transparency and accountability when safety systems fail, especially for students with special needs

Theme: Student safety and well-being must be non-negotiable.

3. Strengthen Academic Outcomes and Expand Learning Opportunities

Parents want:

- Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students
- Evidence-based instructional practices
- More opportunities for college credit in high school
- Alternative and individualized learning pathways (including Montessori, alternative education, and gifted programming)
- Smaller class sizes, especially for students with special needs

Theme: Parents want results, rigor, and multiple pathways to success.

4. Support and Stabilize the Education Workforce—With a Focus on the Classroom

Parents emphasized:

- Competitive pay for teachers and non-certified staff

- Improved teacher-to-student ratios, especially in SPED
- Fewer administrative layers and more resources directed to classrooms
- Retention of experienced KSDE staff to ensure continuity and institutional knowledge

Theme: *Invest in the people who directly serve students.*

5. Respect Local Control, Community Voice, and Political Balance

Parents want a Commissioner who will:

- Listen to families and local communities
- Build trust through transparent communication
- Respect local decision-making while ensuring fairness
- Keep partisan politics out of classrooms
- Navigate contentious issues (e.g., curriculum, DEI, SEL, instructional methods) with balance and respect for parent voice

Theme: *Trust grows when families are heard, and schools stay focused on students—not politics.*

Parents want a student-focused, accountable Commissioner who will restore academic rigor and expectations, ensure school safety, improve learning outcomes and pathways, direct resources to classrooms, and respect community voice while keeping politics out of education.

CITIZENS (Taxpayers without Children in School, Elected Officials, Others)

1. Restore Academic Rigor, Accountability, and Basic Skills

Citizens overwhelmingly emphasized a return to:

- Strong expectations in reading, writing, and mathematics
- Honest accountability for student outcomes
- Transparent assessment practices (no lowering benchmarks or “gaming” results)
- Clear promotion standards and remediation when students are not ready to advance

Theme: *Raise standards, tell the truth about results, and focus on fundamentals.*

2. Address Student Behavior, Discipline, and School Safety

Respondents consistently raised concerns about:

- Escalating student behavior issues
- Inconsistent consequences and discipline
- Bullying and intimidation
- The need for safe, orderly learning environments where all students can learn

Theme: *Students deserve classrooms that are safe, calm, and conducive to learning.*

3. Solve the Teacher Shortage Through Pay, Preparation, and Retention

Citizens broadly agree that:

- Teacher recruitment and retention is a statewide crisis
- Salaries must be competitive to keep high-quality educators
- Preparation pathways should be efficient but rigorous
- Collaboration with higher education is essential to building a sustainable workforce

Theme: *Kansas must value teachers if it expects strong schools.*

4. Ensure Responsible Stewardship, Transparency, and Local Control

Respondents stressed the importance of:

- Transparency in budgets, spending, and decision-making
- Accountability to taxpayers
- Reducing administrative overhead and bureaucracy
- Respect for local school board authority over curriculum and operations
- Clear governance boundaries and adherence to proper procedures

Theme: *Trust grows when the system is transparent, efficient, and locally responsive.*

5. Navigate Political and Cultural Divisions While Advocating for Public Education

Citizen feedback reflects a wide range of views, but strong agreement that the Commissioner should:

- Keep partisan politics from overwhelming instruction
- Focus on students rather than ideology
- Advocate publicly for Kansas public schools
- Lead calmly and credibly in a polarized environment
- Maintain visibility, accessibility, and professionalism

Theme: *Leadership must rise above politics and keep students at the center.*

Citizens want a credible, experienced education leader who will restore academic rigor, ensure safety and discipline, solve the teacher shortage, be transparent and fiscally responsible, and navigate political divisions while advocating for strong public schools.

COMMONALITIES AMONG ALL GROUPS (Consensus Themes)

1. Address the Educator Workforce Shortage

Every stakeholder group—without exception—identified teacher shortages, recruitment, and retention as a critical priority.

Shared elements include:

- Increasing the supply of qualified teachers in shortage areas
- Improving compensation and working conditions
- Strengthening preparation pipelines with higher education
- Retaining experienced educators and support staff

Why this is universal: Without enough qualified adults in schools, *nothing else works.*

2. Fully Fund and Strengthen Special Education

Across groups, Special Education emerged as a system under strain:

- Chronic underfunding
- Staffing shortages (teachers, paras, specialists)
- Increasing behavioral and academic needs
- Inequitable funding models are creating pressure on general education

Why this is universal: Stakeholders agree Kansas is failing to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students—and staff are paying the price.

3. Improve Student Behavior, Safety, and Learning Conditions

While language differed, all groups emphasized:

- The need for safe, orderly schools
- Clear expectations and consistent consequences
- Support for mental health and behavioral challenges
- Environments where teaching and learning can actually occur

Why this is universal: No stakeholder group believes learning is possible in chaotic or unsafe classrooms.

4. Focus on Strong Academic Outcomes—Especially Literacy and Numeracy

Across perspectives, there is broad agreement on:

- Improving reading and math outcomes
- Honest accountability and meaningful assessment
- High expectations and rigor
- Multiple pathways to success without lowering standards

Why this is universal: Stakeholders may disagree on methods, but they agree that Kansas must do better for student learning.

5. Reduce Bureaucracy and Streamline Systems

Nearly all groups called for:

- Fewer redundant reports and compliance burdens
- More efficient KSDE systems and processes
- Alignment between standards, curriculum, assessments, and data systems

Why this is universal: Stakeholders see inefficiency as draining time, energy, and resources away from students.

6. Be a Visible Presence for Trust-Building Leadership

Across all groups, stakeholders want a Commissioner who is:

- Approachable and visible in schools statewide
- Transparent and honest
- Willing to listen and incorporate feedback
- Credible, experienced, and Kansas-connected

Why this is universal: Trust in leadership is seen as essential to moving the system forward, especially in a polarized climate.

7. Advocate for Public Education While Respecting Local Context

Every group expressed—directly or indirectly—the need for:

- A strong advocate for Kansas public schools
- Protection from harmful political interference
- Respect for local control and district diversity
- Equitable (not identical) support across rural, suburban, and urban districts

Why this is universal: Stakeholders want leadership that defends public education while recognizing Kansas's diversity.

The shared priorities point to a Commissioner who must:

Stabilize the workforce, fully support Special Education, restore safe and orderly learning environments, improve academic outcomes, reduce bureaucracy, lead transparently, and advocate fiercely for Kansas public education.

To summarize, in addition to the priorities from the multiple choice in Q2:

- Addressing school funding challenges, and supporting sustainable, equitable, and adequate funding.
- Addressing classroom behavior issues and their effect on student learning and teacher retention.
- Focus on supporting districts to improve literacy and numeracy for all students.
- Support school districts' local control while maintaining state accountability measures.
- Increase the number of certified teachers in areas of shortage.

Additional priorities that appeared in the open-ended responses of Q3 are:

- Fully Fund and Strengthen Special Education
- Reduce Bureaucracy and Streamline Systems
- Be a Visible Presence for Trust-Building Leadership
- Advocate for Public Education

Quantitative Results: Attributes

Turning to leadership qualifications and experience, respondents were asked to rank the following as: "Extremely important; Important; Somewhat important; Not so important; Not important at all."

- Q4. Have experience as an educator?
- Q5. Have the proven ability to successfully manage conflict & change with courage, confidence, composure?
- Q6. Have been a successful leader in a large and complex organization?
- Q7. Have demonstrated expertise in improving students' academic achievement?
- Q8. Have proven success in implementing successful practices for recruiting and retaining excellent staff?
- Q9. Have successfully worked with legislators to pursue school, district, regional, or state public education needs?
- Q10. Have fostered new opportunities for stakeholder engagement and collaboration?
- Q11. Possess a comprehensive knowledge of leading educational research and best practices?
- Q12. Be a clear, transparent, and effective communicator to all stakeholders?
- Q13. Have successfully addressed the needs of a diverse student population?
- Q14. Have earned distinction as a visible and immersive presence in communities and schools?
- Q15. Have shown the proven ability to inspire and motivate all stakeholders?
- Q16. Be well versed in serving special education students?
- Q17. Have earned a doctorate degree?
- Q18. Be (or have been) a leader in a field other than education (e.g. business, military, non-profits)?
- Q19. Be a current or former resident of Kansas?

Paraphrasing the adage, "if everything is important, nothing is important," HYA uses "Extremely Important" as the indicator of a necessary qualification and/or experience. The four leading qualifications/experiences were:

- Have experience as an educator
- Have the proven ability to successfully manage conflict & change with courage, confidence, and composure
- Be a clear, transparent, and effective communicator to all stakeholders

Disaggregating the data by role (Table 2), we found more similarities than differences among groups. For example, more than 50% of ALL disaggregated groups ranked "Have the proven ability to successfully manage conflict and change with courage, confidence, composure" as an Extremely Important Attribute for the next leader.

Moreover, more than 50% of participants for all groups – with the exception of “Taxpayers without children in school” note that “Experience as an Educator” is Extremely Important. Likewise, more than 50% of all groups with the exception of “Parents” ranked as Extremely Important.

Clearly, these three attributes are “must haves” for the next Commissioner.

Table 2: Percentage Ranking a Characteristic, Qualification, or Experience as Extremely Important (disaggregated by role)

	Stakeholder Group									Rural n=335	Urban n=101	Suburban n=165
	Superintendent n=125	Teacher n=97	Non-Teaching n=161	KSDE Staff n=109	Parent n=77	Elected Official n=41	Taxpayer n=35	Other Stakeholder n=29				
Q4. Have experience as an educator?	93	86	80	63	60	53	47	70	76	71	76	
Q5. Have the proven ability to successfully manage conflict & change	65	57	52	56	60	68	56	67	56	52	56	
Q6. Have been a successful leader in a large and complex organization?	28	22	35	26	14	26	22	22	22	34	28	
Q7. Have demonstrated expertise in improving students' academic achievement?	28	39	30	26	41	37	41	22	33	33	30	
Q8. Have proven success for recruiting and retaining excellent staff?	21	33	25	26	33	26	38	26	24	39	24	
Q9. Have successfully worked with legislators to pursue public education needs?	40	34	50	28	31	42	25	30	36	30	40	
Q10. Have fostered new opportunities for stakeholder engagement & collaboration?	11	9	10	7	11	11	13	15	9	10	13	
Q11. Possess a comprehensive knowledge of educational research / best practices?	33	40	26	29	27	29	19	37	31	29	32	
Q12. Be a clear, transparent, and effective communicator to all stakeholders?	68	62	63	67	47	58	63	63	64	54	64	
Q13. Have successfully addressed the needs of a diverse student population?	19	41	28	30	31	24	19	33	22	46	31	
Q14. Have earned distinction as a visible, immersive presence?	20	15	7	10	11	13	0	15	13	13	13	
Q15. Have shown the proven ability to inspire and motivate all stakeholders?	23	18	25	19	10	24	9	22	19	15	24	
Q16. Be well versed in serving special education students?	15	39	21	13	23	18	16	26	19	25	28	
Q17. Have earned a doctorate degree?	12	8	4	11	7	16	6	37	6	13	13	
Q18. Be (or have been) a leader in a field other than education?	6	5	0	3	6	0	6	4	4	2	4	
Q19. Be a current or former resident of Kansas?	46	37	29	26	40	29	25	41	37	27	29	

KEY: **Yellow shading** indicates that 50% or more of respondents ranked this attribute in their Top 5 choices

NOTE: For easier reading, this table is enlarged and included on a separate page at the end of the full Leadership Profile Report.

One should also note the three items that were lowest ranked among attributes and thus should not be considered when selecting a new Commissioner.

- Be (or have been) a leader in a field other than education (e.g. business, military, non-profits)
- Have earned a doctorate degree
- Have fostered **new** opportunities for stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Qualitative Survey Results: Attributes

In addition to the multiple-choice prompts, participants were invited to provide open-ended responses to "the most important PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES you believe are essential traits for the next Commissioner to have. (For example, integrity, empathy, courage, political savvy)" We received 434 comments to this prompt. For purposes of analysis, we disaggregated respondents into three groups: Citizens (parents, elected officials, taxpayers without children in school, and others); Agency (KSDE staff); and Educators (Superintendents, Teachers, and non-teaching public school employees). These are the Top 10 attributes from each group.

CITIZENS (parents, elected officials, taxpayers without children in school, others)

1. Integrity (Non-Negotiable)

By far the most frequently cited attribute.

- Honest, ethical, trustworthy
- Says what they mean and means what they say
- Acts consistently—even under pressure

Why it matters: Trust in education leadership is fragile; integrity is seen as foundational.

2. Honesty, Transparency, and Truth-Telling

Closely tied to integrity, but distinct in emphasis.

- Tells the truth about student outcomes and system challenges
- Transparent decision-making and communication
- No "spin," double-talk, or hidden agendas

Why it matters: Stakeholders want confidence that problems won't be minimized or concealed.

3. Empathy, Compassion, and Respect for People

Repeated across parents, citizens, and elected officials.

- Understands students, educators, and families as people—not numbers
- Values dignity, kindness, and humanity
- Especially attentive to vulnerable students and communities

Why it matters: People want firm leadership *without* cruelty or detachment.

4. Strong, Courageous Leadership

Often expressed as "backbone," "fortitude," or "grit."

- Willing to make hard decisions
- Not swayed by the loudest voices or special interests
- Can stand up to political pressure when students' interests are at stake

Why it matters: Stakeholders want leadership, not avoidance.

5. Effective Communicator and Listener

Nearly universal expectation.

- Listen deeply and without judgment
- Communicates clearly with parents, educators, legislators, and the public
- Explain decisions and rationale in plain language

Why it matters: Poor communication is seen as a root cause of mistrust and conflict.

6. Political Savvy Without Being Political

A nuanced but consistent theme.

- Understands how to navigate legislatures, boards, and power structures
- Can negotiate and build coalitions
- Avoids ideological extremes or performative politics

Why it matters: People want results—not culture wars or chaos.

7. Student-Centered and Values-Driven

Across ideologies, respondents emphasized:

- Decisions grounded in what is best for students
- High academic standards and expectations
- Moral clarity about the purpose of public education

Why it matters: Stakeholders want students—not systems or politics—at the center.

8. Collaborative, Relationship-BUILDER

Often paired with diplomacy and bridge-building.

- Works across differences
- Brings opposing groups together
- Build trust among educators, families, communities, and policymakers

Why it matters: Kansas is diverse; progress requires collaboration, not silos.

9. Educational Credibility and Real-World Experience

Strong preference for:

- Actual classroom experience
- Understanding how schools' function day-to-day
- Credibility with educators and the public

Why it matters: People distrust leaders perceived as disconnected from real schools.

10. Humility, Open-Mindedness, and Willingness to Learn

Repeated in softer but consistent language.

- Not arrogant or power-hungry
- Willing to admit mistakes
- Curious, reflective, and adaptable

Why it matters: Stakeholders want confidence *without ego*.

Citizens want a Commissioner with unquestioned integrity, honest and transparent communication, deep empathy, courageous and student-centered leadership, political skill without ideology, strong collaboration skills, real educational experience, and the humility to listen, learn, and lead for the long term.

AGENCY

1. Integrity (Foundational)

The single most repeated and strongly emphasized attribute.

- Ethical, principled, honest
- Acts in the best interest of students and the state
- Consistent in words and actions, even under pressure

Why it matters: Agency staff want a leader they can trust—internally and publicly.

2. Political Savvy Without Personal Ambition

Repeated emphasis on *skillful navigation*, not politics for self.

- Able to work with legislators, boards, and critics
- Can push back when needed
- Keeps principles above personal or positional gain

Why it matters: The Commissioner must protect students and KSDE without inflaming conflict.

3. Strong, Clear, and Calm Communication

Agency respondents emphasized communication more than any other group.

- Transparent, authentic, and consistent
- Able to communicate clearly during uncertainty or controversy
- Prevents misinformation through proactive engagement

Why it matters: Poor communication creates crises; good communication prevents them.

4. Student-Centered, Equity-Driven Decision Making

Clear expectation that:

- Students—especially the most vulnerable—come first
- Decisions are grounded in student experience and outcomes
- Equity is operationalized, not just stated

Why it matters: Agency staff see the Commissioner as the moral compass of the system.

5. Accountability Paired with Compassion

Agency respondents want **high expectations with humanity**.

- Holds self and others accountable
- Cares about staff workload and well-being

- Balances results with understanding of real-world constraints

Why it matters: KSDE culture and retention depend on fair, human leadership.

6. Visionary Systems Thinker Who Can Execute

Strong emphasis on systems leadership.

- See how policy, data, funding, and practice connect
- Focused on solutions, not silos
- Visionary but attentive to implementation details

Why it matters: The agency needs coherence, alignment, and follow-through.

7. Approachable, Trust-Building, and Relational

Agency respondents repeatedly described the way leadership shows up.

- Personable, respectful, visible
- Build trust internally and externally
- Creates psychological safety for honest dialogue

Why it matters: Trust drives collaboration and performance inside KSDE.

8. Courage to Do What's Right—Even When Unpopular

Often described as "backbone," "moral courage," or "resolute."

- Willing to make difficult decisions
- Can withstand criticism and political pressure
- Prioritizes long-term outcomes over short-term comfort

Why it matters: System improvement requires courage, not avoidance.

9. Open-Minded, Reflective, and Willing to Learn

Agency staff value humility and growth.

- Seeking expertise from the field and research
- Admits when something isn't working
- Adjust course based on evidence and feedback

Why it matters: Continuous improvement starts with leader learning.

10. Proven Educational Credibility and Kansas Context

Strong preference for:

- Experience as a Kansas superintendent or school leader
- Deep understanding of the Kansas education system
- Credibility with districts, educators, and partners

Why it matters: Agency staff want leadership grounded in, lived in Kansas experience.

The Agency wants a principled, politically savvy, student-centered Commissioner who communicates clearly, leads with integrity and courage, builds trust internally and externally, thinks systemically, and holds high expectations with compassion.

EDUCATORS (Superintendents, Teachers, Non-teaching Public School Staff)

1. Integrity and Trustworthiness

By far the most repeated attribute.

- Ethical, honest, credible
- Keeps promises and builds trust through consistent action

2. Courage and Backbone

Often framed as moral courage and willingness to stand firm.

- Willing to advocate for Kansas students and public education
- Not swayed by a loud minority, corporations, or political pressure

3. Strong Communication and Active Listening

Educators repeatedly emphasized both speaking and listening.

- Clear, plain-language communicator
- Makes people feel heard and understood
- Communicate vision in a way that brings even skeptics along

4. Real Education Experience and Classroom Credibility

Strong preference for leaders who understand schools from the inside.

- Practical understanding of how classrooms and district's function
- Ideally, Kansas-rooted leadership experience (many explicitly prefer superintendent experience)

5. Empathy, Compassion, and Respect for Educators

A consistent theme: human-centered leadership.

- Understands current reality (post-COVID, student needs, staff stress)
- Treats educators the way they want to be treated

6. Student-First, Public Education Advocate

Educators want a Commissioner whose "north star" is students.

- Defends public schools
- Advocates for student success across socioeconomic backgrounds

7. Political Savvy Without Being Political

Repeated desire for someone who can navigate the legislature and the board.

- Skilled at influence and diplomacy
- Not ideological, not agenda-driven

8. Visionary Yet Practical (Not “Education-ese”)

Educators want direction *and* realism.

- Clear plan for improvement and student achievement
- Avoids canned programs and one-size-fits-all “theories”
- Focused on what actually works in Kansas classrooms

9. Fairness, Consistency, and Sound Judgment

Often stated as firm, fair, consistent, principled decision-making.

- Consistent expectations and follow-through
- Makes balanced decisions using evidence and stakeholder input

10. Open-Minded, Flexible, and Growth-Oriented

Educators want a leader who learns and adapts.

- Seeks input from the field
- Adjusts based on evidence
- Willing to delegate and build strong teams

Educators want a Commissioner of Education who leads with integrity and courage, communicates clearly while genuinely listening, brings real classroom and district credibility, advocates fiercely for students and public education, navigates politics without being ideological, and combines a clear, practical vision with empathy, fairness, and a continuous willingness to learn and adapt.

Synthesizing all of this into a list of top ten attributes that reflect common desires across all stakeholder groups, we find these are the key traits the next Commissioner must have and exhibit:

1. Integrity and Trustworthiness (Non-Negotiable)

The Commissioner must be ethical, honest, and consistent, someone whose words and actions align, even under pressure—because trust in education leadership is fragile and foundational to progress.

2. Honesty, Transparency, and Truth-Telling

Stakeholders want a leader who speaks plainly about challenges and outcomes, avoids spin or hidden agendas, and communicates decisions openly so problems are addressed—not obscured.

3. Courageous Leadership with Moral Backbone

Across groups, there is strong demand for a Commissioner willing to make hard decisions, stand up to political or ideological pressure, and prioritize students’ long-term interests over short-term comfort.

4. Strong Communication and Active Listening

The ideal Commissioner communicates clearly in plain language, listens deeply without judgment, explains decisions thoughtfully, and prevents conflict through proactive, steady communication.

5. Student-Centered, Public Education Advocate

Stakeholders want a leader whose “north star” is students—especially the most vulnerable—and who defends public education with high expectations, moral clarity, and a clear sense of purpose.

6. Political Savvy Without Being Political

The Commissioner must skillfully navigate legislatures, boards, and power dynamics, build coalitions, and push back when necessary—without being ideological, performative, or agenda-driven.

7. Educational Credibility and Real-World Experience

There is a strong preference for a leader with authentic classroom and district experience—ideally Kansas-rooted—who understands how schools actually function day to day and has credibility with educators and the public.

8. Empathy, Compassion, and Respect for People

Stakeholders consistently emphasized human-centered leadership: a Commissioner who understands educators, students, and families as people, leads with dignity and kindness, and balances accountability with care.

9. Visionary, Systems-Minded, and Practical Leadership

The Commissioner must articulate a clear vision, think systemically across policy, funding, data, and practice, and execute realistically avoiding jargon, one-size-fits-all solutions, or disconnected initiatives.

10. Humility, Open-Mindedness, and Commitment to Learning

Across all groups, there is a strong desire for a leader who is confident without ego—willing to admit mistakes, seek expertise, listen to the field, adapt based on evidence, and grow alongside the system.

To summarize, across all stakeholder groups, there is striking alignment around the need for a Commissioner who leads with integrity and courage, communicates honestly and clearly, centers students and public education, navigates politics skillfully without

ideology, brings real educational credibility, builds trust through empathy and relationships, and pairs a clear, practical vision with humility and continuous learning.

Here are ten relevant verbatim quotes supporting these characteristics (the number is the order in which they were received among the 464 comments):

16. *Someone who can put the students of Kansas first and be strong enough in mind and integrity to face hard issues with courage and the knowledge that facing an issue creates opportunities for improvement*

36. *Political courage - Dedicated to seeing ALL students succeed, regardless of ethnicity, income level, ability/disability, location Fearless*

48. *The most important personal attributes for the next Commissioner include integrity, empathy, and strong listening skills. They must genuinely value educators, students, and families by seeking input from those working directly in schools and using that feedback to guide decisions. The Commissioner should demonstrate transparency, fairness, and the courage to advocate for teachers and students, even when doing so is politically challenging. Additionally, strong communication, sound judgment, and the ability to lead with both compassion and accountability are essential for creating trust and driving meaningful, sustainable change in education*

51. *We need someone who knows the needs of KS communities and has worked with a diverse group of students and families, with a special focus on how decisions affect the most vulnerable among us. And now more than ever, civility and integrity are qualities that leaders need to display at all times and in all interactions*

114. *Integrity is absolutely key. A Commissioner with a strong moral compass will ensure that they make ethical decisions that benefit our community. Empathy is also crucial, as it allows the Commissioner to understand and address the concerns and needs of the people they serve. Courage is another important trait, enabling the Commissioner to take bold actions and stand up for what is right, even in the face of adversity. Finally, political savvy is essential for navigating the complex landscape of our community's needs and interests*

210. *High integrity, courage in difficult situations, and a keen ability to work successfully with all facets of KSDE to ensure the best support is provided to districts. This individual can't be the most knowledgeable and skilled in every aspect of education, but they do need to be highly skilled to work with a diverse team to accomplish the scope of work.*

252. They will need to be comfortable in the political world, working with all stakeholders, however first and foremost should be an advocate of public education for all students. Integrity, Forward thinking, and Adaptability will all be important for the new Commissioner.

285. The most important personal attributes for the next Commissioner include honesty, integrity, and a genuine love for public education. They should be relatable and cooperative, with the ability to build strong relationships and work effectively with a wide range of stakeholders. Additionally, being a great communicator is essential to clearly convey vision, listen to educators, and advocate for teachers and students

328. Integrity, Empathy, and Humility are bare minimums for any leader. This position also requires strong public speaking skills, political advocacy skills, a strong understanding of improving student learning in schools and the ability to see how the future of education is changing and build consensus around a new vision of preparing students for success in their future

418. I feel we need someone who is a strong communicator that can effectively communicate sensitive subjects to the public. Many times, when there is an uproar about education, it is because issues have not been communicated well to stakeholders. This causes people to develop their own hypotheses. The Commissioner must also have a motivating, yet compassionate personality/demeanor. They must know how to get results while still understanding they are dealing with fallible humans.

In closing, we found most participants to be thoughtful and engaged respondents. Those who took time to complete the survey provided helpful, thoughtful feedback and expressed their thoughts clearly. Distilling an enormous amount of data into one paragraph, our team concludes that the ideal candidate for Kansas's next State Commissioner of Education is a leader who leads with unquestioned integrity, honesty, and transparency; communicates clearly and listens deeply; and demonstrates the courage to make difficult decisions in the best interests of students. The Commissioner must be a visible and trusted advocate for public education, grounded in real classroom and district experience, and capable of navigating complex political environments with skill and diplomacy—without being ideological or agenda-driven. Equally important, stakeholders emphasized the need for a student-centered, systems-minded leader who pairs a clear and practical vision with empathy, respect for educators and families, and a commitment to collaboration across Kansas's diverse communities. Finally, there is broad agreement that the next Commissioner must lead with humility, remain open to learning, adapt based on evidence, and build trust through consistent, principled action over time.

SECTION THREE: DESIRED CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALIFICATIONS

From the interviews, focus groups, forums, and survey results, we have identified these primary desired characteristics and qualifications for the next State Commissioner of Kansas. As noted earlier, these will be used throughout the recruitment and selection process to identify highly qualified candidates and ultimately the individual that the State Board will select to lead and serve Kansas' present and future students and educators, as well as the Kansas Department of Education and ultimately to ensure that all of Kansans benefit from the highest quality of public school education.

1. Integrity and Ethical Leadership

The Commissioner must be consistently honest, principled, and trustworthy, aligning words and actions even under pressure to build and sustain public confidence in education leadership.

2. Honesty, Transparency, and Truth-Telling

The Commissioner communicates openly and plainly about challenges, decisions, and outcomes—without spin or hidden agendas—so problems are confronted rather than concealed.

3. Courage and Moral Backbone

The Commissioner demonstrates the fortitude to make difficult decisions, speak truth to power, and protect students and public education despite political, ideological, or personal pressure.

4. Strong Communication and Deep Listening

The Commissioner clearly explains complex issues in accessible language while listening to understand—not rebut—across educators, families, policymakers, students, and the public.

5. Student-Centered, Public Education Advocate

Every decision is guided by what best serves students—especially the most vulnerable—with a firm commitment to high expectations and the long-term strength of Kansas public schools.

6. Political Savvy Without Being Political

The Commissioner skillfully navigates legislatures, boards, and power dynamics to advance education priorities while remaining non-ideological, pragmatic, and focused on results.

7. Educational Credibility and Real-World Experience

The Commissioner brings authentic experience in public education—ideally including Kansas district leadership—grounding decisions in an understanding of classrooms, districts, and implementation realities.

8. Empathy, Compassion, and Respect for People

The Commissioner leads with humanity, recognizing educators, students, and families as people, and balances accountability with care, dignity, and respect.

9. Visionary, Systems-Minded, and Practical Leadership

The Commissioner sets a clear “north star,” thinks systemically across policy, funding, data, and practice, and executes solutions that are realistic, coherent, and evidence-based.

10. Humility, Approachability, and Commitment to Learning

The Commissioner leads with confidence without ego—remaining visible, open to feedback, willing to admit mistakes, and committed to continuous learning and improvement.

Respectfully Submitted,

Glenn “Max” McGee, Mike Richie, and Frank Henderson

Table 1: Ranking and Percentage of Respondents Selecting Priority in Their Top Five (disaggregated by role)

	Stakeholder Group										Rural n=335	Urban n=101	Suburban n=165			
	Super-		Admin/		KSDE		Elected		Other							
	intendant n=125	Teacher n=97	Non-Teaching n=161	Staff n=109	Parent n=77	Official n=41	Taxpayer n=35	Stakeholder n=54								
Answer Choices																
Collaborate with local districts & higher education to support professional development											2 (47)					
Focus on supporting districts to improve literacy and numeracy for all students.					5 (34)	5 (30)	5 (37)	3 (49)	5 (32)		3 (43)					
Be present in schools and communities to listen, learn, and build trust.	5 (42)				4 (40)	5 (30)				4 (36)						
Address classroom behavior issues & impact on student learning & teacher retention.		2 (64)	2 (48)			2 (49)			1 (57)	4 (44)	4 (36)	2 (50)	2 (49)			
Ensure KSDE operates efficiently & collaboratively to support school districts	2 (60)				1 (61)		3 (39)	4 (37)		3 (45)	5 (34)	3 (44)				
Support students' workforce readiness and career pathways									5 (34)							
Support school districts' local control while maintaining state accountability measures	4 (54)	5 (34)	4 (40)			4 (30)	2 (46)	1 (57)		2 (46)						
Increase the numbers of certified teachers in areas of shortage.		3 (37)	4 (40)	5 (34)	3 (39)	3 (39)			2 (47)		4 (39)	5 (33)				
Address school funding challenges; support sustainable, equitable, adequate funding	1 (80)	1 (72)	1 (83)	2 (54)	1 (64)	1 (73)	5 (34)	1 (56)		1 (71)	1 (67)	1 (70)				
Develop new educational opportunities to prepare students for future success.						5 (30)	5 (37)									
Set a clear vision for the Future of Kansas Education	3 (55)		3 (41)	3 (42)									4 (40)			
Improve communication with all stakeholders.																
Provide guidance for districts to manage technology opportunities & threats																
Improve programs and support services for students with special needs.		3 (37)														
Continue efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps.																

KEY: Yellow shading indicates that 50% or more of respondents ranked this priority in their top 5 choices

Table 2: Percentage Ranking a Characteristic, Qualification, or Experience as Extremely Important (disaggregated by role)

	Stakeholder Group												
			Admin/		KSDE		Elected		Other				
	<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Teacher</u>	<u>Non-Teaching</u>	<u>Staff</u>	<u>Parent</u>	<u>Official</u>	<u>Taxpayer</u>	<u>Stakeholder</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Suburban</u>		
	n=125	n=97	n=161	n=109	n=77	n=41	n=35	n=29	n=335	n=101	n=165		
Q4. Have experience as an educator?	93	86	80	63	60	53	47	70	76	71	76		
Q5. Have the proven ability to successfully manage conflict & change	65	57	52	56	60	68	56	67	56	52	56		
Q6. Have been a successful leader in a large and complex organization?	28	22	35	26	14	26	22	22	22	34	28		
Q7. Have demonstrated expertise in improving students' academic achievement?	28	39	30	26	41	37	41	22	33	33	30		
Q8. Have proven success i for recruiting and retaining excellent staff?	21	33	25	26	33	26	38	26	24	39	24		
Q9. Have successfully worked with legislators to pursue public education needs?	40	34	50	28	31	42	25	30	36	30	40		
Q10. Have fostered new opportunities for stakeholder engagement & collaboration?	11	9	10	7	11	11	13	15	9	10	13		
Q11. Possess a comprehensive knowledge of educational research / best practices?	33	40	26	29	27	29	19	37	31	29	32		
Q12. Be a clear, transparent, and effective communicator to all stakeholders?	68	62	63	67	47	58	63	63	64	54	64		
Q13. Have successfully addressed the needs of a diverse student population?	19	41	28	30	31	24	19	33	22	46	31		
Q14. Have earned distinction as a visible, immersive presence?	20	15	7	10	11	13	0	15	13	13	13		
Q15. Have shown the proven ability to inspire and motivate all stakeholders?	23	18	25	19	10	24	9	22	19	15	24		
Q16. Be well versed in serving special education students?	15	39	21	13	23	18	16	26	19	25	28		
Q17. Have earned a doctorate degree?	12	8	4	11	7	16	6	37	6	13	13		
Q18. Be (or have been) a leader in a field other than education?	6	5	0	3	6	0	6	4	4	2	4		
Q19. Be a current or former resident of Kansas?	46	37	29	26	40	29	25	41	37	27	29		

KEY: Yellow shading indicates that 50% or more of respondents ranked this attribute in their top 5 choices