



## LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT

**Auburn-Washburn USD 437**  
**January 20, 2026**

## SELECTION PROCESS

The Auburn-Washburn Unified School District has retained the services of Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) to assist the Board with the hiring of the next superintendent. The consultants will screen applications and recommend candidates to the Board for interviews and further consideration. Any questions regarding the application process, selection process, and/or this Leadership Profile Report should be directed to: Mike Richie, HYA Vice President [mikerichie@hyasearch.com](mailto:mikerichie@hyasearch.com) or Frank Henderson, HYA Associate [frankhenderson@hyasearch.com](mailto:frankhenderson@hyasearch.com).

## PURPOSE

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by HYA during December 2025 and January 2026 for the new superintendent of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District. The data contained herein was obtained from the input the HYA consultants received when they met with individuals and groups in either individual interviews or focus group settings. In addition, the District conducted an online survey completed by stakeholders in October 2025.

HYA and the Board intend to meet the challenge of finding an individual who possesses the skills and character traits required to meet the district's needs. The search team will focus its recruitment on candidates who possess leadership qualities congruent with the profile.

The search team would like to thank the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District for the opportunity to find your next leader that fits the criteria of your stakeholders. HYA would like to thank all of the participants who attended focus group meetings or completed the online survey, and the Auburn-Washburn Staff who helped coordinate the schedules, invitations, dates, and arrangements which supported the data collection for this report.

Respectfully submitted,  
Dr. Mike Richie, HYA Vice President  
Frank Henderson, HYA Associate

## DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT

Auburn-Washburn Unified School District serves 6,000 students in 128 square miles located in southwest Topeka, the state's Capital City, and Shawnee County. The district has 1,100 employees and an annual operating budget of \$132 million.

Auburn-Washburn is an amazing place to learn and work due to our engaged patron and business community, informed parents who value the importance of an exemplary education, dedicated and talented administrators, teachers, and support staff, and outstanding students who come to school ready and willing to do their very best. We also provide a large variety of co-curricular, performing and fine arts, and athletic opportunities, and our students perform and compete extremely well with students in Kansas and the nation.

The Auburn-Washburn School District is dedicated to meeting the strengths, needs, and dreams of every child, every day. Our district includes seven elementary schools, each serving about 400 students. These schools feed into Washburn Rural Middle School and the new Washburn Rural North Middle School, which serves students in grades 6–8 and average about 700 students each. Both middle schools lead to Washburn Rural High School, a comprehensive 6A high school with just under 2,000 students. In addition, the district offers an early childhood program for 250 three- and four-year-olds and an alternative learning center that provides tailored educational opportunities for students who need a different pathway to success. Across all schools, relationships come first. We work to build strong connections with students and families, creating the foundation for high academic achievement and the development of skills for lifelong success.

### ***Our Mission: Inspiring, challenging, and preparing every child, every day.***

**Vision:** Auburn-Washburn schools provides a safe, enjoyable, and challenging school environment where students have the opportunity to achieve their maximum individual education potential. All students receive a balanced education where traditional academics are taught, creativity and innovation are cultivated, and skills for success are developed; preparing them to assume roles as responsible citizens in a global community, the workplace, and in life.

**Core Values:** We believe learning is a lifelong process. The following values will help realize our vision:

1. We believe in the value and uniqueness of each student:
  - a. Each student has different needs.
  - b. Each student should have the opportunity, and be encouraged, to reach their potential.
  - c. Each student is entitled to a safe, current, and well-maintained school environment.
2. We believe that excellence in education is a multifaceted process:
  - a. Excellence requires building meaningful relationships with all stakeholders and especially with students.
  - b. Excellence requires the commitment and judicious stewardship of community resources.

- c. Excellence prepares students to become happy, responsible, and productive citizens; to successfully live and work in a complex, ever-changing world.
- d. Excellence is a combination of academic performance and skills for success.
- e. Excellence must be a dynamic and engaging process in order to meet changing needs.
- f. Excellence requires rigorous assessment and feedback of both students and faculty staff.
- g. Excellence requires focus on the future.
- h. Excellence depends upon effective resource management.
- i. Excellence, both academic and skills for success, should be recognized and celebrated.

3. We believe that respect and responsibility are essential components of an excellent education:

- a. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.
- b. Effective communication enhances trust and cooperation.
- c. Each student is responsible for their own actions.
- d. Responsibility for public education rests jointly with students, parents, teachers, and community.

Visit the Auburn-Washburn School District Website for more information: <https://usd437.net/>

**Top 10 most valued leadership qualities as identified by a stakeholder survey (October 2025)**

1. Integrity and transparency
2. Strong communication skills
3. Ability to build consensus and commitment when making tough decisions
4. Collaborative leadership style
5. Approachability and visibility in schools/community
6. Equity-mindedness and inclusivity
7. Listens to and represents the interests and concerns of stakeholders
8. Develop and direct an effective administration team
9. Fosters a culture of trust, professionalism, and fairness
10. Strong morals, ethics, and values

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### **Data taken from District implemented survey, October 2025.**

Community feedback was collected by the District through a series of in-person meetings and an online survey. The purpose of these opportunities was to gather input on the key priorities, leadership qualities, and considerations for the district's next superintendent.

A total of 205 survey responses were recorded, representing:

Staff Members: 109

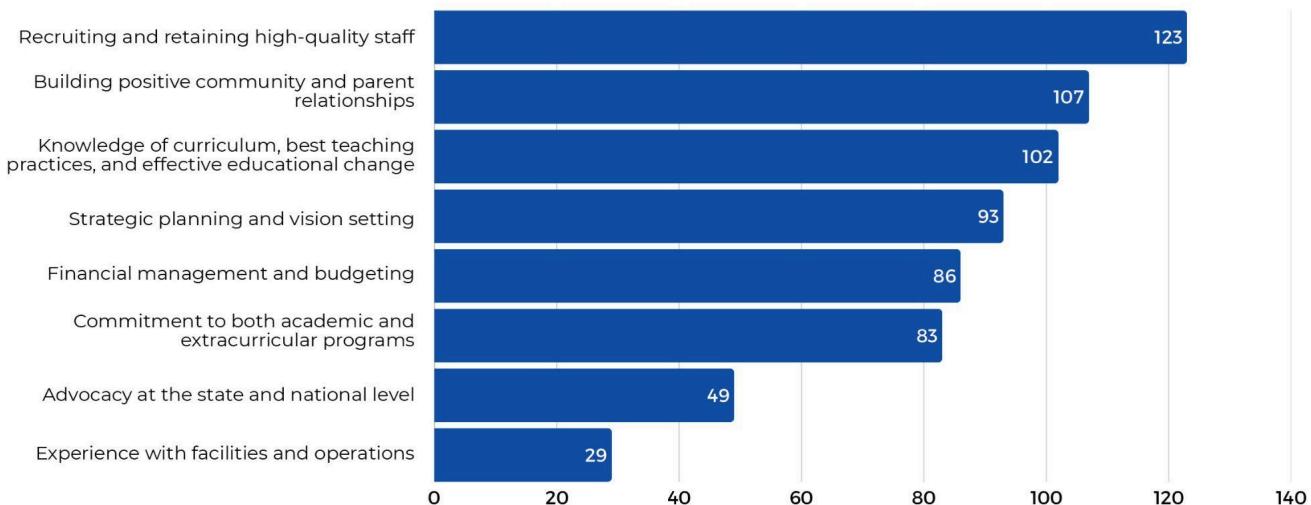
Parents/Guardians: 112

Patrons/Taxpayers: 77

Community meetings were held at Washburn Rural Middle School, Washburn Rural North Middle School, Washburn Rural High School, and the Shuler Education Center. These sessions provided opportunities for staff, parents, students, and community members to share their perspectives directly with Board members. Discussion topics included the leadership qualities, experiences, and first-year priorities most important for the district's next leader.

### **Top-Ranked Skills and Experiences**

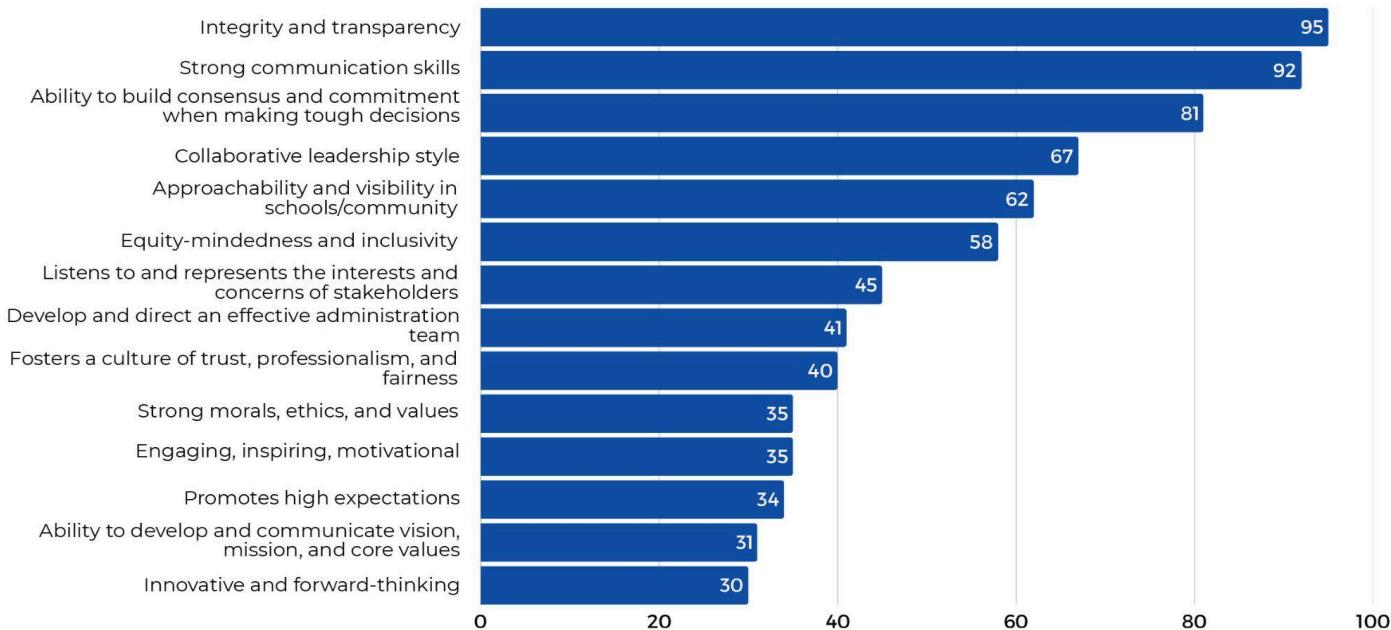
Survey respondents were asked to select up to three skills and experiences they believe to be most important for the next superintendent. Results were as follows:



A total of 12 write-in responses were submitted, highlighting areas such as teaching experience, special education, and support and advocacy for staff. Feedback from in-person sessions echoed common themes outlined in the online survey, specifically emphasizing the importance of relationship-building and long-term strategic planning.

## Most Valued Leadership Qualities

Survey respondents were asked to identify up to three personal leadership qualities they believe to be most important for the next superintendent. Results were as follows:



A total of 7 write-in responses were submitted, highlighting various niche desires. Feedback from in-person sessions echoed common themes outlined in the online survey, specifically emphasizing the importance of integrity and visibility. A long-term commitment to the community was also emphasized in various meetings.

## Insights from Open-Ended Questions

Responses to the open-ended questions revealed several key themes that offer deeper insight into stakeholder expectations and district sentiment.

- **Longevity and Stability:** Many respondents expressed a strong desire for a superintendent committed to serving the district long-term. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of continuity and consistent leadership over short-term tenures or "stepping stone" roles.
- **Educational Experience & Political Neutrality:** There was a clear preference for a superintendent who is student- and education-focused rather than politically driven.

Respondents highlighted the importance of hands-on classroom and district-level experience, coupled with a balanced, non-partisan approach to decision-making. Respondents envision the new superintendent's first year as a period of listening, connecting, and building trust. They want a leader who will strengthen relationships, prioritize communication and fiscal responsibility, and remain centered on students in all decisions. Specifically, respondents emphasized:

- **Listening before leading:** Respondents emphasized that the new superintendent should spend their first year observing, listening, and learning before implementing major changes.
- **Visibility in schools:** Stakeholders want a leader who is consistently present in buildings and classrooms.

### **HYA Community Engagement**

To shape the search for a new superintendent, the HYA Associates gathered valuable insights through interviews, and focus group discussions. These efforts aimed to identify the key qualities desired in the next leader while also highlighting Auburn-Washburn's strengths and challenges ahead. Common themes voiced by multiple groups were used to build a well-rounded leadership profile, ensuring the selected candidate aligns with the district's needs and vision. It should be emphasized that the data is not a scientific sampling, nor does it necessarily represent the majority opinion of each respective group.

HYA conducted individual interviews with nine School Board members (the seven current Board members at the time of the interviews and the two new Board members), along with nineteen (19) focus groups (both in-district and virtual), ensuring that a broad range of perspectives are considered in the superintendent search.

#### **The following questions were asked during each interview and focus group:**

1. What are the strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District that the next superintendent can build upon?
2. What are the challenges facing the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District that the next superintendent should be aware of, or would like to see addressed?
3. What characteristics or traits are you looking for in your new superintendent?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share with us or that we should know about the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?

Through the information gathered, common themes were generated by the respondents. In this report, we will highlight what those themes were as identified by the following groups:

- School Board
- Staff
- Students
- Parents/Community/Business Leaders/Foundation Board

### **PROCESS**

The structure of the individual meetings and focus groups was open, allowing participants to build upon each other's comments. All of those involved in providing input were asked to respond to the questions listed above.

## PARTICIPATION

Responses were gathered from individual interviews and focus groups. The HYA consultants conducted nine (9) individual interviews and hosted 19 focus groups.

<b>Auburn-Washburn Unified School District Interviews and Focus Groups</b>
School Board Members - nine (9) (seven current and two new school board members)
Focus Group 1: Auburn-Washburn Foundation
Focus Group 2: Parents and Community Members
Focus Group 3: Student Group Luncheon
Focus Group 4: Parents and Community Members
Focus Group 5: Certified Staff Members (Secondary Schedule)
Focus Group 6: AW-NEA Officers and Building Reps
Focus Group 7: Any Certified or Classified Staff Member
Focus Group 8: Business Leaders
Focus Group 9: Washburn, Washburn Tech, KSDE, Board of Regents
Focus Group 10: DW/SEC Classified Staff (transportation, mechanics, grounds, secretaries, IT)
Focus Group 11: Certified Staff Members (Elementary Schedule)
Focus Group 12: Parents and Community Members
Focus Group 13: Any Certified or Classified Staff Member
Focus Group 14: Principals
Focus Group 15: Operations Administrators
Focus Group 16: Learning Services Administrators
Focus Group 17: Classified Staff
Focus Group 18: Any Certified or Classified Staff Member & Auburn Community
Focus Group 19: Any Stakeholder

## PROFILE DEVELOPMENT & QUALITIATIVE DATA

Perceived Strengths • Perceived Challenges • Desired Characteristics

### Strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by BOARD OF DIRECTORS

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

#### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Strengths**

1. Stable, respected leadership
2. Strong facilities and physical assets
3. Financial stability and sound management
4. Academic excellence and diverse programming
5. Community and stakeholder support

The Auburn-Washburn Unified School District is positioned for continued success and growth, with a strong foundation for the next superintendent to build upon. Board interviews highlighted the district's many strengths, acknowledged ongoing challenges, and outlined the qualities desired in the next leader. The district is widely viewed as having stable, respected leadership and a strong administrative culture. Stakeholders consistently describe it as a "low-drama" district that is well run, with superintendents who demonstrate integrity, transparency, and a willingness to take responsibility. Communication is seen as clear and effective, contributing to trust and alignment between the board, administration, and broader community.

Another major strength is the district's physical assets and financial stewardship. Well-maintained and safe schools, including a new middle school and a highly valued Innovation Center, reflect pride and long-term planning. Financially, the district is regarded as stable and responsibly managed, with consistent reserve levels, straightforward financial reporting, strong oversight, and successful completion of major bond projects.

Academically, the district enjoys a strong reputation for excellence and forward-thinking leadership. High performance at the secondary level, along with early childhood and diverse programming options, are frequently highlighted. These academic strengths are reinforced by strong community support, with families, staff, and extracurricular programs viewed as key assets, and positive partnerships with local businesses and foundations further enhancing district success.

## **Challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Challenges**

1. Staffing and recruitment difficulties
2. Enrollment decline and housing availability
3. Diversity and inclusion
4. Communication with parents and community
5. Student mental health and expanded school roles

Stakeholders consistently identified staffing and recruitment as a significant challenge for the district, particularly in hiring and retaining bus drivers, paraeducators, and food service staff. While compensation is viewed as competitive, the high cost and limited availability of housing present a major barrier for both current and prospective employees. Ongoing shortages among classified staff are having a direct impact on daily operations and service delivery.

Enrollment trends and housing availability emerged as another key concern. Many noted that incoming kindergarten classes are smaller than graduating cohorts, raising long-term concerns about declining student enrollment. The lack of affordable and diverse housing options was frequently cited as a limiting factor for attracting families and staff, with broader implications for the district's future sustainability.

Participants also pointed to challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, including a perceived lack of diversity and diversity of thought across the district. Respondents expressed a desire for more inclusive representation and a clearer, more visible commitment to embracing diversity in district policies, practices, and leadership.

Communication with parents and the community was identified as an area needing improvement. Some families feel they are not consistently informed about important events or changes, with concerns about overreliance on students as messengers. Transportation changes, in particular, were cited as instances where communication did not adequately prepare families.

Finally, there was strong recognition of the growing need to address student mental health and the expanding role of schools. Stakeholders noted increasing demands for mental health supports, concerns about technology overuse, and challenges related to students' social skill development. Many observed that schools are increasingly expected to fill gaps created by broader societal issues, adding complexity to their core educational mission.

**Characteristics of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

<b>Top Five Desired Characteristics of the next Auburn-Washburn Superintendent as identified by SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS</b>	
<b>Excellent Communication Skills</b>	<b>Trustworthy, Steady Leadership</b>
The superintendent should provide clear, consistent communication with staff, parents, and the board; skillfully navigate difficult conversations; and listen without micromanaging.	The candidate should demonstrate leadership, remaining calm, prepared, and reliable; leading with integrity; and showing a genuine commitment to the district for the long term.
<b>Strong Community Engagement</b>	<b>Operational and HR Competence</b>
Be visible and accessible in the community, building relationships with business and civic leaders, and understanding the local political and advocacy landscape.	The leader should have a solid HR background, the ability to manage grievances and formal complaints effectively, and a clear understanding of district finances, facilities, and staffing.
<b>Adaptive, Collaborative Mindset</b>	
The superintendent should bring a collaborative mindset—learning quickly, working alongside the community rather than imposing change, and partnering effectively with the board.	

**Strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by  
Parents/Community/Business Leaders/Foundation Board**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

**Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Strengths**

1. Academic excellence with high expectations
2. Comprehensive student opportunities and enrichment
3. Exceptional career and college readiness (CTE and partnerships)
4. Strong leadership, staff, and organizational stability
5. Community trust, investment, and transparency

Five clear strength themes emerge from the parent, community, business leader, and Foundation Board perspectives on Auburn-Washburn USD. Together, they paint a picture of a high-performing, well-supported, and forward-thinking district.

Auburn-Washburn is widely recognized for maintaining rigorous academic standards while ensuring students receive the support needed to meet them. Stakeholders consistently describe a district culture where high expectations are paired with strong instructional practices, early

intervention, and a commitment to continuous improvement. From a robust Pre-K program through graduation, the district emphasizes college readiness, CTE programming and options, literacy, and foundational skills, creating a seamless academic pipeline. This focus on excellence is reflected in student achievement, graduation outcomes, and the district's strong reputation both locally and regionally.

Beyond academics, Auburn-Washburn provides a well-rounded educational experience that supports students' social, emotional, and physical development. Families and community members highlight the breadth and quality of extracurricular offerings, including athletics, fine arts, band, music, theater, outdoor education, clubs, and enrichment programs. Before and after-school care, strong PE and art programs, and well-resourced libraries ensure equitable access to opportunities for all students. This holistic approach allows students to explore interests, build relationships, and develop confidence, contributing to high engagement and a positive school climate.

Career and Technical Education is a defining strength of the district. Auburn-Washburn's CTE Center, aligned with workforce needs and supported by strong partnerships with Washburn Tech and Washburn University, provides students with meaningful, real-world learning experiences. Programs such as hands-on career pathways demonstrate the district's commitment to innovation and relevance. Business and community leaders value how these opportunities prepare students for both postsecondary education and immediate career success, strengthening the local workforce and regional economy.

The district benefits from experienced administrators and highly professional educators who feel valued, heard, and supported. Leadership longevity and strong staff retention create consistency in vision, decision-making, and district culture. Stakeholders frequently note the district's emphasis on caring for employees, fostering trust, and allowing professionals to do their work effectively. This stability supports strong instructional practices, positive labor relations, and a collaborative environment that ultimately benefits students.

Auburn-Washburn enjoys deep community support and engagement, reinforced by an involved parent base, business partnerships, and a strong school board. The district is viewed as fiscally responsible, with significant investments in facilities, safety, and programming that reflect long-term planning. Transparent communication, responsiveness to stakeholder input, and celebration of successes contribute to a strong sense of shared ownership. Many describe the district as offering a "private school feel" within a public system—combining high expectations, personal attention, and community pride.

Taken together, these five themes illustrate why Auburn-Washburn Unified School District is widely regarded as a high-expectation, high-support system. The district successfully blends academic rigor, broad student opportunities, innovative programming, stable leadership, and strong community trust into a cohesive model that serves students well and positions the district for continued success.

## Challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by Parents/Community/Business Leaders/Foundation Board

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Challenges**

1. Staffing, workforce sustainability, and human capital challenges
2. Financial limitations, state funding uncertainty, and resource prioritization
3. Equity, access, and consistency across schools and student populations
4. Safety, student well-being, and responsible technology integration
5. Leadership, communication, and community engagement in a high-expectation district

One of the most pressing challenges facing the Auburn-Washburn USD is the recruitment, retention, and long-term sustainability of a high-quality workforce. The district competes in an increasingly difficult labor market for teachers, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, transportation drivers, and specialized staff. This challenge is intensified by statewide and national trends showing educators leaving the profession due to workload, burnout, compensation concerns, and increased expectations.

Staffing shortages (especially classified staff) can affect daily operations, student learning, transportation reliability, and the ability to expand or maintain programs. Special education staffing is of particular concern, as increased student needs require more highly trained personnel and ongoing professional development. Rising mental health needs among students also place additional demands on counselors, social workers, and classroom teachers, further contributing to staff stress.

Retention is not solely a compensation issue; it is closely tied to workload balance, professional respect, training opportunities, and district culture. Sustaining excellence in a high-expectation district requires intentional strategies to support staff well-being, develop internal leadership, and ensure that employees feel valued, supported, and equipped to meet evolving student needs.

Financial constraints serve as a foundational challenge that influences nearly every decision the district makes. Kansas state funding volatility, coupled with political transitions at the state level—including gubernatorial and commissioner changes—creates uncertainty in long-term planning. At the same time, operational costs continue to rise while enrollment declines in some schools reduce per-pupil revenue.

The district must continuously balance community expectations for excellence with the realities of finite resources. Decisions related to transportation changes, facility improvements (such as stadium seating), enrichment offerings, technology investments, and staffing levels often require difficult trade-offs. Increased reliance on PTOs for supplemental funding raises equity concerns, as not all schools or communities have equal fundraising capacity. Strategic financial planning must focus on sustainability, transparency, and alignment with district priorities. Maintaining high-quality programs while managing fiscal constraints will require innovative thinking, careful communication, and strong advocacy at the state level.

Ensuring equity across Auburn-Washburn's diverse schools and student populations is a complex and growing challenge. Socioeconomic disparities, changing demographics, and uneven access to programs and enrichment opportunities create inconsistencies in student experiences. Stakeholders expressed concern that enrichment options are stronger for older students than for younger students, potentially limiting early engagement and talent development.

There is also a recognized need to expand opportunities for students who are solid performers but not elite, academically and athletically. Highly competitive environments can unintentionally narrow participation, leaving some students without meaningful pathways to grow, belong, and succeed. Program gaps, such as the absence of middle school soccer, reflect broader questions about access and student choice.

Equity also extends to special education services, where increased training, resources, and consistent quality across schools are essential. As demographics continue to shift, the district must remain proactive in adapting instructional models, support services, and resource distribution to ensure all students receive a high-quality education regardless of background or location.

School safety remains a persistent and evolving challenge, encompassing physical security, transportation safety, mental health support, and digital protection. Ensuring the safety of students and staff requires constant vigilance, ongoing investment, and clear protocols. Community expectations are high, and incidents—whether local or national—heighten concern and urgency.

Mental health needs among students are increasing, placing additional responsibility on schools to provide counseling, social-emotional support, and trauma-informed practices. These needs intersect directly with staffing capacity and training, further underscoring the importance of a holistic approach to safety and well-being.

Technology presents both opportunities and risks. The district must stay ahead of rapid developments in areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital citizenship while ensuring students are safe online. Responsible AI use, staff training, and clear guidelines are essential to leveraging innovation without compromising student safety or academic integrity.

Auburn-Washburn's strong community engagement is a significant asset, but it also presents leadership challenges. High parental involvement brings increased scrutiny, advocacy, and expectations for transparency, responsiveness, and consistency. Communication delays or lack of clarity, particularly around complex issues like transportation changes or budget constraints, can quickly erode trust.

The superintendent is expected to serve not only as the educational leader of the district but also as a visible and engaged community leader. Successfully integrating into the Topeka community, building relationships with business leaders and higher education partners, and navigating political dynamics at the state level are essential components of the role.

Leadership in this context requires strong communication skills, the ability to explain the "why" behind decisions, and a collaborative approach that values stakeholder input while making difficult, district-wide decisions. Balancing competing interests, maintaining community confidence, and

leading through demographic, political, and educational change will be critical for the district's continued success.

Auburn-Washburn USD faces challenges that are interconnected and reflective of a high-performing district operating in a time of significant change. Workforce sustainability, financial limitations, equity and access, safety and well-being, and leadership demands all intersect. Addressing these challenges will require thoughtful, steady leadership; strategic planning; strong advocacy; and a continued commitment to serving all students at a high level while adapting to an evolving educational landscape.

<b>Top Five Desired Characteristics of the next Auburn-Washburn Superintendent as identified by Parents/Community/Business Leaders/Foundation Board</b>	
<b>Visible, Approachable, and Authentic Presence</b>	<b>Student-Centered and People-Focused Leadership</b>
The superintendent is expected to be highly visible in schools, approachable, and genuinely connected to students, staff, and families. Authentic engagement, humility, and being "in the buildings where kids are" signal trust, accessibility, and strong relational leadership.	There is a strong emphasis on putting students first while valuing and advocating for staff. The ideal superintendent is compassionate, supportive of all learners, listens to understand, and empowers educators by hiring strong people and trusting them to lead.
<b>Strong Communication, Transparency and Trust</b>	<b>Strategic, Experienced, and Forward Thinking Leadership</b>
Effective communication with all stakeholders is essential. This includes being a good listener, explaining decisions and the "why," making parents feel heard, and maintaining transparency, accountability, and follow-through in leadership decisions.	The district is looking for a seasoned educational leader with a full career in education who understands instructional practices, budgeting, and best practices. The superintendent should be aspirational, adaptable, and capable of strategic, long-term thinking while navigating political and financial complexities.
<b>Long-Term Commitment and Community Integration</b>	
A strong desire exists for a superintendent who will reside in the district, integrate into the community, build partnerships (including technical colleges and the state), and commit to the long term. Stability, investment, and relationship-building over time are viewed as critical to district success. Must be deeply invested in both the schools and the broader community.	

## Strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by STAFF

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Strengths**

1. High academic performance and achieving school district
2. Deeply embedded student-first and inclusive culture
3. Stability, trust, and a strong professional culture
4. Provides many resources and opportunities, both to students and staff
5. Deep sense of community, relational strength, and family-centered values

Auburn-Washburn Unified School District is consistently recognized by its staff for its strong academic culture and high expectations, forming the foundation of the district's identity. Staff describe the district as a high-performing organization with rigorous academic standards, excellent test scores, and a consistent long-term strategy that ensures students receive a quality education from early childhood through high school. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are in place and supported by administration, ensuring that teachers collaborate effectively to maintain instructional excellence. Staff emphasize that these structures allow the district to deliver diverse academic pathways, including a robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, college-prep courses, and enrichment opportunities, ensuring all students—regardless of their future plans—have access to meaningful learning experiences. The district's strong reputation is so well established that families often cite it as the reason they choose to move into the community, reflecting both the external perception of excellence and internal pride among staff.

Closely intertwined with academic strength is the district's unwavering focus on the whole child and inclusive student support. Staff repeatedly note that "***they are all our kids***" is more than a slogan, it guides decision-making at every level. Inclusion is intentionally practiced, and special education is fully integrated into discussions and policy, rather than being an afterthought. Investments in student well-being are evident through full mental health teams in every building—counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses—along with policies around class sizes and safety. The district prioritizes early childhood education, ensuring students have a strong foundation from the start. Staff describe an environment where adults consistently advocate for what is best for students, and programs are designed to address not just academic success, but social, emotional, and physical development as well, creating an environment where all students can thrive.

Auburn-Washburn is also defined by stability, trust, and a strong professional culture. Staff turnover is low, leadership is consistent and competent, and there is long-term retention of both administrators and teachers. The Board is described as supportive and stable, providing consistent guidance without micromanaging classroom-level decisions. This environment fosters a trusting culture where staff feel valued and respected, able to exercise professional judgment while knowing they have the district's full support. Relationships across the district—among staff, administration, and community members—are described as strong and collaborative. Adults in the district genuinely want what is best for students and each other, contributing to a culture where teamwork, mentorship, and mutual support thrive.

The district also stands out for the wealth of resources and opportunities it provides, both to students and staff. Students benefit from an extraordinary range of co-curricular options, from athletics, arts, and theatre, to debate, music, and outdoor education. CTE pathways and partnerships with institutions like Washburn Tech and Washburn University expand opportunities for college and career readiness. Staff enjoy opportunities for professional growth, internal mobility, and leadership development. Buildings are afforded a degree of autonomy, and collaboration between departments—including special education and general education—is actively encouraged. The district's size allows it to provide ample resources while remaining personable and accessible, ensuring that both staff and students feel supported and connected.

Finally, a deep sense of community, relational strength, and family-centered values permeates the district. Staff describe Auburn-Washburn as a "big family," where relationships are valued, the culture is fun and engaging, and all members of the community—students, staff, and families—are included in the district's mission. Families are actively engaged, and the district works closely with the broader community to foster connection and collaboration. Decisions are consistently made with students' best interests in mind, but always within a framework that emphasizes family, inclusion, and trust. The culture of respect, approachability, and shared purpose reinforces Auburn-Washburn's identity as a district where people feel valued, supported, and committed to collective success.

### **Challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by SCHOOL DISTRICT STAFF**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

#### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Challenges**

1. Staffing, retention, and compensation
2. Equity and consistency across the district
3. Communication and decision-making processes
4. Meeting the diverse and growing needs of students
5. Financial and operational constraints

Auburn-Washburn faces ongoing challenges in recruiting and keeping high-quality paraprofessionals, and other classified staff. Staff repeatedly mentioned concerns about competitive wages, benefits, and insurance packages, as well as specific issues like maternity leave and the need for equitable pay across support staff. Turnover is particularly notable in key areas such as the Learning Services Department and special education leadership, where continuity is critical for student support. Additionally, classified staff turnover is high, and low pay for bus drivers and paraprofessionals further complicates maintaining a stable workforce. The combination of increased student needs and insufficient staffing amplifies the pressure on existing personnel, creating a cycle where retaining talent becomes more difficult.

While principals have autonomy to run their buildings, this autonomy sometimes creates inconsistencies across schools in policy implementation, curriculum support, and use of technology. Staff reported variability in teacher training, particularly around new curriculum and technology integration, which can result in inequitable experiences for students. Physical equity

across buildings also remains a concern, as some schools benefited from recent renovations while others were left untouched. Title I schools, in particular, require more systemic support, and there is a growing disparity in resources for students with severe disabilities. Additionally, socioeconomic disparities across the district—from very wealthy families to families experiencing homelessness, pose challenges in ensuring equitable access to opportunities and interventions.

Staff highlighted a need for more effective, two-way communication within the district. Weekly emails are often ignored or overlooked, and information about new hires, staff departures, or policy changes is not always clearly communicated. Some teachers feel they are not truly being heard, leading to a perception of false feedback. Central office decisions sometimes fail to account for building-level realities, and the current leadership structure—with an unclear “number two” or deputy role—can slow decision-making. Additionally, some district-wide processes rely too heavily on a single individual, creating bottlenecks that impede timely and efficient execution.

Staff consistently noted rising behavioral and mental health challenges, as well as academic gaps, especially for middle-ground students who are neither struggling nor high achievers. Middle school math and split ELA classes present particular challenges, with some students underprepared for higher-level courses and interventions pulling them from core classes like social studies and science. Rising numbers of students with severe disabilities and complex special education needs strain resources, highlighting the need for more para support and additional interventions. Staff also emphasized that student needs are becoming increasingly complex, reflecting shifts in the community and broader social factors, making consistent and responsive support critical.

Budget pressures permeate the district, with staff citing late budgets, difficulties in managing funds, and challenges in keeping benefits competitive amidst rising insurance premiums. Operational issues, such as bus driver shortages and new transportation policies, add to the strain on staff and families. The interplay between budgeting, staffing, and student support highlights the delicate balancing act the district must perform to maintain high standards while addressing growing demands. Central office presence in buildings and better systems to distribute responsibilities are seen as critical to managing these operational challenges effectively.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic strategies that integrate resources, policy, and personnel to maintain the district’s high standards while supporting all students and staff.

**Top Five Desired Characteristics of the next Auburn-Washburn Superintendent as identified by  
SCHOOL DISTRICT STAFF**

Trust, Integrity, and Steady Leadership	Strong Communication and Relationship Building
The staff wants a leader who is dependable, ethical, and calm under pressure. This includes being trustworthy, transparent, level-headed, accountable, and able to weather challenges while making tough decisions with a backbone. Integrity and consistency matter more than quick wins or flashy changes.	Clear, honest, and frequent communication is essential. Staff value a superintendent who listens well, explains decisions, articulates perspectives clearly, works effectively with unions and boards, and builds strong relationships with staff, parents, and the broader community.
People-First, Inclusive, and Supportive Culture	Visionary Yet Balanced Leadership
There is a strong emphasis on being a "good human" who is kind, approachable, relatable, and respectful of all roles—especially classified staff. Supporting diversity, mental health, and a family-oriented culture while caring about both small details and big-picture needs is critical.	Staff want a forward-thinking, innovative leader who sets a clear vision and values, anticipates future challenges, and is open to new ideas—but not someone who chases every new trend. The preference is for thoughtful progress that builds on existing strengths rather than unnecessary overhaul. Someone who honors what is working while guiding the district confidently into the future.
<b>Deep Understanding of the District and Community</b>	
Experience and context matter. Staff want a leader who understands Kansas finance, special education, mental health needs, and all grade levels, lives and works in the district, knows how the system operates, and advocates effectively at the state level without bringing a personal agenda or treating the role as a stepping stone.	

**Strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

**Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Strengths**

1. Broad and equitable student opportunities
2. Strong academic rigor with personalized support
3. Career readiness and future-focused learning
4. Positive, inclusive culture and student engagement
5. High-quality staff, facilities, and community investment

Auburn-Washburn offers an exceptional range of opportunities beyond athletics, including clubs, fine arts, career pathways, AP/IB, Tech, and unique programs not offered elsewhere, ensuring

every student can find a place to belong and succeed. High expectations are paired with robust supports such as after-school labs, mentoring, responsive counselors, and second-chance opportunities, allowing students to recover, grow, and thrive academically. The district emphasizes real-world preparation through diverse career pathways, partnerships like Washburn Tech, innovative programs, and effective use of technology and AI to prepare students for life beyond graduation. Students experience a welcoming environment where inclusivity, encouragement, recognition, and student voice are valued, and where clubs, sports, and activities actively engage

the entire student body. Dedicated, highly qualified educators, strong student-teacher relationships, modern facilities, and continued reinvestment—supported by strong community engagement—create an environment focused on long-term student success.

### **Challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District as identified by HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

(Based on interviews and personal statements)

#### **Top Five Most Frequently Mentioned Challenges**

1. Consistency, fairness, and equity across the district
2. Student support, well-being, and belonging
3. Safety, behavior, and school climate
4. Access, logistics, and barriers to participation
5. Academic rigor, readiness, and emerging technology

The concerns point to a district balancing scale and opportunity with the need for consistency, equity, safety, connection, and clarity, while also adapting to post-COVID realities and emerging technologies like AI. There is a strong concern about inconsistent policies, expectations, and funding across schools and classrooms, ranging from cell phone rules and scanning systems to class rigor, teacher expectations, and discipline. Students also note inequities in funding for programs (AP vs. IB, theatre, minor sports, clubs) and want resources distributed more fairly so no group feels invisible in a large district.

Many concerns focus on meeting students' academic, emotional, and mental health needs (especially post-COVID), for special education students, struggling middle schoolers, and students "in the middle." Students want stronger emotional supports, better access to tutoring and after-school help, positive staff interactions, and a stronger district culture that helps all students feel connected and valued.

Safety issues are a recurring theme, including scanning systems, metal detectors, transportation safety, bus behavior, parking lot stress, and protection for teachers from violent behavior. Students express concern about respect, accountability, and discipline, noting that misbehavior disrupts learning and damages relationships between students and staff. Transportation challenges, large attendance zones, lack of sidewalks, zero hour classes, after-school activities, lunch access, and financial burdens create barriers for some students. These issues can limit participation, increase stress, and widen opportunity gaps, particularly for students without reliable transportation or financial resources.

Students want stronger academic consistency and rigor, especially in middle school, smoother transitions into high school, and clearer guidance on college readiness, money management, and postsecondary planning. There is also significant concern and confusion around AI—its regulation, misuse, and impact on learning—along with broader worries about curriculum mandates and instructional consistency.

<b>Top Five Desired Characteristics of the next Auburn-Washburn Superintendent as identified by HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS</b>	
<b>Visibility and Student Connections</b>	<b>Trust, Integrity, and Follow Through</b>
Students strongly value a superintendent who is visible in schools and at events, has a strong pulse on what is happening across the district, and actively seeks student input. They also want a leader who motivates students and formalizes student voice through structures such as a Superintendent/Student Advisory Group.	Students rate trust, integrity, and follow-through as extremely important, emphasizing that effective leaders must do what they say and consistently put actions behind their words. They value honesty, transparency, and realistic promises that are fully carried out rather than overpromised or hidden. "If you promise something, follow through - or don't promise it".
<b>Communication and Transparency</b>	<b>Decision-Making and Leadership Style</b>
Students place a high value on consistent, clear communication from the superintendent. They want the superintendent to explain what the district is working on, how decisions affect students and parents, and the "why" behind those decisions.	Students value leaders who are open-minded yet decisive, willing to make tough decisions and stand by them. They respect superintendents who have the personality to handle all situations and make practical, common-sense calls, including decisions like snow days.
<b>Financial Responsibility and Equity in Funding</b>	
Students care deeply about financial responsibility and want district funds spent wisely and fairly. They value equitable support across academics, sports, clubs, band, and theatre, so all students benefit. Be fair, responsible, and invest in all students.	

## FINDINGS / THEMES

Many of the discussions pertaining to strengths and challenges for the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District flow into the expectations for the next superintendent. Several of the characteristics that are present in the profile for the next superintendent build on the current strengths of the organization, in addition to addressing the challenges ahead. The search team will seek a new superintendent who will understand issues facing the district.

When the data from interviews and focus groups were combined, themes emerged. It should be noted that there was more similarity across groups than there were differences. Additionally, the characteristics desired in the next superintendent were also closely aligned across groups. This congruence is viewed as a positive characteristic of this search and will bring clarity in focus for the board and the new superintendent.

Based on all stakeholder feedback, the ideas naturally group into five overarching themes that collectively reflect Auburn-Washburn's core identity, longstanding strengths, and strategic priorities. While the individual statements highlight specific programs, practices, and perceptions, together they reveal consistent patterns in what stakeholders value most about the district. These themes intentionally synthesize overlapping ideas—such as academic rigor, leadership stability, community trust, and student opportunity—into a clear, coherent framework. At the same time, they preserve the depth, nuance, and emphasis expressed across stakeholder perspectives, ensuring that both the district's measurable strengths and its cultural foundations are accurately represented.

**The following themes are supported by the combined data.**

### STRENGTHS

#### **1. Academic Excellence with High Expectations and Personalized Support**

Auburn-Washburn is consistently characterized as a high-performing district with strong academic rigor and clear expectations for student achievement. This excellence is balanced with personalized support structures that help students at all levels succeed, reflecting a commitment to both achievement and growth. The district's reputation for strong academic performance reinforces community confidence and positions Auburn-Washburn as a destination district for families seeking quality education.

#### **2. Broad, Equitable Student Opportunities and Enrichment**

The district provides a wide range of opportunities that extend well beyond the core curriculum, ensuring students can explore interests, develop talents, and engage meaningfully in school. Enrichment offerings, extracurricular activities, and access to diverse programs support the whole child and promote equity by ensuring opportunities are available to many, not just a select few. This breadth of programming enhances student engagement, belonging, and long-term success.

#### **3. Career, College, and Future-Focused Readiness**

Auburn-Washburn places a strong emphasis on preparing students for life beyond graduation. Career and Technical Education pathways, along with partnerships with higher

education and community organizations, ensure students graduate with relevant skills, real-world experiences, and multiple postsecondary options. This future-focused approach aligns academic rigor with practical application, helping students make informed choices about college, careers, and workforce entry.

#### **4. Strong Leadership, High-Quality Staff, and Organizational Stability**

Stable, respected leadership and a strong professional culture are central to the district's success. Auburn-Washburn benefits from experienced staff, sound organizational systems, and consistent leadership that support long-term planning and continuous improvement. This stability fosters trust, collaboration, and high morale, enabling staff to focus on student outcomes rather than constant structural change.

#### **5. Community Trust, Investment, and Inclusive, Student-First Culture**

The district is deeply rooted in a sense of community, marked by strong relationships, transparency, and family-centered values. Community support, financial stewardship, and investment in facilities reflect trust in the district's mission and leadership. An inclusive, student-first culture ensures that students feel valued, supported, and safe, strengthening engagement and reinforcing Auburn-Washburn as a trusted community institution.

*Together, these five themes present Auburn-Washburn as a high-achieving, stable, and future-focused district with strong community ties and a clear commitment to serving all students well.*

**The following themes are supported by the combined data.**

#### **CHALLENGES**

Five clear, interconnected themes emerge from the district stakeholders' list of challenges, highlighting the complex and evolving landscape in which the district operates. Together, these themes reflect significant operational pressures related to staffing, finances, and resource allocation, while also underscoring the district's responsibility to respond to changing student needs, demographic shifts, and rising expectations from families and the community. They illustrate the tension between sustaining a high-performing, high-expectation system and adapting to realities such as workforce shortages, enrollment changes, equity concerns, and expanded student support needs. Collectively, the themes reveal a district striving to balance fiscal responsibility, instructional excellence, student well-being, and equitable access, all while maintaining trust, clear communication, and strong community partnerships in an increasingly complex educational environment.

#### **1. Staffing, Workforce Sustainability, and Human Capital**

Stakeholders consistently point to difficulties recruiting and retaining high-quality staff (classified staff and transportation), concerns about compensation and workload, and long-term sustainability of the workforce. These challenges are compounded by expanded expectations placed on educators and support staff as schools increasingly address academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs beyond traditional instructional roles.

## **2. Financial Constraints, Enrollment Shifts, and Resource Prioritization**

Declining and stagnant enrollment, housing availability, and uncertainty in state funding create ongoing financial and operational pressures. Stakeholders note the challenge of balancing limited resources while maintaining program quality, staffing levels, and equitable access to opportunities across the district. Budget constraints influence nearly every other challenge identified.

## **3. Equity, Consistency, and Access Across the District**

Stakeholders highlight concerns about fairness, consistency of practices, and equitable access to programs, services, and opportunities for all students. This includes addressing diversity and inclusion, reducing barriers to participation, and ensuring that students across different schools and populations experience comparable support, expectations, and resources.

## **4. Student Well-Being, Safety, and School Climate**

Mental health needs, student behavior, sense of belonging, and overall school climate are recurring concerns. Stakeholders emphasize the growing role schools play in supporting student well-being, ensuring safety, and responsibly integrating technology in ways that support learning while protecting students' social and emotional health.

## **5. Leadership, Communication, and Community Engagement in a High-Expectation District**

Effective communication with parents and the broader community, along with transparent decision-making and strong leadership, are viewed as important priorities. Stakeholders express the importance of trust, clarity, and engagement to navigate complex challenges while sustaining high academic rigor, readiness for the future, and thoughtful integration of emerging technologies.

Together, these five themes capture the core challenges facing the district and reflect the tension between maintaining high expectations and adapting to changing financial, demographic, and student needs.

**The following themes are supported by the combined data.**

### **DESIRED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT**

The following reflects a summary of refined key characteristics of the new superintendent from all stakeholder groups.

The district seeks a superintendent who is a steady, ethical, and highly visible leader with exceptional communication skills and a deep commitment to students, staff, and community. This leader will be approachable, authentic, and present in schools, building trust through transparency, integrity, and consistent follow-through. With strong operational, financial, and human resources expertise, the superintendent will manage resources responsibly while ensuring equity and excellence for all students. A seasoned educational professional, the ideal candidate will balance visionary, forward-thinking leadership with respect for what is already working, guiding thoughtful progress rather than unnecessary change. Collaboration, community integration, and a long-term

commitment to the district are essential, along with a people-first mindset that values student voice, staff well-being, and strong relationships across the entire community.

**1. Exceptional Communication and Transparency**

A clear, consistent, and honest communicator who listens well, explains decisions and their rationale, keeps stakeholders informed, and follows through on commitments.

**2. Trustworthy, Steady, and Ethical Leadership**

Calm, dependable, and level-headed under pressure, leading with integrity, accountability, and consistency rather than reacting impulsively or chasing quick wins.

**3. Student-Centered, People-First Leadership**

Puts students first while genuinely valuing and advocating for staff, families, and classified employees; compassionate, inclusive, and supportive of mental health and well-being.

**4. Visible, Approachable, and Authentic Presence**

Highly visible in schools and at events, accessible to students and staff, humble, relational, and genuinely connected to the day-to-day life of the district.

**5. Strong Community Engagement and Integration**

Builds authentic relationships with parents, civic and business leaders, and community partners; understands the local context and advocacy landscape and actively participates in the community.

**6. Strategic, Experienced, and Forward-Thinking Leadership**

A seasoned educational leader with deep instructional, financial, and organizational experience who can think long-term, anticipate challenges, and guide thoughtful, balanced progress.

**7. Operational, Financial, and HR Competence**

Demonstrates strong understanding of district finance, facilities, staffing, grievances, and labor relations; manages resources responsibly and equitably.

**8. Collaborative and Adaptive Leadership Style**

Works effectively with the board, unions, and staff; seeks input, builds consensus, learns quickly, and partners rather than imposes change.

**9. Commitment to Stability and Long-Term Investment**

Desires to live in the district, build lasting relationships, and commit to the role long term—viewed as a calling, not a stepping stone.

**10. Integrity, Follow-Through, and Student Voice**

Does what they say they will do, makes realistic promises, values student input, and establishes structures to ensure student voice meaningfully informs decisions.

## BULLETED NOTES FROM ALL GROUPS

The interviews and focus groups of stakeholders generated the following responses. Careful attention has been made to accurately convey the message. The comments listed below emerged from statements made by stakeholders and they are to be considered personal opinions of the individual making the comments regarding the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District.

### Board Members

#### What are the strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?

- Low-drama district
- Well-run administrative leadership
- Scott's communication, transparency, and willingness to take responsibility
- Integrity and effectiveness of recent superintendents
- New middle school
- Well-maintained, safe schools
- Innovation Center as a major asset
- Recent renovations show pride in the district
- Same reserve amount for years
- No-nonsense financial presentations
- Successful bond project completion
- Strong fiscal oversight and planning
- Good academic reputation
- Forward-thinking leadership
- Strong performance at Washburn Rural
- Early childhood and diverse programming opportunities
- Community strongly supports public education
- Families, staff, and extracurriculars are a strength
- Board and administration alignment, especially during COVID
- Positive partnerships with businesses and foundations
- Stable, trusted leadership and governance
- Strong facilities and long-term financial stewardship
- High-quality academics and innovative programming
- Community support and family engagement
- Professional administration and board alignment

#### What are the challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?

- Hiring and retaining bus drivers, paraeducators, and food service staff
- Competitive pay, but housing affordability is a barrier
- Classified staff shortages impact operations
- Smaller kindergarten classes than graduating classes
- Need for more housing options
- High cost of housing limits families and staff
- Future concerns about declining student numbers
- Lack of diversity and diversity of thought

- Need for more inclusive representation
- Clearer stance on embracing diversity needed
- Parents are not always informed about important events
- Too much reliance on students to communicate with parents
- Transportation changes caught families off guard
- Mental health support is increasingly necessary
- Schools filling gaps created by societal failures
- Concerns about technology overuse and social skill development
- Staffing shortages and workforce retention
- Enrollment trends and housing affordability
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns
- Communication gaps with families and community
- Addressing student mental health and social needs

## **Parents/Community/Business Leaders/Foundation Board Focus Group**

### **What are the strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?**

- High expectations
- Great academics
- Well supported by all
- Great student support at every level
- Many enrichment opportunities
- Excellent extracurricular activities
- Numerous state championships
- Outdoor Ed Program
- Before and after school care/activities
- CTE Center and curriculum
- Partnership with Washburn Tech
- Student provided daycare for teachers
- Have done a lot of great things in the schools and more to come
- A lot of support with enrichment and academic support for all students
- Leaders come to the district and stay
- Reputation for academic excellence
- Strong, strong, strong CTE Program is really valued across the district
- High parental involvement
- Engaged and supportive staff
- Ability to retain staff
- Facilities are amazing
- Almost feels like a private school setting
- Open to placing students from Washburn University - great partnership, very supportive
- Financially sound
- Students are better prepared for college
- Staff and administration are very strong and professional
- Not afraid to be innovative

- Administrative longevity
- High level of expectations
- How involved the community is
- How the board represents the community
- Opportunities in the district
- Tech opportunities
- Great Pre-K Center
- Focus on all students individually
- District cares about teachers
- District investment in facilities
- Excellent administrators
- Teachers are heard
- Diversity of workforce
- Good push for outside activities, PE, and Art
- Well-funded libraries
- High level of communication from the leadership
- Sharing of the “wins”
- Commitment to excellence
- How the district is made into a community
- Being informed of policy and politics without being political
- Campus portal throughout the district
- Transparency
- Early childhood education

### **What are the challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?**

- Retain quality staff, teachers, and paras
- Need more seating at the football stadium
- A lot of competition at the top, both academically and athletically - how do we provide more opportunities for students who are good but not elite, the same goes for academics
- Do not offer soccer in the middle school
- School safety is always going to be a challenge
- Socioeconomics, disparity across the district - in all schools
- Financial restraints across the district
- Declining enrollment in some schools in the district
- Very high expectations across the district in all areas, the community expects this
- Transportation - lack of drivers is an issue
- High parental involvement can be a challenge, will lean on the superintendent
- Kansas State funding
- Won't just be the leader of the school district but will also need to be a community leader
- Demographics are changing, how will the district handle this?
- Election year for the Governor and will have a new State Commissioner, what will happen in Kansas?
- What jobs are out there or will be out there that will be a CTE focus in the future?
- People are leaving the profession

- Getting integrated in the Topeka community is going to take work on his/her part
- Technology - keeping students safe, staying ahead of the curve
- School safety - ensure students and staff are safe, how are we keeping students safe
- Equity across the district, keep quality education in all schools
- Communication can be an issue at times (sometimes it takes a little longer to communicate with parents)
- Transportation - more transparency to the 'why' (used to bus all students, now it's no busing within 2.5 miles, option to pay)
- Using AI
- Balancing curriculum with workforce needs
- Resources for special needs students, more training
- Too much reliance on PTO support
- Increase mental health needs
- Substitute teachers
- Enrichment for younger students is not as good as enrichment for the older students

## School District Staff

### What are the strengths of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?

- High-performing district
- Robust co-curricular activities
- High standards
- Consistent long-term strategy in place
- PLC's are in place
- Administration supports PLC decisions
- Variety of academic offerings, CTE pathway
- Staff really gets to know their students
- We don't outsource transportation and food service
- Consistent and competent administration
- Safety committee is in place
- Work well together, relationships are strong
- District is large enough to have resources and diversity, yet small enough so people know each other - accessibility
- High academic standards and performance
- Many people say we bought a house in the Auburn-Washburn School District because of its' reputation
- Trusting environment
- Inclusion works the way that it is intended to work
- A lot of co-curricular success - speech, debate, athletics, the arts, music, theatre
- Low turnover with staff and administration, stability
- Adults in the district will do what is best for students
- Many resources in the district
- CTE
- A lot of opportunities for students, college-bound, and career
- Staff is amazing, staff is like a big family

- The district has many resources
- Staff philosophy is "they are all our kids"
- The district has so many positive things going on
- Everyone from the top down is very approachable
- Know how to build a fun culture
- Opportunities for staff to move up in the district
- Decisions made on what's best for students
- Policy in place for class sizes
- Family focused, value family
- Great facilities across the district
- Full mental health team in each building - RN, counselor, social worker, and school psych
- High level of retention
- Strong community
- Consistent board, supportive of education
- Desired employer, easier to recruit staff
- High expectations for students
- Academic success
- High test scores
- Low staff turnover
- Strong administrative staff, longevity
- Strong co-curricular activities
- Opportunities for students and staff
- Well taken care of, professional
- Buildings have a lot of autonomy
- Collaborative school district
- Strong board leadership, supportive board
- A lot of community involvement
- All staff want the best for all students
- Staff wants to see everybody do great
- Decisions are made by what's in the best interest of students
- Strong community involvement
- Family driven district - Family, Family, Family!
- Relationships
- Huge investment in early childhood education
- Willingness to have special education at the table
- Strong collaboration between regular education and special education
- Investment in mental health
- Special education is part of the conversation and decision making, not an after-thought

#### **What are the challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?**

- Must maintain high expectations, how do we continue this
- At times we struggle with the middle ground students
- District uses a lot of technology
- Budget constraints
- Recruit and retain quality staff

- Some staff use a lot of technology integration and others do not
- Need a consistent cell phone policy
- Need guidance with AI
- Accountability is an issue
- Must be able to offer competitive wages with good benefits to retain staff
- At the elementary level, principals are given the autonomy to run their building, which can create issues amongst the schools with inconsistencies
- Some areas can do a better job with communication
- Some districtwide systems can be improved
- More support for the Title I schools
- Para/classified staff pay and benefits need to be improved
- Can be an illusion of teacher feedback
- In some situations teachers are not being heard
- Tend to lose classified staff
- Administration needs to understand the negotiated agreement so mistakes are not made
- Teacher training for curriculum, equity in training across the district
- Behaviors and mental health issues continue to rise across the district
- Some key positions have been eliminated
- Special Education Director's longevity is a concern
- Some buildings had renovations with the passed bond and others did not get touched, equity between the buildings
- Celebrate the positives at all levels not just middle school and high school levels
- Split ELA classes at the middle school - a big gap with special education students, low end, and middle of the road students
- Middle school has some difficulties with math, some students are not ready for 8th grade or high school math, need more math interventions at the middle school
- At the middle school, 7th and 8th grade students are pulled from social studies and/or science classes for interventions
- Low pay for classified staff is a concern
- Insurance benefits can be improved
- Maternity leave needs to be looked at for better benefits
- Communication - weekly emails go out but people don't read them, staff need to be receptive to the communication
- More communication as to who is a new employee in the district or who is leaving
- Not enough Para support
- Student needs are increasing everywhere
- Younger students are coming into the schools not ready, with different backgrounds
- Central office staff should have more of a presence in the buildings to see the challenges of each building, need to be in the trenches
- The dynamics of the district have changed
- Systems tightened up - sometimes must flow through one person and it can slow things down - needs to happen in an orderly and timely manner
- Budgeting getting money, or budgets late in the year
- Support staff pay/benefits
- Lack of understanding on how some decisions affect the building level

- A lot of turnover in the Learning Services Department
- Budgeting is a challenge
- Look at the leadership model at the central office, there is no true number two person in charge
- Enrollment is stagnated
- Legislators can be a challenge, political landscape is a challenge
- Trying to keep up with the benefit package, large increase with insurance premiums
- Bus driver shortage
- New policy if you live under two miles from the school you are not bused - families can pay in within two miles (elementary is \$250 for the year am/pm pick up and drop-off; secondary is \$125 for the year, pm drop off only)
- Pay for support staff is low
- Understanding the budget and the pieces of the budget
- Disparity of socioeconomic status across the district from very wealthy families to the homeless
- Sharing more of the responsibilities or access to certain things, lack of process
- How can we support new families that move into the district
- Buildings have their own autonomy, but sometimes this gets in the way of district-level consistency
- Number of special education students with severe disabilities is increasing, this impacts funding and resources

## High School Students

### What are the strengths of Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?

- Variety of activities for all students, not just sports
- Offer a lot of classes
- Good facilities
- Good options for career paths
- Community engagement throughout the district is really good
- Students are encouraged to meet other students
- Lots of support
- After school labs to help students if they need extra help
- Mentoring programs
- Girls on the Run program
- Students are recognized for doing good things
- Students are very encouraging
- Many programs to meet everyone's needs
- Lots of career pathways
- Highly qualified teachers and staff
- Counselors are very good and get back to you right away
- Partnership with Washburn Tech
- Teachers are dedicated to make sure students succeed
- Innovations and new buildings, expanding
- IB and AP programs
- District uses and manages AI very well

- Tech, AP and IB a lot of options
- Great community between students and teachers
- Band department does a nice job letting younger students know how they can be involved in band
- Engage student body, clubs and sports
- Many opportunities to bounce back if you need to for academics
- Lots of freedom in what you can do
- Students are inclusive with one another
- Offer many programs that are not offered elsewhere
- Great rigor throughout the school
- Lots of freedom in the selection of classes
- All groups are included when it comes to creating policy, no one is left out
- A lot of reinvestment into student body
- School does a good job teaching leadership skills
- Very successful school district, a lot of good things going on
- More opportunities for freshman and younger students
- Before and after school help available if needed
- Many diverse opportunities for students
- Club advisors are very passionate about the club or activities they supervise
- A lot of transitioning for 9th grade students
- Great service projects
- All high school students have public library card access - phenomenal public library in Topeka
- Should have a strict cell phone policy
- Motivator in place for students to skip one final based on what they do in the classroom

#### **What are the challenges of the Auburn-Washburn Unified School District?**

- Scanning system - both a love and hate concept
- Cell phone policy will need to be watched
- IB pay for test but not AP
- More focus on special education
- Because of our large district emotional supports can be challenging
- Need to build culture for connecting, like spirit day
- Worried about mandates in curriculum coming down the road
- Can be a lack of respect
- Scanning system in the classroom is a challenge
- Consistency is important for all schools
- When coming in late, you must go through metal detectors, but when you come to school in the morning, you don't have to
- Need to pay more attention to students in the middle
- Theatre department could use more funding
- Minor sports don't get as much as the major sports programs
- More information on national outreach for college
- Middle school students who struggle need more help
- Transportation, not safe in some cases with no sidewalks

- Larger school zone areas, make school zone signs larger
- Bus behavior needs to improve, lack of respect for school bus drivers
- Still dealing with ramifications from COVID - academics, social and mental health issues
- Retaining and recruiting quality staff
- Need to get the word out for tutoring opportunities and after school help
- Financial burden put some students at a disadvantage
- 0 hours can be difficult for students without transportation
- After school activities are tough for some students with no transportation
- School lunch - need more food, make sure there is enough food for third lunch, and accurate menus
- Vending machines need more flexibility
- School parking lot is very stressful, need staggered release for the parking lot
- A lot of options about stuff
- AI regulation
- New scan system
- Need to find qualified subs
- Buses need to be regulated more and how students treat the bus drivers
- Teachers should have more protection from student that are physically violent
- Student behaviors need to be held accountable and punished, it's hard to learn if students are misbehaving
- Class sizes can be very large, can be hard to get attention from the teacher
- More rigorous middle school classes
- Many mini communities that are tight knit within the school, how can we bring them all together
- Recognize all clubs and activities
- Can be invisible in a large district
- Always willing to help families in need, very caring
- Need more consistency at the elementary level
- Some staff need to be more positive and give more support to students
- Funding needs to be spent equally across the district
- Staff can treat students like former siblings, good or bad
- 7th and 8th grade are similar, but drastic change when in 9th grade - expectations and academic challenge
- Some students think that AI can just do the work for them
- AI should be banned in schools
- Some teachers try to push AI
- Security on Chromebooks could be tighter
- COVID really hurt learning and literacy issues across the nation
- Classes are not consistent, it depends on the teacher
- Expectations for teachers to follow
- Should have a strict cell phone policy, and need to be consistent in all classrooms
- Student-teacher relationship because of the screening system
- Volunteerism needs to be pushed more at a younger age
- What can students do (freshman) to prepare for college, they want to know what they need to do, and how, and when to apply for college

- Money management is critical for high school students
- More class offerings at the middle school