HYA



LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT

Mercer County Special Services School District

Sept/Oct 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) in September and October 2026 for the new superintendent of the Mercer County Special Services School District. The data contained herein were obtained from input the HYA consultants received when they met with individuals and groups in either individual interviews or focus group settings and from the results of the Board's online survey completed by stakeholders. The surveys, interviews, and focus group meetings were structured to gather input to assist the Board in determining the primary characteristics desired in the new superintendent. Additionally the stakeholder interviews and focus groups collected information regarding the strengths of the District and some of the challenges that it will be facing in the coming years.

PARTICIPATION

The numbers of participants, by stakeholder group, in the two methods of data gathering are listed below:

<table>
<tr><th>Group</th><th>Personal interviews or focus groups</th><th>Board Online Survey</th></tr>
<tr><td>Board</td><td>5</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Building level administrators</td><td rowspan="2">10</td><td rowspan="6">20</td></tr>
<tr><td>Central office administrators</td></tr>
<tr><td>Faculty/Related Staff/Paraprofessionals</td><td>20</td></tr>
<tr><td>Bargaining Unit Leaders</td><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td>Support Staff</td><td>0</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sending Districts</td><td>1</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Parents</td><td>1</td><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>Total</td><td>40</td><td>22</td></tr>
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A draft of the desired characteristics is provided under separate cover and is meant to be a stand-alone complementary piece to the Leadership Profile Report.

It should be emphasized that the data are not a scientific sampling, nor should they necessarily be viewed as representing the majority opinion of the respective groups to which they are attributed. Items are included if, in the consultants' judgment, they warranted the Board's attention.

STRENGTHS OF THE DISTRICT

Summary

The Board of Education highlights the district's specialized expertise, staff commitment and continuity, comprehensive support services, exceptional autism programs, outstanding facilities, and strong backing from county leadership. Teachers and staff across the district emphasize their deep dedication to students, noting a positive, collaborative climate enhanced by recent building upgrades, small-team dynamics, and strong communication channels via reliable websites and parent apps. The Leadership Team and Collective Bargaining Units point to specialized therapeutic and behavioral programs, competitive salaries, and an individualized approach that enables students to experience school typical to peers, complemented by the support of county commissioners and executives. Additionally, sending district special education directors value high-quality, cost-effective programs tailored for the district's most challenging students, while parents appreciate devoted staff and student involvement in alternative activities like the Special Olympics.

Board survey results indicate that staff believe the successor superintendent must build upon the district's strong academic progress, reputation, small-town feel, comprehensive educational offerings, well-rounded students, dedicated staff, and involved parents.

Strengths listed:

- **Dedicated and Caring Staff:** Across virtually all stakeholder groups—including the Board, leadership, teachers, support staff, and parents—the unwavering commitment, care, and expertise of the teachers and staff are highlighted as the district's foundational strength.
- **Comprehensive and Specialized Programs:** Stakeholders strongly value the district's specialized programming, autism programs, behavioral

therapy, and comprehensive support services tailored for students with complex needs who cannot be served elsewhere.

- **Individualized Student Approach:** The district is recognized for maintaining a "no one-size-fits-all" philosophy, providing an individualized approach that allows students to experience school and participate on their home fields.
- **Collaborative Environment & Strong Climate:** Staff members report positive, intimate team dynamics with strong internal communication, healthy business office operations, and a shared dedication to student success.
- **Supportive External Partnerships:** Strong backing and collaboration from the County Executive, County Commissioners, and sending districts provide vital operational and financial support.
- **Quality and Value for Sending Districts:** Special education directors note that the district delivers valuable, high-quality programs for the most challenged and difficult-to-serve students.
- **Facility Upgrades and Communication Tools:** Recent building and equipment upgrades, alongside improved website resources and parent communication apps, have enhanced the district's infrastructure and engagement.
- **Student Diversity and Community Acceptance:** The school community is recognized for its diversity and its strong acceptance and embracement of all students regardless of individual challenges.

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES FACING THE DISTRICT

Summary

Stakeholders identify declining enrollment, underutilized facilities, and financial sustainability as critical challenges, driven by sending districts expanding in-house services and tuition cost impacts. Frequent administrative turnover has caused frustration, diminished trust, and created a strong demand for stable, transparent leadership. Rebuilding relationships with sending districts and bargaining units requires improved communication, responsiveness, and collaboration. Additionally, staff face morale and retention hurdles that necessitate enhanced psychological support, specialized training, and appropriate facilities and resources. Finally, stakeholders emphasize the need to better market district programs, eliminate organizational silos across schools, and expand family engagement opportunities.

Board survey results indicate that the successor superintendent should focus on raising student achievement, improving district-community communication, enhancing the district's reputation, and promoting schools to boost enrollment and meet the increasingly diverse needs of county students.

Challenges listed:

- **Enrollment & Financial Sustainability:** Stakeholders frequently cite low and declining enrollment, underutilized facilities, financial pressures, and funding concerns as sending districts increasingly develop in-house services.
- **Leadership Turnover & Trust:** Multiple groups emphasize the negative impact of frequent leadership changes at the top, noting a strong need for stable district-level direction, transparency, and restored trust among families and staff.
- **Sending District Relationships & Communication:** Strengthening communication, responsiveness, and collaborative relationships with sending school districts is highlighted as essential for building confidence in district programs.
- **Staff Morale & Support:** Concerns regarding staff morale, teacher retention, administrative accessibility, and the need for adequate psychological support and professional training are prominent across employee groups.
- **Resources & Facility Limitations:** Stakeholders point to aging facilities, capital funding needs, reduced program offerings, and challenges with agency-provided 1:1 support staff hours and training.
- **District Visibility & Marketing:** There is a recognized need to improve the promotion and marketing of the district's specialized resources and services to attract students and staff.
- **Organizational Silos & Family Engagement:** Parents and staff note a sense of separation across district schools and a need for greater cohesiveness, cross-school student interaction, and opportunities for families to connect.

HYA and the Board intend to meet the challenge of finding an individual who possesses most of the skills and character traits required to meet the needs of the district. The search team will seek a new superintendent who can work with the Mercer County Special Services Board of Education to provide the leadership

needed to continue to meet the unique needs of each of its students, schools and communities.

The search team thanks all the participants who attended focus groups meetings or completed the Board online survey and the Mercer County Special Services School District staff members who assisted with our meetings, particularly Udaya Batchu who organized the search team's time in the district.