



LEADERSHIP PROFILE REPORT HELENA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the Leadership Profile Assessment conducted by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) in October 2020 for the new superintendent of the Helena Public Schools. 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 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:

Group	Personal interviews or focus groups
Board Members	8 plus 2 student members
Elementary administrators	10
Secondary administrators	12
Central office administrators	10
Teachers	46
Community	23
Support Staff	3
Parents & Families	16
Students	3
Total	133

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

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

Strengths of the District

A number of themes emerged from conversations with constituent groups, which are summarized below:

Educational Excellence

- Helena Public Schools stakeholders believe that the district provides a rigorous, high quality education to its students with a rich variety of program offerings.
- Students in the district generally achieve at high levels, and the teaching staff is well regarded for its commitment, expertise, and dedication to the success of students.

Teacher and Staff Quality

- The high quality of the teaching and support staff is a source of great pride within the community.
- Groups praised the student-centered focus of staff and appreciated the caring and commitment provided by all.
- There is a belief that the competitive teacher salary schedule in Helena attracts “the best of the best” teachers in Montana, and the community as a whole is very supportive of its teachers.
- Stakeholders frequently noted the strength of the site administrators as critical to the success of the district.

Parents and Community

- Stakeholders praised the degree of parent involvement in the schools and the high level of community support for public education in Helena.
- Within the community there is a pervasive sense of pride in the three new elementary schools and the vote of confidence received in the recent passage of the bond.
- The Helena Education Foundation was universally praised for its unwavering support and was viewed as a great strength of the district.
- Community partnerships and relationships between the school district and other community entities including the business community, higher education, public health, and others were recognized as being important to the district’s success.

Size and Location

- The size of the district and its unique location are highlighted as strengths of the district by many groups. Located in the capitol, the community attracts residents who are involved in the public sector and appreciate the role of public schools in our democracy.
- Stakeholders note that there is a true sense of community in the district with many current employees being former students. It was noted that there is a small city feel with families interconnected in many ways. Many people noted that Helena is “a great place to live and work!”

Leadership

- The Board's focus on developing and implementing Strategic Priorities was seen as an important directive guiding and aligning decisions throughout the organization.
- Program options within the district such as Montessori and PAL and site leadership autonomy is valued and appreciated by parents.
- The district's thoughtful response to the Covid-19 challenge and options offered to parents were viewed positively.
- The visibility and approachability of the Superintendent as the "face of the district" was noted and appreciated by many groups. Board members were also seen as being highly involved in the district.

Challenges, Concerns, Issues Facing the District

Budget

- The number one challenge, almost universally expressed was around school finances. General concern about the fiscal well-being of the District, particularly as it relates to salary increases for teachers, has created distrust impacting negotiations.
- Adversarial relationships can be an obstacle to collaborative decision-making. These budget challenges will continue into the future so the District must effectively plan for and resolve budget issues associated with uncertainty.
- With the building of the East Helena High School, the District stands to lose a considerable number of students resulting in a loss of revenue for the District. Given the District's precarious fiscal condition, hiring sufficient teachers to deal with Covid-19 and providing the range of educational programs viewed by many as essential, including services for special education and Title I, is troubling. The District may have to look at possibility closing one or more school(s).
- While the District has built three new schools due to passage of bonds, old facilities including Helena High School require replacement or improvement. Passage of future bonds for construction will be challenging.

Communications

- Frustration and distrust generated by what some see as decisions made without the full engagement and understanding among stakeholders has created skepticism. There is a lack of understanding as to the amount and use of reserves and how financial decisions are made. Clear, consistent and timely communication would help members of the school community understand district practices and be informed of issues, events or programs that may be relevant to them. Improved communications with all stakeholders is needed so the budget appears transparent to all.
- Communication with students could be improved. Board members and central office administrators could facilitate conversations with students while visiting the individual sites.

Board Governance

- The role of the Board in governing the District is of concern and some question whether sound boardmanship practices are in place. There is a perception that the Board is not working as a unit but rather individual agendas are in place with a tendency toward micromanaging.
- This has been an extremely difficult year for many. The recent instability of the superintendent position coupled with the pattern of frequent turnover in this position has created a climate of concern as to the District's viability to attract high quality candidates.

Curriculum and Instruction

- High performing students do very well academically but there is concern that for many students equity in terms of program offerings is an unmet need.
- Some parents feel that transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school need improvement.

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 Helena Public Schools Board of Trustees to provide the leadership needed to meet the unique needs of each of its schools and communities.

The search team would like to thank all the participants who attended focus groups meetings or completed the online survey and the Helena Public Schools staff members who assisted with our meetings, particularly Michelle Skinner who organized the search team's interviews.