



EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT & DEVELOPMENT

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**Executive Summary
Whitefish School District Stakeholder Meetings
January 14, 2026**

On January 14, 2026, consultant Shar Johns met with district stakeholders representing staff, students, parents, administrators, union representatives, classified employees, directors, and community members across the Whitefish School District to gather input regarding the selection of the new superintendent. Outlined below is an Executive Summary of the major themes expressed by the approximately 95 participants at these sessions. The input provides a clear picture of district strengths, the challenges facing the next Superintendent, and the leadership traits most critical for future success.

Additional information will be provided after the online survey results are tabulated. The online survey will remain active until Thursday, January 22, 2026 to give all stakeholders opportunity to respond.

DISTRICT STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

Whitefish is a unique and diverse resort community with a home town feel. Stakeholders consistently described Whitefish School District as a high-functioning district anchored by a deeply supportive community. There is strong pride in the district's small-town culture combined with the resources and opportunities typically found in much larger systems. Levy and bond support, community donations, and volunteer involvement were repeatedly cited as evidence of trust and investment in public education.

Participants highlighted the district's broad academic and extracurricular offerings, including AP courses, GATE, SPED services, Independent High School option, athletics, arts, trades, and internships. Staff quality emerged as a core strength, with frequent references to dedicated, experienced, and highly educated teachers and leaders who care deeply about students. Students and parents emphasized a positive school climate characterized by safety, kindness, connection, and a focus on the whole child. Teachers and parents alike express that students experience a wonderful balance of academic rigor and fun in the classrooms.

KEY CHALLENGES AHEAD

Despite these strengths, stakeholders identified several persistent and emerging challenges the next Superintendent will need to address. Attendance for both students and staff was the most consistently raised concern, with participants noting cultural shifts following COVID, frequent family travel, and policies perceived as punitive rather than supportive.

Affordability and housing insecurity were identified as significant threats to staffing stability and long-term sustainability. Rising costs of living were linked to difficulties attracting and retaining teachers and classified staff, as well as growing socioeconomic divides among families. Enrollment fluctuations, legislative funding

uncertainty, and increasing demands in SPED and ESL services were also cited as compounding pressures on district resources.

Culturally, stakeholders described tension between tradition and innovation. While community pride and longevity are valued, some expressed concern that entrenched practices, uneven decision-making processes, and limited staff ownership in decisions may hinder progress. Parents and students raised concerns about testing volume, scheduling rigidity, technology policies, and ensuring student voice is meaningfully incorporated into decisions. As a highly engaged community, families appropriately advocate for their students and schools. Stakeholders noted that, at times, parent advocacy and trustee involvement extend beyond established communication pathways and governance roles, creating inconsistency in decision-making and placing strain on administrative operations.

SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP PROFILE

Across all groups, there was remarkable alignment on the characteristics needed for the next Superintendent. Stakeholders want a visible, approachable, and authentic leader who is deeply engaged in schools and the broader community, while maintaining clear boundaries and consistency. Strong communication, transparency, and follow-through were identified as essential to maintaining trust in a highly engaged and opinionated community.

Instructional leadership is a priority. Stakeholders emphasized the need for a Superintendent who is data-informed, current in best practices, focused on improving academic outcomes, and capable of tying systems together to support students at all levels. Respondents also stressed the importance of valuing all employee groups equally, supporting teachers and classified staff, developing leaders internally, and modeling accountability. The next Superintendent will need strong governance awareness and communication skills to reinforce appropriate chains of command, clarify roles between the Board and administration, and establish consistent, transparent processes for addressing concerns while maintaining positive relationships with families and trustees.

Lastly, stakeholders expressed an emphasis on leadership that is personable, proactive, and forward-thinking. They also desire a superintendent who is active in the community, and has a plan for longevity in the community. Although viewpoints and experience from outside Montana are valued, the willingness to learn, understand, and embrace the unique culture and climate of Whitefish, and Montana, are essential.