McPherson & Jacobson, LLC

Executive Recruitment and Development

Addison Northwest School District
Superintendent Search
Executive Summary of Stakeholder Focus Groups

Prepared for the Addison Northwest School District Board

Final Draft Updated 10/20/2026

Stakeholder Input — September 23, 2026

Six focus groups · Vergennes, Vermont

McPherson & Jacobson, L.L.C.

11725 Arbor Street, Suite 220 · Omaha, Nebraska 68144

888-375-4814 · mail@macnjake.com · www.macnjake.com

Conducting national searches for boards of education since 1991

SCOPE AND METHOD

About This Summary

This narrative summary synthesizes six stakeholder focus groups conducted on September 23, 2026, by consultant Dr. Judy Sclair-Stein as part of the Addison Northwest School District Superintendent Search. Participating groups included Teachers, Students, Parents, Administrators, Support Staff, and Community Members. Input was gathered to inform the selection of a new superintendent for the Addison Northwest School District.

Each group responded to the same four questions: the good things about the community, the good things about the district, the qualities and characteristics the new superintendent should possess, and the issues the new superintendent should be aware of on entering the district. This document reports, for each question in turn, the themes that recurred across groups and what those themes imply for the Board's decisions. Two groups, Parents and Administrators, also commented on the draft selection criteria; those comments are reported in a final section. Direct quotations are drawn from facilitator notes as recorded.

Findings described here as widely shared reflect themes raised independently by separate groups rather than emphasis within any single session. Where a theme appears in only one group, that is noted.

QUESTION ONE

Strengths of the Community

Every group described a small, close-knit community in which people know one another, and the language was remarkably consistent. Support staff said "everybody knows your name." A community member said the town "is almost like a family; it's like Cheers where everybody knows your name." Parents described a place where "everyone knows you walking down the street" and families know each other's families, and students observed that the community is "not as big, but know more people." Support staff called it a "generational community" built on trusting relationships, and one community member summarized its pull plainly: "It's the community that kept me here; everyone knows each other."

Beneath that closeness, three assets recurred. The first is care in action. Teachers described families who "come together to help another in need" and noted that "kids show up for one another." Administrators described a community that "lends a hand with projects" and "helps take care of neighbors," and parents called it "small but mighty," with "always groups supporting each other." The most vivid illustration came from the community group: when a local student went to the summer Special Olympics, the owner of Daily Chocolates made "Chocolate Bars" bearing her Olympic medal. The second is place. Every group named the setting in some form: Lake Champlain, water and mountains, agricultural land and natural resources, all four seasons "plus mud season," and a rural location that is still "close enough to Burlington." Parents described the area as about "half way" to other destinations, and support staff noted that most things in Vergennes are accessible on foot. The third is the bond between town and schools. Parents called the schools "the hub of the community," administrators said the community "supports schools – shows trust," and the community group observed that "kids connect in the school."

Community events, including parades, block parties, and other small-town gatherings, were named by three groups. Administrators named "diversity of land and people," and teachers described the community as politically diverse. Parents were the only group to name affordability and safety, describing the area as "a place of safety."

Two qualifications run beneath the praise. The first is tone. Students offered the most measured view in the study, describing an "average community" where "most people are nice." The second is complexity. Support staff described an "intellectual challenging community" and framed the challenge as "how to communicate with the different groups," an observation that pairs with the teachers' description of political diversity and anticipates the communication expectations reported under Question Three. Administrators added a forward-looking note that "uncertainty can bring opportunity."

QUESTION TWO

Strengths of the District

Five of six groups led with people and relationships. Administrators described "kind kids – fun to work with – genuinely kind to each other," along with "dedicated educators and staff" and a relatively experienced staff. Students echoed the point from their own vantage: peers who are "kind to each other," teachers who check in on them, being "friends with everyone," and the "buddies" system in elementary school. Parents named caring staff members and a culture in which "older kids take care of the younger kids." Teachers named "people connection," and support staff described high in-school collaboration among teachers, teachers who are "willing and accepting new things," and a district where "employees are valued."

Beyond people, three strengths recurred. The first is systems and supports. Teachers named a "strong systems focus – MTSS, 504, etc." and a "strong leadership team in place," with "lots of 'Yes' even with any political restraints." Students gave the most detailed account of student supports in the study, naming a focus on social-emotional learning, attention to health concerns and coping mechanisms, strict hazing, harassment, and bullying guidelines, and a school where it is "easy to get help." Support staff named strong curriculum in literacy and math and strong technology, and administrators cited collaborative thinking and innovative learning. The second is scale. Administrators described a "very small district" in which "networking is easy," and teachers pointed to proximity and a setting they called "VT Urban." The third is family partnership. Parents valued being included in decision-making, citing the principal search committee, and noted that the schools "incorporate with each other."

Programs drew consistent and specific praise. The community group was the most enthusiastic in the study and the most specific, naming a garden at Ferrisburgh Central School whose vegetables are used for school lunch, sap collection that teaches students to boil sap and make maple syrup, ice rinks at Ferrisburgh Central and Vergennes Union Elementary, a pool at Ferrisburgh Central, access to skates for every child, a PE Olympics, the career center at the high school, and an exchange program organized by the German teacher. Teachers named the Fusion After School and Summer programs and "the best gymnasium in the state." Parents named sports, Community Based Learning that pairs students with community partners, and combined elementary grades (2/3 and 4/5) that they described as "more integrated."

Two qualifications run beneath the praise. The first is consistency across grade levels. Support staff cited strong curriculum in literacy and math, while teachers reported that middle school literacy and math scores are lower. Students praised strict bullying and harassment guidelines, yet under Question Four the same group described bullying and harassment claims and said discipline "is not working." Both accounts may be accurate: strong systems exist, but their effect appears uneven across buildings and grade levels. The second is perspective. Administrators described a district "already in a good spot," while a community member reported that engagement with the school board and superintendent "has not been productive." These views likely reflect different distances from district leadership rather than different facts.

QUESTION THREE

Characteristics the New Superintendent Should Have

This question produced the clearest consensus in the study. Every group asked for a superintendent who is visible and present, and several defined what presence should look like. Teachers asked for a leader who is "being in the schools, makes the time," who is approachable enough that staff are "able to approach and ask a question," and who attends community events. Administrators asked for someone who "wants to be part of the community – go to sporting events, visit schools." Support staff asked for classroom visits, "presence in the buildings," and engagement with both staff and students. Parents asked the superintendent to "be present in the schools, know the students and staff," and offered a concrete format: open talk sessions such as "Coffee Breaks with the Superintendent." Students explained most plainly why this matters: they "feel disconnected from superintendent – don't always know who it is."

Communication and transparency were named by five groups. Parents asked for "transparency on everything" and noted that the "community wants to be included." Support staff and community members each named transparency, and community members added consistency. Teachers were the most specific about tone, asking for communication that is "purposed, regulated, confident" and that staff "feel safe with." Students asked for good communication skills.

Five groups asked for a leader who listens first and leads collaboratively. Teachers wanted a superintendent who "leads 'with' (as a group, not alone)," who "helps to bring out the best in everyone," and who models listening leadership. Support staff framed the same idea as "'Us' not 'You' (district as a whole)." A community member described the sequence: "Come in, listen, see and then adapt to what's needed and then be sensible." Administrators asked for collaboration that extends regionally to other superintendents, and parents asked for a leader who listens and remains open while still being "able to voice an opinion."

Knowledge of Vermont and respect for what is already in place recurred with unusual insistence, particularly from administrators, whose notes record "joining an established team, support team and not upheave what is already in place," "appreciate systems already in place," and "leans into curiosity, embracing history of district and state" as separate entries, along with knowing "the landscape – VT education." Support staff named knowledge of the state level, and the community group asked for a leader "embracing VT culture" and able "to adapt to the different needs of our community." Parents asked for a leader who keeps abreast of education at larger scales, including shifts in preparing students for life after high school, who understands that preschool is embedded in a PreK–12 district, and who knows standards-based grading.

Groups also asked for steadiness paired with the capacity to decide. Parents asked for a leader who can "make tough decisions with little bit of empathy" and who does not "see in black and white, but see the gray line." Support staff asked for a "bold decision maker" who is also compassionate and willing to try new ideas. Administrators named fearlessness, a strong moral compass, being grounded, and "don't over react"; teachers named steadiness; students named confidence; and the community group asked for someone "up for the challenge." These requests sit in productive tension with the administrators' call not to upheave existing systems. Taken together, they describe a leader who makes hard decisions from a position of understanding rather than disruption for its own sake.

Finally, groups asked that students remain at the center and that staff be supported. Administrators asked for a leader who is student centered and equity-minded. Support staff asked for a superintendent who "looks at

students as individual student" and treats everyone equally, and community members asked for someone who "genuinely cares for the well being and academic achievement of each student." Students asked for more student-led opportunities and for a leader who will "understand what our school means to us." On staff support, teachers made a notable request: more supervision and evaluation, including "more opportunities for walk-throughs" and more feedback to improve their practice. Support staff asked for a leader who "looks at contracts as a tool and not weaponized." Parents added a lighthearted note that captures the breadth of these expectations: "Have superpowers!"

QUESTION FOUR

Critical Issues to Prioritize

The future structure of the district and its finances form the most widely shared concern. Four groups named state-level consolidation or the pending merger. Support staff put the question most directly, "big picture – will district exist in the future," and asked that staff be kept informed of merger information. Administrators named Act 170, and parents and community members each named state consolidation. Budget concerns were tied closely to this uncertainty. Teachers named "getting budgets passed" and "community support and understanding of the budget." Parents observed that "budget and taxes are closely tied together" and asked the superintendent to understand the tax base and communicate it to the community. Community members asked the superintendent to be "mindful of per-pupil spending and invest wisely" and named student-to-teacher ratio. Support staff named negotiations. Across these groups, the budget is framed less as a technical task than as a communication task: earning voter understanding in a period of structural change.

Student behavior and mental health were raised by four groups, and students supplied the most operationally specific evidence in the study. They described students who are "disrespectful, disrupting classes, walking out of classes," bullying and harassment claims, the language students use, and students "feeling overwhelmed" and "keeping things to themselves and not sharing with others (adults)." They reported "too many 'Clear the Halls' in the school for student issues" and concluded that "discipline is not working," adding that staff can become "too lenient about a situation and then it gets forgotten about." Support staff independently described "many behavioral issues – more supports needed." Administrators described mental health issues as chronic, recommended partnering with other districts and agencies, and offered one of the most important observations in the study: the need to "get adults into a safer place in order to help the students." Community members asked for "a strong strategy around students building social emotional skills."

Special education and student services were named by three groups. Teachers cited a "lack of resources for severely disabled students." Parents asked the superintendent to attend to students who are "more challenging and need further services" and to the budgets that support them. A community member asked that general education teachers become "more familiar with students' IEPs and make sure accommodations are being provided, so parents don't have to reach to the teacher."

Academic focus recurred in four groups. Teachers reported that "middle school literacy and math scores are lower" and asked for a focus on differentiation. Parents named academic standards and changes to the testing system. Community members asked the superintendent to "prioritize the education, growth, and success of students." Support staff observed that the community is "very engaged with sports, music, theater – not education," and framed the challenge as "providing structure for success."

Staff morale and voice were raised by teachers and community members and carry particular weight. Teachers described a split in staff morale, with negativity at the high school and positivity at the middle school, along with staff turnover. A community member asked the superintendent to "support teachers so they feel comfortable speaking up without fear of losing their jobs." Another community member offered the most personal statement in the study: "My engagement with the school board or the superintendent has not been productive and I don't feel heard." Although these comments came from few voices, they echo the requests for transparency, listening, and contracts that are "not weaponized" reported under Question Three.

Two groups asked the next superintendent to take time to learn the district before acting. Parents suggested "a retreat time with the administrative team to know history of the district." Administrators asked the new leader to take time to know the history of the schools and "where they are at," to "value the perspective of history and the future of our schools," to bring "a realistic view of working in a school every day," and to recognize that the district is "already in a good spot."

Several items surfaced in a single group each and are recorded here because they are consequential rather than common. Teachers noted that the high school Co-Principal model is new this year, with co-principals holding equal responsibilities and dividing the role to be more efficient, and also named transportation. Support staff noted that the middle and high schools share a building with separate rules, asked what equity means in the district, named engaging families, and observed that a nearby Christian school is "not seen as a competitor." Students noted that their school does not interact with other schools.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Feedback on the Draft Criteria

Two groups reviewed the draft selection criteria and offered specific revisions. Administrators gave the most detailed feedback. They observed that the draft is "lacking the mention of students" — including student leadership, agency, and relationships — and asked that "students need to be mentioned throughout." They described the equity criterion (bullet #2) as sounding "reactive rather than proactive" and less robust than the equity guidelines already in place, and recommended drawing on the Board's equity statement, the vision statement, and the Portrait of a Graduate.

Both groups addressed the relationships criterion (bullet #5). Parents asked that it emphasize "working" relationships and a working partnership that includes families as a strong piece of communication. Administrators asked that it be broadened to name regional superintendents, state officials, students, staff, community stakeholders, and neighboring districts, reflecting the "many roles and responsibilities" of the position. The two groups arrived independently at the same point: the criteria should describe active, two-way partnerships with a wide range of audiences, consistent with the visibility and communication themes that dominated Question Three.

Prepared by McPherson & Jacobson, L.L.C., Executive Recruitment and Development, as consultant to the Addison Northwest School District Board. Findings reflect six stakeholder focus groups conducted by Dr. Judy Sclair-Stein on September 23, 2026, during the stakeholder input phase of the search process.

McPherson & Jacobson, LLC

Executive Recruitment and Development

Addison Northwest School District
Superintendent Search
Executive Summary of Online Survey Results

Prepared for the Addison Northwest School District Board

Final Draft Updated 10/20/2026

Stakeholder Input

116 survey submissions · September 24 – 30, 2026

McPherson & Jacobson, L.L.C.

11725 Arbor Street, Suite 220 · Omaha, Nebraska 68144

888-375-4814 · mail@macnjake.com · www.macnjake.com

Conducting national searches for boards of education since 1991

SCOPE AND METHOD

About This Summary

This narrative summary synthesizes the online stakeholder survey conducted for the Addison Northwest School District superintendent search. The instrument drew 116 submissions between September 24 and September 30, 2026. Findings from stakeholder focus groups are reported separately and are not reflected here.

Respondents identified their primary connection to the district as parents or guardians of current students (55 percent, 64 responses), staff members (23 percent, 27 responses), community members (13 percent, 15 responses), parents or guardians of former students (3 percent, 4 responses), students (3 percent, 4 responses), and other (2 percent, 2 responses). The survey data provided reports results for the combined pool only; results broken out by respondent group were not available, so every figure in this summary describes all respondents together.

The survey combined multiple-choice selections, a four-point rating scale, and constructed-response questions. This document reports, question by question, the themes that recurred, the figures that carry them, and what each finding implies for the Board's decisions. Quoted language is respondents' own, as recorded.

Interpretation note: this was an open, self-selected survey rather than a probability sample, so the results describe the people who chose to respond and should not be read as a broader opinion. With 116 respondents, a single response moves most percentages by nearly one point, and small differences between items should not be over-read. Parents of current students make up a majority of the sample and therefore weigh most heavily in the combined results. Percentages on the critical-issues and characteristics questions reflect multi-select items and therefore total more than 100 percent. Themes in constructed responses were identified by the consultant; a small number of comments directed personal criticism at named individuals and are not reproduced here.

SURVEY QUESTION ONE

How Stakeholders Feel About the District

Asked for the one word that best describes how they feel about the district, respondents produced a vocabulary that is genuinely split rather than mixed. Hopeful was the single most frequent word, followed by concerned and disappointed at equal frequency, then community and good. The survey platform classified 43 responses as positive, 36 as negative, and 31 as neutral, with 6 unclassified — a near-even division between those who feel well about the district and those who do not.

The positive vocabulary is warm and relational: hopeful, happy, proud, supportive, welcoming, family, love, and wholesome. The negative vocabulary is evaluative and often pointed at performance or direction: disappointed, mediocre, inconsistent, directionless, aimless, falling behind, sloppy, and shambles. A third cluster names ambivalence rather than a position — meh, so-so, ambivalent, mixed, unsure, uncertain, conflicted, and teetering. Two words, expensive and costly, appear among the negative terms and anticipate the tax concerns that recur later in the survey.

Several respondents exceeded the one-word limit, and their longer answers are instructive. One wrote, "Sad. We have such little funding and are about to get redistricted." Another described the district as a "Work In Progress and needed a New Superintendent 10 years ago." A third, more hopeful, said the district "has excellent teachers and is still progressing towards being its best." Taken together, the responses describe a community that likes its schools and its people but is uneasy about the district's direction and its future structure.

SURVEY QUESTION TWO

Strengths of the District

Asked to name three strengths that candidates should know about, 101 respondents produced a consistent rank order. A strong sense of community was the single most frequent theme, cited more often than any other, frequently in the same words: strong community, close-knit community, small-town feel, and community support for the schools. One respondent noted that "the community traditionally supports the school budget," and another described "a strong sense of community within the five towns that the school district serves."

The quality and dedication of teachers and staff followed closely, described as dedicated, caring, experienced, and willing "to go above and beyond to support students." Respondents extended the credit beyond classroom teachers to support staff, principals, and volunteers, and several described administrators as approachable.

Small size came next, framed as an advantage rather than a limitation: "small, personable - knows each child," "hard for students to fall through the cracks," and, from one respondent, "Small schools, big minds." Engaged families, kind students, and inclusion completed the list. Respondents described packed community events, strong parent-teacher organizations, tremendous school spirit, and an "Explicit Board-Level Commitment to Inclusion & Equity."

The programs cited were specific: action-based and outdoor learning, the specialized autism support program, the Wilder program, the bicycle program at Vergennes Union Elementary, the One District One Book family literacy initiative, the Spring Arts Festival, robust after-school and extracurricular programs, athletics, and experiential pathways to post-secondary education. One respondent valued that families do not have to buy school supplies because tax dollars cover them.

Two qualifications run beneath the praise. First, a small number of respondents named no strengths at all, writing "hard pressed to find any" or "Cant think of any," and several used the question to list problems instead, chiefly student behavior and the need for consequences. Second, the strengths most often named describe the community and its people rather than district operations or outcomes. Academic results and district leadership were rarely cited as strengths, a pattern that is consistent with the performance ratings reported under the next question.

SURVEY QUESTION THREE

Perceptions of District Performance

Respondents rated seven facets of the district on a four-point scale (excellent, good, fair, poor), with an additional "I don't know" option. The results are notable less for their ranking than for their ceiling: no facet reached 2.5 on the four-point scale, no facet drew more than 8 percent excellent ratings, and only one facet — relationships with families — was rated excellent or good by a majority of respondents.

Facet	Reported average	Excluding "don't know"	Excellent or good	Poor
Relationships with families	2.35	2.45	54.8%	15.7%
Communications	2.34	2.37	48.3%	19.0%
Student achievement	2.10	2.20	34.5%	18.1%
Financial management	1.99	2.20	36.0%	22.8%
Relationships with staff members	1.91	2.34	37.9%	18.1%
Transparency	1.89	1.94	24.1%	33.6%
Preparing students for college and career	1.76	2.04	25.0%	24.1%

Reported averages are the survey platform's weighted averages, which count "I don't know" responses as zero. The second column recalculates each average using only respondents who gave a rating. Percentages are shares of all respondents to each item (114 to 116).

The "I don't know" option matters for reading this table. The platform's averages count those responses as zero, which lowers the score of any facet many respondents felt unable to judge. Relationships with staff members drew 21 "I don't know" responses, preparing students for college and career drew 16, and financial management drew 11. Once those responses are set aside, relationships with staff members rises from 1.91 to 2.34, and preparation for college and career rises from 1.76 to 2.04. Both figures remain modest, but the large "I don't know" counts are themselves a finding: many respondents do not feel they have enough information to judge how the district treats its employees or prepares students for life after high school.

Transparency is the clearest result in the table. It is the lowest-rated facet once "I don't know" responses are set aside (1.94), it drew the highest share of poor ratings in the survey (33.6 percent), and nearly three in four respondents (73.3 percent) rated it fair or poor. Because almost every respondent offered a rating, this is the facet on which respondents were both most confident and least satisfied.

Instruction fares no better than operations. Student achievement was rated fair or poor by 61.2 percent of respondents, and only 2.6 percent rated it excellent. The contrast with the previous question is instructive: respondents consistently praise the people who teach their children while rating the outcomes those people produce as middling. That contrast is consistent with the next question, in which academic outcomes ranked first among critical issues by a wide margin.

SURVEY QUESTION FOUR

Critical Issues to Prioritize

Respondents selected the three most critical issues from a list of thirteen. Academic outcomes ranked first at 51.72 percent — the only issue selected by a majority of respondents. Staff recruitment and retention ranked second at 36.21 percent, followed by family and community relations and school safety and security, tied at 29.31 percent, and financial management at 25.00 percent.

Critical issue	Percent	Responses
Academic outcomes	51.72%	60
Staff recruitment and retention	36.21%	42
Family and community relations	29.31%	34
School safety and security	29.31%	34
Financial management	25.00%	29
College and career readiness	24.14%	28
Social emotional learning	20.69%	24
Special education services	19.83%	23
Communication	18.97%	22
Mental health services	16.38%	19
Teacher quality	14.66%	17
Diversity and engagement	9.48%	11
Facilities and grounds	4.31%	5

Respondents selected three of thirteen options (116 respondents), so the column totals roughly 300 percent.

Three patterns in this table deserve specific attention. First, staff recruitment and retention (36.21 percent) drew more than twice the support of teacher quality (14.66 percent). Read alongside the strengths question, in which teachers and staff were among the most praised assets, respondents appear to see the problem as keeping good people rather than improving them. Second, the whole-child cluster — social emotional learning, special education services, and mental health services — drew between 16 and 21 percent each, and together these selections exceed academic outcomes in raw count. Third, financial management ranked fifth as a priority even though it was rated poorly, which suggests respondents see fiscal pressure as real but secondary to what happens in classrooms. Facilities and grounds ranked last.

The constructed-response follow-up, answered by 91 respondents, named five recurring additional priorities. Student behavior, discipline, and accountability was the most frequent and the most urgent, raised by roughly one in four respondents. Comments described "extreme lack of consequences," "far too many holds due to disruptive students," and classrooms in which "1 student shouldn't ruin the learning of 20 others." Several respondents were careful to pair the call for consequences with support, writing that the district can "adopt trauma-informed, responsive practices and STILL have logical consequences," and asking for district-

wide behavior plans, behavioral interventionists, and board-certified behavior analysts rather than additional paraprofessionals expected to do more than their roles entail.

Staff support, morale, and retention followed, with calls to "treat the paras better," to support elementary teachers with paraprofessionals and behavior interventionists, and to retain teachers so the district is "not a training ground" for neighboring counties. Respondents also raised staff voice directly, asking for "not retaliating against staff who speak up" and for an environment in which teachers can communicate "without repercussions." Budget and taxes came next, framed most often as a burden on households: "People are being taxed out of Vergennes and right out of Vermont," wrote one respondent, and others asked the next superintendent to reduce central office staffing before classroom positions. State-level consolidation and merger discussions recurred throughout, with respondents divided between those who see a merger as "essential" and an opportunity for broader programming and those who asked the superintendent to move "very slowly and thoughtfully" and to advocate for the district's voice during redistricting. Academic rigor completed the list, with calls for challenge for high-achieving and gifted students, stronger literacy intervention before middle school, changes to proficiency-based grading, and preparation that serves both college-bound students and those headed to trades.

Several smaller themes surfaced and are recorded because they are specific rather than common. A cluster of respondents asked for less screen time and a return to paper-and-pencil work. Others asked for greater cohesion between Ferrisburgh Central School and Vergennes Union Elementary, for updated play equipment, for building security improvements, and for transportation solutions. One respondent noted that arts and staffing cuts in the most recent budget "were not at all brought to the attention of those it affected most."

SURVEY QUESTION FIVE

Characteristics the Next Superintendent Should Have

Respondents selected five characteristics from a list of twenty-three. Two characteristics tied for first at 36.21 percent each: demonstrates high integrity and ethics and leads by example, and communicates effectively. They were followed closely by takes responsibility and is accountable for their actions (34.48 percent), places the needs of students above anything else (33.62 percent), spends time in classrooms (33.62 percent), delivers improved student outcomes (31.90 percent), possesses a background in public education (31.90 percent), promotes safety and security across the district (31.03 percent), and builds strong community relationships (29.31 percent).

The defining feature of this result is its flatness. No characteristic reached 40 percent, and nine characteristics fall within eight points of one another, between 29 and 37 percent. Respondents did not single out one trait; they described a composite of character, communication, presence, and results. The appearance of spends time in classrooms in a tie for fourth place is notable, because it is the most behavioral item on the list — a request for a specific use of the superintendent's time rather than a general quality.

What respondents declined to prioritize is equally informative. Previous experience as a superintendent finished near the bottom at 7.76 percent, above only maintains a vision focused on the future and values school autonomy, each at 6.03 percent. Adapts effectively to changing circumstances and stands firm behind decisions that may not be popular drew 10.34 percent each. Respondents want an accountable educator who communicates and shows up, not necessarily a sitting superintendent, and they rank character and presence above credential.

The constructed-response follow-up, answered by 64 respondents, sharpened the picture. Presence and visibility drew the most pointed language in the dataset. Respondents asked for a superintendent who will "actually show up when things get hard, not just sit in the office," who will "be seen often in the schools to see what is actually happening," and who "needs to be KNOWN by all the stakeholders, including students!" One wrote simply: "Spend time in classrooms and schools- NEVER saw the current superintendent in our school. EVER." Listening and collaboration followed, framed as trust in staff expertise: "listens to faculty and staff because they know their schools better than anyone," and "make decisions with students, teachers and community (not on their own)." A classroom background recurred, with one respondent asking for "at least 10 years of classroom experience" in a tested content area. Kindness, empathy, and emotional intelligence completed the shared list, along with an atmosphere in which teachers can "speak up and feel safe about doing so without fear of retaliation." Smaller numbers asked for financial acumen, political neutrality, and a leader who values the small community and will keep it strong rather than "changing it selfishly."

SURVEY QUESTION SIX

Community Draws for Candidates

Asked to name three things that might encourage a candidate to relocate, 75 respondents produced a stable list with one clear leader. The community itself ranked first by a wide margin — strong, caring, tight-knit, and welcoming, with "a small community with a big heart" that "rallies around our students and teachers." Natural beauty and outdoor recreation ranked second: Lake Champlain, mountains, hiking trails, skiing, clean air, farms and orchards, and a peaceful rural landscape. Four distinct seasons, quality of life, and a great place to raise a family followed.

Location was cast as an advantage rather than isolation: a rural setting with access to Burlington, Middlebury, Montreal, and New York State. Several respondents named downtown Vergennes specifically — its Main Street, shops and restaurants, and walkability. A smaller group pointed to the schools themselves, citing excellent teachers, small class sizes, and "the systems in place are already working very well," and two respondents framed the position as an opportunity: a district with the "size to enable meaningful change but not too big to change," and a community "ready for change."

A few respondents offered candid cautions that the Board should hear. One wrote, "I wouldn't encourage someone to relocate here as an educator because the state of Vermont education is highly volatile." Another described the area as very rural and noted limited racial diversity. These views are few in number but point to the same uncertainty about Vermont's education landscape that recurs throughout the survey.

SURVEY QUESTION SEVEN

Guidance to the Board of Education

The final question invited any additional considerations for the Board, and 48 respondents answered it. The most common request concerned the search process itself. Respondents asked the Board to "ask for input early and often about candidates," to hold community meetings or an informal "meet and greet" with finalists away from the school or district office, to involve parents in the selection process "to yield best buy in," and to "incorporate these survey findings very thoroughly." Several asked the Board to vet candidates independently — researching backgrounds, paying attention to any prior controversy, and seeking "concrete examples of conflict resolution and communication skills" — and one urged the Board not to "settle for the best of the worst" and to reopen the search if no candidate is a strong fit.

Accountability and governance ranked next, and its character is distinctive: a share of respondents directed their comments at the Board and current leadership rather than at the search. The most extensive comment described a "severe governance failure," a board that "operates as a rubber stamp for the administration's agenda," and "a toxic culture of fear" in which staff are afraid to speak freely. Others asked for a leader who is "transparent and holds themselves and everyone around them accountable," and one described the previous leadership as having "initiated changes and then dragged the community along," asking the next superintendent to see community members "as intelligent partners." Views were not uniform: one respondent urged the Board to "avoid change that is simply for the sake of change" and to build on the work of current leadership.

Fiscal responsibility recurred, with requests to "be proactive in movement to lower property taxes," and to find a candidate with financial expertise who can manage costs while identifying investments "with measurable results." State-level uncertainty followed closely. Respondents asked for a leader able to advocate for ANWSD amid uncertainty over Vermont public education, funding, and mergers, and to account for how a merger would affect all students in the district area.

Selecting an internal versus an external candidate was raised but not resolved. Some respondents asked for "fresh eyes and new ears" and to "hire outside the current district employees," while others asked for someone local "that understands Vermont" and who will "want to be a part of Vermont," and one simply listed longevity. The common thread is less about origin than fit: a candidate who understands and respects a small Vermont community.

One comment, from a self-described 18-year classroom veteran, offered the most operationally specific account in the survey. It described the loss of world languages, reductions in STEM and art, the end of middle school agriculture and vocational life-skills programming, and the discontinuation of a specialized self-contained program at the high school. It linked those losses to rising behavioral needs: fewer clinical partnerships and on-site clinicians, paraprofessionals reassigned from academic support to one-to-one behavior management, counselors absorbed by crisis intervention, and general education teachers asked to deliver interventions outside their training.

Finally, three respondents raised a practical recruitment constraint. One reported that candidates may only be offered a one-year contract under new guidance from the Vermont Agency of Education, a second listed the "ability to accept a 1 year term" as a needed characteristic, and a third cautioned that this "will be challenging for out of area candidates."

CROSS-QUESTION FINDINGS

Where the Survey Converges

Because results by respondent group were not available, the most useful comparison this survey supports is across questions rather than across constituencies. Four findings recur in nearly every section, and they are the findings the Board can rely on most.

First, presence. Spends time in classrooms ranked in a tie for fourth among twenty-three characteristics, visibility drew the most pointed language in the constructed responses, and requests to be present in buildings and at community events appeared again among the critical issues and in guidance to the Board. Second, transparency and communication. Transparency was the lowest-rated facet of district performance among respondents who offered a rating, and communicates effectively tied for the top characteristic. Third, student behavior and staff support. Behavior and consequences were the most frequent additional critical issue, staff recruitment and retention ranked second among listed priorities, and respondents repeatedly linked the two, describing staff stretched by unmet behavioral needs. Fourth, academic outcomes. Student achievement was rated fair or poor by six in ten respondents, and academic outcomes was the only priority selected by a majority.

Beneath these convergences runs a single context: uncertainty about the district's future structure. State consolidation, redistricting, and the possibility of a one-year contract appear in the one-word responses, the strengths, the critical issues, the community draws, and the guidance to the Board. Respondents describe a district whose community and people are its greatest assets and whose next superintendent will need to protect those assets while leading through a period the district does not fully control.

Prepared by McPherson & Jacobson, L.L.C., Executive Recruitment and Development, as consultant to the Addison Northwest School District Board. Findings reflect 116 online survey submissions gathered September 24 through September 30, 2026. Stakeholder focus group findings are reported separately.