

# DESIRED QUALIFICATIONS FOR K-12 DISTRICT LEADERS

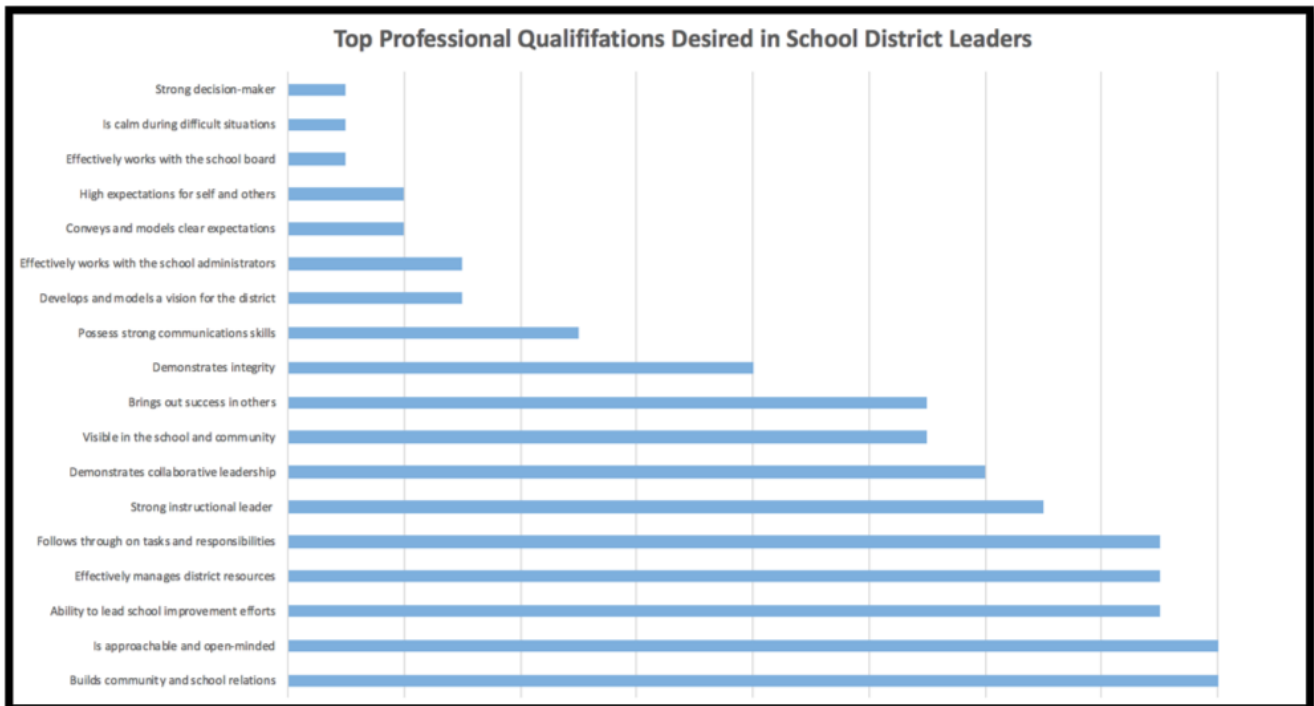
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# INTRODUCTION

In a world changing faster than anyone knows how to handle, one thing remains: leadership is one of the most important factors when it comes to success, whatever the goal is. Well known publications such as Forbes and the Washington Post write daily articles regarding leadership qualities, leadership advice, and lists of dos and don'ts for every industry. Although missions of the corporate business world, the military, and government often vary a great deal, there is no question leadership is critical to progress and positive outcomes.

Education is no different. Leaders must be the right fit for a district in order to bring about meaningful change. Leading a district well requires strong community relations, an ability to create a positive culture, and a forward-looking vision.

Each district has a different idea of what that looks like, but after five years of conducting K-12 leadership searches for districts, the following are clear traits that have emerged as desired qualifications across the board.



# Builds Community and School Relations

Anyone in a small town understands that the school and community success go hand in hand. If the community is vibrant the school is thriving and vice versa. Even though this is known, often times a district leader's time and attention is more on district issues than building community support for the schools. There are several reasons this has happened, but much can be attributed to increased demands of district leaders, a focus on instructional leadership which took time away from community relations, and other factors specific to each district. One district stakeholder comments, "I think that we need someone who has a strong presence in the community and will be able to increase parent and community involvement with the school." They also need to have strong communication skills and be able to make the right decisions for our school district." Through surveying districts seeking to find their next leader, it is abundantly clear that community members and parents feel their input doesn't matter, which leads to a great deal of frustration.

Stakeholders appear to be aching for a leader to come in and help them feel included in the school system which is often the heartbeat of the community.

As described in his latest book, *The Vanishing American Adult*, Senator Ben Sasse writes,

"Too much formalized schooling inevitably crowds out communities of the heart and soul, volunteerism, flexibility and choice, cross-cultural experience, exertion, success and failure, and time— essentially everything for becoming a fully formed adult, an empathetic citizen, and a worker-learner flexible enough to navigate the accelerated pace of job expiration and change in the new economy."

Districts looking to prepare their students for the next-generation workforce understand that the school and community must not be siloed from one another, but instead work together to raise up a generation that is well equipped for an incredible number of unknowns. There is a clear thirst for school leaders that will work with and leverage the community to support the school district.

## **Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:**

1. As a new administrator to the district, how would you go about building relationships of trust and collaboration?
2. How have you worked with the local community to support the school district?
3. How do you recognize staff and students for their achievements?

# Ability to Lead School Improvement Efforts

The push for increasing student achievement and engagement has been growing and seems to be growing stronger every year. Stakeholders have great concern for the preparedness of the students graduating from local school district. Whether moving on to college, career, military or the workforce, every student must be prepared. One district stakeholder provided this advice to the next leader of their district, “be positive and progressive, look for ways to improve the school district for the greater good. Don’t get stuck in traditions just because that’s the way it’s always been done.” This goes beyond academics. One stakeholder commented that a major challenge for their district is, “creating an atmosphere and expectation of excellence throughout the district, leading as we juggle how to help those for whom school is easy while supporting and helping those for whom school is difficult.”

Other information deemed relevant to stakeholders may be included, such as a report on operations for manufacturing firms or corporate social responsibility reports for companies with environmentally or socially sensitive operations. In the case of larger companies, it is usually a sleek, colorful, high-gloss publication. Stakeholders see how the working world is changing, and they know how students have been taught for over a hundred years no longer works for all kids.

For this reason, parents, community members, and employers are looking for leaders that will not invoke initiative fatigue, but make a bold plan with every intention of meeting those goals. This does not mean a leader who is unwilling to listen and use good ideas, but a leader who can create a strong vision and build a culture that can drastically change the course of a district.

Many district leaders are removed from delivering professional development themselves but strong instructional leaders understand the importance of building goals, evaluations of building principals, monitoring student achievement data and guiding professional development efforts. Effective district leaders seem to also be intentional about aligning district resources to maximize school improvement efforts around need areas.

## **Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:**

1. When you visit a classroom, what are the first things you look for as signs that the classroom is an effective learning environment?
2. What is your role in holding teachers and principals accountable for student achievement?
3. If hired for the position, how would your leadership style complement our improvement plans?

# Effectively Manages School Resources

Although not a surprise to see managing school resources on this list, it still warrants discussion. Districts are all over the map in terms of financial solvency. This means every district is in a unique situation when it comes to finances. Although stakeholders may not understand school finance themselves, they showed the importance by the ranking this desired quality so high for their incoming leader. They know it is important to run the district and be efficient with how money is spent and human resources are allocated. Many stakeholders voiced where they thought school resources should be spent, such as facilities, technology, the arts, sports, or hiring more educators. Although every district has different priorities, it is critical that leaders understand how district budgets work, and diligently try to understand the collective desires of the community they are entering.

When it comes to managing district resources the school leader has to understand what they have control over and what they don't. Effectively managing what they can influence in the best interest of the school district and helping people understand their decision making is important for the district leader to be successful long-term.

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## **Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:**

1. When confronted with shrinking resources, how do you prioritize district needs?
2. Please provide examples that demonstrate your understanding of school finance.
3. How would you plan to handle initiatives or programs already in place that you do not agree with?

# Be Visible in the School and Community

The desire for having a leader be visible in the school and community is nothing new; however, it speaks to building community and school relations. There is a clear priority among district stakeholders that demonstrates a push to undo silos between the district and the community. Although districts usually cannot legally require the district leader to live within the district, the data shows that it is preferred that they do.

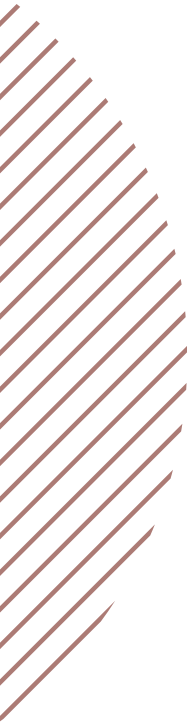
It's not only about living in the district, but showing up to community events. People want to approach the district leader with questions, concerns, and ideas. Often scheduling a meeting with the superintendent during the day is not possible. It is in these situations where community members felt heard and like their leader is doing their best to understand the culture and nuances of a school district they are working to improve. Being visible is an expectation for district leaders across the board.

**"There is a clear priority among district stakeholders that demonstrates a push to undo silos between the district and the community."**

## **Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:**

1. How often do you visit classrooms in the school buildings?  
What do you look for?
2. How do you get engaged in the community on behalf of the school district?
3. How do you advocate for schools at the state and national level?

# Strong Instructional Leader



”District stakeholders are looking for a new leader who will be bold in offering students every opportunity- even if it doesn't look like a traditional school offering.”

There is a new era of education that is just emerging under a new federal law, (Every Student Succeeds Act) that was enacted by the authors in Congress to allow for innovative learning models for every student. That means that curriculum development, assessment, and instruction all have the opportunity to look completely different. District stakeholders are looking for a new leader who will be bold in offering students every opportunity- even if it doesn't look like a traditional school offering.

Parents in every district are interested in truly preparing their students for both college or career. The pendulum is swinging back from the idea that every student must go to college to be successful to a world where many students will get high paying jobs straight out of high school - due in large part to how the leader of their district uses the K-12 experience to prepare them for opportunities through providing an education that provides ways to solve real-world problems.

District leaders may not be on the person standing in front of the staff leading professional development but many stakeholders expect them to be a strong instructional leader. This means leading teacher leadership, planning for professional development, ensuring meaningful evaluations are being conducted, aligning resources to initiatives, among other things.

## **Key questions to consider for the district and leader perspective:**

1. Give an example when you have shown your leadership abilities in developing curriculum in a school system.
2. What professional development initiatives have you led in the last 3 years. What was the outcome?
3. How would you begin to strengthen the instructional core of our school district?

# CONCLUSION

From being visible in the community to building community and school relations, it is clear that optics are important. The five desired qualifications outlined in this paper are clearly necessary skills for district leaders as identified by those they serve.

Although these traits are the top five aggregated, every district looks slightly different when it comes to top priorities. It is imperative that stakeholders play a large role in determining desired qualifications for the next leader. Whether you are a candidate or board member hiring a district leader- these traits should be considered as interviews begin.

It is only through inclusive, transparent, and thoughtful questions and processes that a district can find and hire the perfect fit for this important leadership role. The futures of many depend on it.



# About the Authors

## Trent Grundmeyer, Ph.D

Trent is the founder of Grundmeyer Leader Services LLC. Prior to his tenure at Drake University serving as an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership he served as a high school principal at Hampton-Dumont and Indianola High School. Trent was recognized as 2013 Secondary Principal of the Year by the School Administrators of Iowa organization. He earned his doctorate degree in educational leadership at Iowa State University in 2013 and focuses much of his research around technology integration and leadership.

Trent has many connections around the state and Midwest which provides and advantages to the districts he serves through the recruiting and hiring process. Grundmeyer Leader Search continues to grow based on Trent's integrity in the search process ensuring that the leader who gets hired is truly the best fit for the job.



## Susan Gentz

Susan Gentz is the founder and owner of BSG Strategies, LLC, a consulting business focused specifically on education leadership and technology, through both practice and policy.

Gentz comes from a strong policy background as a former staffer in the United States Senate and Legislative Aide in the Iowa House of Representatives.

Along with experience at both federal and state levels, she served as the Deputy Executive Director for the Center for Digital Education, worked for a government relations firm in Arlington, VA and heavily worked on federal and state education policy at iNACOL, where she wrote published reports to move the field forward with innovative learning models, best practices, and policy recommendations.



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