

**Superintendent Leadership Profile Report  
San Marcos Unified School District  
February 16, 2021**

**Introduction**

This report represents the findings of the Superintendent Leadership Profile conducted by Education Support Services from January 4-February 1, 2021. The information herein was obtained from Zoom focus group meetings, one-on-one interviews, and an online survey. Data gleaned from this engagement process is designed to assist the Board of Education in the selection of its next superintendent.

**Participation**

A cross-section of stakeholders was recommended by the Governing Board to participate in this process. Over 100 employees, parents, community members, students, and public officials provided input surrounding the district's strengths, potential challenges/needs in the ensuing years and desired characteristics of the incoming superintendent. In every instance, participants expressed a deep fondness for the district and described San Marcos Unified as an exceptional place to live, work, study, and raise a family.

**On-Line Survey**

An on-line survey was launched to enlist stakeholder perceptions about the overall quality of education in SMUSD, along with the desired leadership skills and personal attributes of the next superintendent.

Nearly 3,000 respondents completed the on-line survey. Among these respondents were members of the administrative team, certificated and classified staff, parents, students, and community members. Detailed results surrounding the quality of education in the district are summarized in Exhibit A.

**Survey Respondents**

	Frequency	Percentage
Administrative staff	28	.9%
Certificated staff	468	16%
Classified staff	187	6%
Parent	1607	54%
Student	653	22%
Community members	32	1.1%

## **Strengths of the District**

Participants were united when describing the strengths of SMUSD. The things that draw people to the district fell into three general categories:

### **Close-Knit, Caring Community**

Stakeholders described SMUSD as a close-knit, caring community where people grow up together, lean on one another and pull together in times of need. Former students are known to return to the district to live, work and raise a family. Described as a 'destination district,' employees, parents and students expressed a strong sense of connection to their local schools. Despite its size, the district has been able to maintain its small-town roots with a common desire to do good work on behalf of all learners. Participants, including city and business leaders, expressed an unwavering commitment to the ongoing success of SMUSD.

### **Innovative Programs, Services and Staff**

A 'culture of exceptionalism' has led to the implementation of initiatives and services to meet students at every level and need during their TK-12 experience. Be it CTE, STEM, IB, LiM, PBIS, AVID, ACES, the arts, athletics, special education, English Learner support, or teacher professional development one stakeholder noted, "We always try to be at the forefront of education." Dedicated and talented teachers, administrators and support staff ensure that student-centric programs flourish on each campus.

Parents and students consistently shared that they were drawn to the district for its rich programs, bountiful resources, exceptional teachers, and award-winning schools.

### **Education Hub of North County**

Home to CSUSM, Palomar College, the PIMA Medical Institute, University of St. Augustine, and the San Marcos Unified School District, the community is widely known as the Education Hub of North County. Stakeholders identified the strong synergy along the K-16 pipeline as a major draw to the area. Shared learning environments create a cohesive education system in which each component supports and enhances the other. Foundations like the San Marcos Promise help make the region a sought after place where students are poised to excel due to the commitment and investment of multiple partners. The limitless educational opportunities in SMUSD and beyond are a key marketing tool for developers and realtors.

## **Challenges/Issues**

When asked to describe some of the challenges/issues a new superintendent might face in the ensuing years, four themes emerged.

### **Budget Shortfall**

Given district trends of deficit spending coupled with post-COVID fiscal uncertainty, the greatest challenge on the horizon is the budget. Stakeholders worry that it will be difficult to maintain all the programs SMUSD values as the financial fallout continues to play out. There is a sense that considerable pressure will affect the district's ability to maintain the same level of resources and services people have grown accustomed to. As such, the incoming superintendent will need to work with the Board, community and employee associations on extreme belt-tightening measures that extend beyond trimming around the perimeter.

### Governance Team in Transition

With three newly-elected trustees joining the governance team and a fourth superintendent about to be hired within the span of four years, SMUSD has experienced unprecedented changes that have affected organizational stability, trust and morale. To govern effectively, the Board and new superintendent will need to develop unity of purpose around both short and long-range goals. Stakeholders believe to move through this transition period in an effective way, the district needs: a) strategic focus and clear direction; b) alignment of budgets to resources; c) a clear and transparent communication flow from the Board to cabinet to school sites to families to the greater community; and d) renewed emphasis on 'students first.'

### Competing Perspectives and Values

Restoring schools to normalcy amidst a global pandemic, equity challenges, social justice issues, mental health concerns, and divergent agendas have elicited passionate discourse across the district. As the district endeavors to provide a learning and working environment that is equitable, inclusive, and collaborative differing points of view have emerged about what that means and how to get there.

SMUSD is navigating an unprecedented set of disruptions that have strained relationships throughout. A genuine commitment toward shared understanding, mutually beneficial solutions, and a third way is called for as the Board, new superintendent, administrators, staff members, parents, and employee associations grapple with these complex, yet crucial matters. One stakeholder noted, "We're a Super Bowl team just waiting for the right coach."

### Honoring the Past While Looking to the Future

Stakeholders place a high value on the rich history that has made SMUSD a destination district. An array of beliefs and commitments are sewn into the fabric of the culture. With so many 'home grown' team members, traditions run deep. The incoming superintendent will need to work with the Board, employees and community to articulate a discernible vision that honors the past with an eye toward the future.

### **Desired Characteristics of the Incoming Superintendent**

Stakeholders would like the new superintendent to unify people through listening, understanding, and gentle diplomacy. They seek an individual who is a strategic thinker with the ability to 'return the shine to the SMUSD apple.' Specifically, stakeholders want a leader who:

- Has integrity and is honest.
- Communicates openly and often.
- Successfully navigates differing views and perspectives (is politically savvy).
- Is decisive and has the courage to make tough decisions.
- Is able to build trust and restore positive working relationships with all stakeholders.
- Articulates and promotes a shared vision and mission.
- Values and maintains strong relationships with the employee associations.

On-line survey respondents identified the following *Leadership Skills* as most important for SMUSD's incoming superintendent to possess:

**Most Important Leadership Skills  
Internal Respondent Rankings**

1. Fosters a climate of trust and mutual respect
  2. Is knowledgeable about best practices surrounding teaching and learning
  3. Is present and visible throughout the district and community
  4. Is a forward thinker and open to new ideas
  - 5.\* Is able to build capacity and teamwork  
Is able to attract and retain talented staff
- \*Tied for 5<sup>th</sup> place

**Most Important Leadership Skills  
External Respondent Rankings**

1. Is a forward thinker and open to new ideas
2. Is knowledgeable about best practices surrounding teaching and learning
3. Fosters a climate of trust and mutual respect
4. Is able to attract and retain talented staff
5. Is sensitive to and understands the needs of diverse learners

On-line survey respondents identified the following *Personal Attributes* as those deserving the most attention by the Board of Education when assessing applicants:

**Personal Attribute Rankings**

	Internal Stakeholders	External Stakeholders
Honest and ethical	1	1
Strong communicator	2	2
Approachable and personable	3	4
Inclusive	4	
Problem Solver		3

The search advisers would like to thank all the participants who attended meetings and completed the survey. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to team members Dana Voros and Jennifer Machado who helped orchestrate a seamless process to gather the thoughts/interests of multiple constituents that will guide the Board in this important work.

The ESS search advisers and Governing Board intend to meet the challenge of finding an individual who possesses the experience, skills, and attributes to successfully lead the San Marcos Unified School District into the future.

Respectfully submitted,

*Dr. Suzette Lovely*

*Ms. Beverly Hempstead*

## Exhibit A

Rate the overall quality of education in the District

	Excellent	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Poor
<b>Internal Stakeholders (683)</b>	36%	49%	14%	Less than 1%	Less than 1%
<b>External Stakeholders (2292)</b>	28%	41%	23%	5%	3%

Select the response that best describes your agreement with each statement.

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't know	
	Internal	External	Internal	External	Internal	External	Internal	External	Internal	External
<b>1. The district provides a clear, compelling vision for the future.</b>	16%	16%	56%	49%	22%	20%	4%	8%	2%	7%
<b>2. The district maintains high expectations for student performance.</b>	29%	24%	61%	56%	8%	12%	1%	4%	1%	4%
<b>3. The district is working to close learning gaps.</b>	17%	15%	61%	44%	16%	16%	3%	6%	3%	19%
<b>4. District schools are safe.</b>	34%	31%	57%	53%	5%	8%	2%	3%	2%	5%
<b>5. The district engages the community as a partner to improve the system.</b>	15%	18%	57%	44%	17%	20%	6%	9%	5%	9%
<b>6. Communication from the district is transparent and ongoing.</b>	13%	19%	41%	45%	31%	21%	13%	9%	2%	6%
<b>7. The district embraces diverse racial, cultural, and socio-economic groups.</b>	22%	29%	57%	50%	15%	8%	3%	3%	3%	10%
<b>8. Facilities are clean and well-maintained.</b>	25%	29%	54%	52%	16%	9%	4%	3%	1%	7%
<b>9. The district provides adequate technology to support distance learning.</b>	26%	35%	56%	53%	13%	8%	3%	3%	2%	1%
<b>10. The district is heading in the right direction.</b>	18%	21%	51%	45%	18%	15%	5%	9%	8%	10%

In choosing the next superintendent, which path or strategy do you feel the Board of Education should take:

	Candidate who will stay the course	Candidate who will make some necessary changes	Candidate who is ready to take district in new direction
<b>Internal Stakeholders</b>	9%	31%	60%
<b>External Stakeholders</b>	12%	45%	43%