



**SUNSET RIDGE**  
SCHOOL DISTRICT 29

## **Community Engagement Report and Superintendent Profile**

*May 13, 2025*

In January 2025, the School Board of Sunset Ridge School District 29 hired School Exec Connect to conduct a search for a new Superintendent who will officially begin on July 1, 2026. The search began this winter with a three-month community engagement process designed to document reflections and insights from District students, staff, and community stakeholders. Representative focus groups and an online survey allowed any stakeholder in the District to contribute on a voluntary basis.

Participation in the community engagement process was strong. Information from the focus groups and the survey was used to create a New Superintendent Profile that will guide the recruitment, screening, interviews, and selection of a new Superintendent. Focus group participants included the School Board, District administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and community members. Eighty-one (81) stakeholders participated in one of eighteen (18) focus groups or sixteen (16) individual meetings. Focus group questions asked participants to identify strengths/points of pride in District 29, challenges facing the District, first-year priorities for the new Superintendent, and the specific characteristics, skills, experiences, and attributes desired in the next Superintendent.

An online survey, open from February 28-March 19, provided an avenue for input from any employee or resident of the District. One hundred and thirty-seven (137) people responded to questions about perceived strengths in the District and challenges the new Superintendent will face. Respondents also identified priorities for the new Superintendent to address and characteristics they associate with a successful Superintendent in Sunset Ridge District 29. The survey also included eight statements about the District and asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A final open-ended response question asked participants to share any other thoughts they had about the superintendent search. A summary of the survey results can be found after the focus group report.

Due to the sampling methodology, this report should not be construed as being scientifically accurate. The opinions set forth in the report may not reflect the opinions of all staff, students, and residents but do reflect the opinions of those who participated. Judgments regarding what is included in this report are

based upon the frequency of statements received throughout the data-gathering process. The information gathered in this report shaped the New Superintendent Profile, found on the final page of this document.

This report will be helpful in screening and interviewing candidates. The Board of Education will gain an understanding of the community's view of the District and the superintendency and can use the profile to prepare questions for the Board and stakeholder interviews with the candidates. The consultants also recommend sharing the report with the newly appointed Superintendent for a better understanding of the issues and opportunities facing District 29. The Board may also choose to post the report on the Superintendent Search portion of the District website to be viewed by stakeholders.

## **Focus Group Report**

Focus group meetings and individual interviews were conducted from January to April, 2025, asking teachers, parents, students, administrators, Board members and community leaders to discuss the strengths of the district and the challenges a new Superintendent will face as well as the characteristics desired in the next leader of District 29.

**Question 1: What are the greatest strengths of District 29? If you had a conversation with the new Superintendent, what programs/practices/priorities would you say need to be continued, protected or preserved?**

Across groups, the following responses showed up consistently:

- Sunset Ridge 29 feels like a small town in a big city, or like a private school that is actually public. The schools are the heart of the community, and there is an intimate, personal feel about the District that draws families to move here. “The District is like a small town with big city professionalism,” said one parent. The words homey, comfortable, warm, community, connection, inviting, engaged, family, optimistic, and generous are words associated with this point.
- Academic excellence is a priority and it is assumed that a focus on academics will continue or even intensify. Small class size was associated with academic excellence, as was strong instruction and individualized attention to students.
- The high quality of the instructional and leadership staff was frequently noted, along with a notable confidence in the District's teachers. Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers is a top priority.
- The District's motto focusing on ‘one child at a time’ is ingrained in District staff, and the feeling that every child is important and worthy of attention and support is well established. The motto was quoted in most focus groups and in many individual interviews. Teachers and parents value and appreciate this focus as well as the flexibility it brings in dealing with individual students.
- The current Superintendent embodies the small-town, personal touch in dealing with families and staff, learning names of all students and being highly visible, accessible, and warm in his

interactions with all constituents. All groups expressed a belief that this highly personal approach is a foundational part of the District culture and that it is important to continue this practice. Parents, students, staff, and Village officials all praised the level of accessibility of the current Superintendent.

- A focus on the arts, music, sports, and clubs is important to the balanced approach valued in the District. Test scores are important, but so is dedication to the arts and activities.
- A culture of high expectations permeates the District. Teachers are encouraged to innovate and to address individual student needs.
- The depth and breadth of services offered to students is a point of pride.
- Fiscal responsibility by the District administration and Board was noted and valued across the constituent groups.
- The parents of Sunset Ridge School District represent a strong resource to the schools and are great advocates of public education. Sophisticated and well-informed, they work closely with administrators and individual teachers.
- In the words of one constituent, “This is a stellar District. We swim in a huge ocean, but we view ourselves as being competitive with the strongest.”

**Question 2: What challenges does the District face in the coming years? What would you tell the incoming Superintendent about obstacles to success and/or areas that need attention?**

A fundamental challenge for the new Superintendent will be building the kind of trust and respect between all constituents and him/herself that creates and maintains a culture of community and pride. Decisions/implementation of plans for Middlefork will be something a new Superintendent will need to be ready to address on day one.

- The task of establishing warm, personal relationships with constituents is critical to success in District 29. Dr. Stange is extremely adept at social relationships, and while focus group participants know they should not expect the new Superintendent to be just like Dr. Stange, they nonetheless see this skill as being critical to the new person’s success. The high expectations represent a challenge to the new Superintendent.
- The new Superintendent will need to be ready to take over the planning and/or implementation of renovations/construction at Middlefork, including financial planning.
- Hiring highly skilled teachers will be a challenge in the coming years as a teacher shortage becomes more pronounced. Hiring the very best teachers and retaining the District’s new and experienced teachers is of critical importance. This challenge also includes facilitating positive relationships among all generations of the staff at both schools. The hiring challenge also extends to administrators and support staff, with a need for the new Superintendent to provide support and mentoring to administration (but without micromanaging).
- The parent population of SRSD 29 is highly educated and engaged, and the new Superintendent needs to be skilled and experienced in working with parents and community members. Focus

group participants expressed a concern that some parents have a disproportionate voice in District matters.

- As student services evolve and change, the new Superintendent needs to address the challenges of meeting the needs of all students and families and capitalizing on resources to do so. Potential changes at True North represent another challenge.
- Student achievement is important in District 29, and the new Superintendent needs to have a deep understanding of data and its meanings. Communicating about academics to the staff, Board, and community is vital, as is conveying a sense of balance and perspective about all the ways that students demonstrate achievement.
- Maintaining the kind of visibility and accessibility that parents, staff, and community expect will be a challenge. In a small district such as District 29, the Superintendent, by necessity, is highly involved with all aspect of academics, operations, finance, student services – even snow removal. Three participants noted that Dr. Stange and other administrators have even shoveled snow off the roof after a heavy winter storm, and that the Superintendent is frequently seen in lunchrooms, drop-off lines, and classrooms.
- Balancing respect for tradition and openness to change is a particular necessity in a district that has highly skilled staff, and that also has legacy parents as well as families who are new to the community.
- Addressing concerns from the support staff about pay, benefits, and expectations will be important for the new Superintendent.
- Teachers value their autonomy and independence in the classroom, while some parents feel that the student experience in particular grade levels or subject areas can be uneven. A new Superintendent needs to understand the culture while also examining all aspects of the student experience.
- Teachers noted some changes they are worried about: an increase in students who need intensive support, a slight increase in class sizes, a perceived unevenness in application of student discipline, and lack of space at Middlefork, for instance.
- Coordination, articulation, and alignment across both schools while respecting the unique needs of each grade level is important.
- Balancing a “thick skin” with an engaging manner and open door is critical.

**Question 3: What skills, dispositions, qualities, and experiences are important for the success of the next Superintendent?**

- Skilled at managing a dynamic environment and possessing excellent communication skills
- Strong executive functioning skills: personable, warm, engaging, positive, optimistic
- Interested in learning names of all students and families and can interact successfully with students of all ages; child-centered and playful

- Executes an effective Board meeting and works closely with the Board president and Board members
- Demonstrably successful and experienced educational leader at the school and/or district level; understands and/or has worked in the North Shore or similar schools and communities
- Intends to stay in this position for a significant amount of time
- Knowledgeable about special education including best practices, legal developments, and creative solutions for individual students
- Skilled at financial management; has a history of sound fiscal planning and implementation of responsible budgets
- Visionary: committed to the beliefs underlying the Strategic Plan, including “one student at a time”
- Fosters the growth and development of the administrative team, holding self and others accountable
- Familiar with recent developments and best practices in curriculum, instruction and technology
- Possesses a deep understanding of data; able to analyze and communicate effectively to stakeholders about the meaning of that information
- Knowledgeable about all aspects of school policy, programs, and operations
- Frequently used words: Self-aware, confident, humble, wise, reflective, empathetic, charismatic, authentic, available, flexible, organized, connected, respectful, outgoing, sense of humor, cool under pressure, problem-solver
- Students’ words: Knows my name, optimistic, generous, funny, inspiring, playful, hard-working, kind, talks to everyone, role model, visible, helpful, thoughtful
- Understands the uniqueness of Sunset Ridge School District and the Northfield community
- Committed to the physical and emotional safety of all; presents a “voice of calm when issues get hot”

**Question 4: What should be the new Superintendent’s priorities in the first months and year of his/her tenure?**

- Relationships, relationships, relationships: the new Superintendent must focus on building relationships with all constituencies from day one, meeting with individuals and groups and engaging with them deeply. Conduct a listening tour and report on observations. Be highly visible and accessible.
- Middlefork facilities improvements (including financing) will certainly be a critical priority, at whatever point decision-making has reached by July 1, 2026.
- Establish strong ties with the Board of Education, arranging an IASB-facilitated self-evaluation workshop to establish clear expectations and communication channels between Board and Superintendent.

- Working closely with the principals and administrators, reach an understanding of the strengths and challenges of the District staff and programs. “Learn the people and the system,” including student services, curriculum and instruction, finance and operations.
- Learn about the Strategic Plan, including the underlying beliefs, the priority areas and the strategies for improvement.
- Academic achievement and readiness for high school continue to be priorities, and it is important for the Superintendent to understand the underlying reasons for this emphasis.
- Develop strong ties with Village and Park District officials, learning the history of these vital relationships, and exploring such challenges as traffic control and dog parks near schools.
- Almost every group mentioned the importance of the new Superintendent getting to know the people, the community, and the established systems before suggesting sweeping changes.
- Recognize the skills and talents of the teaching staff, administration, and Board and find ways to support and enhance their work.
- Third graders’ requests: bigger hooks for coats, dessert day, comfort dogs, funny socks.  
Seventh/eighth graders’ requests: maintain and even expand the activities that are available for students, work on transitions between buildings, visit classrooms and lunchrooms, make sure to understand all the green initiatives that are part of their school.
- Know the curriculum and be able to explain it to parents and the community; foster creativity and risk-taking among teachers.
- Capitalize on the engaged and involved parent community; develop partnerships with parents and foster greater parent participation.
- Understand the District financial position, and the challenges associated with renovations/construction at Middlefork. Be prepared for contract negotiations and administrator contract renewals.
- Take the time to learn about the people, schools, and community – but “don’t do nothing!” Find the ‘easy wins’ and take action where necessary/possible.

## Survey Results

Survey responses aligned with focus group observations in a number of ways. Pride in the District and confidence in the strong teaching staff are among the themes that appeared in focus groups as well as in the survey.

**Question 1-2: Please indicate the group that best represents you. (The second question asked respondents to indicate their race.)**

- Staff member 40 29.20%
- Community member 1 00.73%
- Parent (current or within the past four years) 96 70.07%

**TOTAL: 137**

Respondents were 83.2% white, with 2.2% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian, 1.5% multiracial, and 13.1% preferring not to answer.

**Question 3: What are the top educational strengths of the School District? Select up to four answers.**

Responses	Percent Responding	Number Responding
Quality of teaching staff	72.9%	100
Positive, nurturing school learning environment	59.8%	82
Emphasis on educating the whole child	48.9%	67
Tailoring instruction to individual student needs	37.9%	52

The extraordinarily strong response about quality of teaching was also heard in focus groups and interviews. The next three most common responses highlight the highly student-centered approach in the District. “One child at a time” is more than just a saying – it has meaning and resonance throughout the constituencies.

**Question 4: What educational improvements are most needed in the School District? Select up to four answers.**

Responses	Percent Responding	Number Responding
Challenging, quality curriculum	31.4%	43
Preparing students to be productive citizens in a democratic society	29.2%	40
Instructional methods that engage students	24.8%	34
Vision for the direction of the School District	24.8%	34

Responses to this question did not show the unanimity that emerged in the previous question; while there is strong agreement about the quality of teaching and attention to individual students, respondents were less clear about what improvements need to be made.

**Question 5: What are the top strengths of the School District in the area of organization and management?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>	<b>Number Responding</b>
Communication with parents and community	67.9%	93
Student safety	48.9%	67
Clean and attractive schools	44.5%	61
Image of the District	33.6%	51

As in the question about educational strengths of the District, a strong consensus emerged about strengths in the areas of organization and management.

**Question 6: What improvements are most needed for the School District in the areas of organization and management that the new Superintendent should prioritize?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>	<b>Number Responding</b>
Student conduct and discipline	33.6%	46
Community support of education	27.7%	38
Maximizing district resources	27.0%	37
Staff morale	24.1%	33

When asked about needed improvements in organization and management of the District, responses were more divided than in the question about strengths in these areas. Respondents seem to have reached consensus about strengths of the District, but not about areas needing improvement. In fact, the top four strengths garnered 272 responses, but the top four areas for improvement only had 154 responses.

**Question 7: Which of the following District priorities should the new Superintendent focus upon? Select up to four answers.**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>	<b>Number Responding</b>
Student growth and achievement	56.2%	77
Social and emotional health of students	54.0%	74
21 <sup>st</sup> Century skills	49.6%	68
Relationships with staff and community members	41.6%	57

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**Question 8: Please choose the TOP SEVEN characteristics/skills that you believe are most important for a person to be successful as the new Superintendent of our School District.**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>	<b>Number Responding</b>
Recruits and develops highly qualified teachers and administrators	67.9%	93
Displays courage and integrity; builds trust	62.8%	86
Articulates a clear vision for our schools and School District	54.7%	75
Possesses warm people skills and a sense of humor; is approachable and friendly	49.6%	68
Makes decisions based on the best interests of students	47.5%	65
Builds high-functioning teams and brings out the best in others	43.8%	60
Demonstrates a deep knowledge of curriculum and the teaching and learning process	40.9%	56
Holds self and others accountable	40.1%	55
Develops meaningful community support and partnerships	38.0%	52

Characteristics identified in the survey as being important to the next Superintendent closely align with results from the Focus Groups, including an emphasis on hiring great teachers/administrators, building trust, possessing excellent executive functioning skills, and demonstrating deep knowledge about the core business of schooling.

Questions 9-17 present statements about Sunset Ridge District 29 and ask whether respondents Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or have No Opinion.

Statements	SA	A	D	SD	NO
<b>9. I am proud of our District/schools and would encourage families to move into the District.</b>	63.5%	26.3%	8.0%	.7%	1.5%
<b>10. The District is effectively addressing the social and emotional health of our students.</b>	33.6%	51.8%	8.0%	.7%	5.8%
<b>11. The District provides adequate communication and information to parents and community members</b>	44.8%	44.8%	8.1%	2.2%	0
<b>12. The District has high expectations for our students and staff</b>	46.3%	44.1%	4.4%	2.2%	2.9%
<b>13. District practices and policies reflect a value on social justice and fairness for all students</b>	16.1%	59.1%	7.3%	1.5%	16.1%
<b>14. The District meets the needs of students with Individualized Education Plans and of those who are English Language Learners.</b>	24.1%	37.2%	5.8%	.7%	32.1%
<b>15. The District meets the needs of students who are experiencing academic difficulties.</b>	24.1%	45.3%	9.5%	1.5%	19.7%
<b>16. The District meets the needs of students who are gifted or talented.</b>	24.8%	43.1%	8.8%	7.3%	16.1%
<b>17. The District provides enough extracurricular activities (including clubs, athletics and the arts) to meet the interests of our students.</b>	43.8%	43.8%	8.0%	2.9%	1.5%

The responses to these statements show a remarkable level of support for and pride in the District on the part of constituents. Almost 90% Strongly Agree or Agree with the statement that they are proud of the District and would encourage families to move here. Every statement shows a vast majority of constituents who Strongly Agree or Agree rather than Disagree or Strongly Disagree. These results are not typical of other school districts which used the same or similar survey questions, with District 29 responses about District programs and practices skewing very positive.

**Question 18: Is there anything else you would like the School Exec Connect consultant to know that could be helpful in the search for a new Superintendent for Sunset Ridge District 29?**

Thirty-five survey respondents answered this open-ended question, with many comments similar to points made in focus groups, but with some different points as well.

- Specific personal qualities desired in the new Superintendent were mentioned by eight respondents, including an ability to connect to students and parents, excellent communication skills, a happy disposition, a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, and strong people skills.
- Curriculum issues – including a desire to hire a Superintendent well-versed in curriculum and instruction and demonstrating a commitment to rigor and high standards appeared in six responses.
- Four respondents expressed a desire for the District to de-emphasize social justice, diversity, and equity. Three others expressed concern that the District does not do enough to recognize the diversity of the students and families in the District.
- Concerns about special education emerged in five responses: comments ranged from concerns about individual student needs to fear of the loss of federal funding. Several people also mentioned their appreciation for Dr. Stange’s experience and knowledge of SPED, and that they hoped the next Superintendent would be as knowledgeable.
- Other comments raised specific concerns about extracurricular offerings, school fund-raising, the transition to Sunset Ridge from Middlefork, and Board-staff relationships.
- A number of respondents made generally positive comments about the District and the search process, expressing appreciation for current leaders and hoping that the search for an excellent new Superintendent is productive.

The last section of this report is the **New Superintendent Profile**, which identifies the most important qualities and skills desired in the next Superintendent. The Profile is a distillation of the information shared in Focus Groups, individual interviews, and the survey.



## SUNSET RIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT 29

### *New Superintendent Profile*

- Creates a positive and nurturing school learning environment using exceptional interpersonal skills to establish strong relationships with all constituents; uses a warm and engaging approach that is sincere and optimistic in nature
- Promotes a vision for the future of education in Sunset Ridge School District 29 grounded in a deep understanding of child development, learning, curriculum, instruction and on best practices as learned through research and professional experience
- Holds high standards for self and others; establishes a climate of reflectiveness and personal accountability
- Hires and develops outstanding teachers and administrators and ensures their ongoing development and growth through mentoring and professional learning
- Promotes academic excellence; uses data to analyze student learning and to gauge impacts of programs and instruction
- Understands curriculum and instruction in grades K-8 and can speak comfortably and clearly to constituents about standards and programs
- Commits to meeting the needs of every student every day, including their social and emotional health; adheres to the motto of “one student at a time” and promotes freedom for teachers to think creatively about each student’s needs
- Connects on a personal level with students, staff, board and community; learns student and family names and maintains visibility and accessibility
- Examines current practices, policies, and planning documents during the transition period and knows that understanding comes before sweeping action; respects tradition while being open to positive change
- Displays integrity and courage, builds trust among all constituencies
- Develops and nurtures community partnerships; cultivates productive relationships within the District and with the township
- Recognizes the diversity of viewpoints and family backgrounds represented in District 29
- Promotes partnerships with parents, believing that every parent is worthy of respect and the precious commodity of the Superintendent’s time; capitalizes on parent strengths while managing those relationships with fairness and firmness
- Demonstrates fiscal responsibility in budgeting and planning; has experience in school construction/renovation and the financing of large capital projects
- Focuses on student and staff physical and psychological safety; maintains buildings that are clean, attractive and safe
- Works skillfully with the Board of Education through excellent communication skills and adherence to mutual expectations