

Aitkin Public Schools Superintendent Search

Public Engagement Superintendent Search Survey

Overview: On February 4, 2026, the “Aitkin Public Schools Superintendent Search Survey” was made available to the public both online and in hard copy. The survey remained open for respondents until February 25, 2026, and a total of 74 people completed the survey.

Although this survey was opt-in (meaning individuals must actively choose to participate), MSBA’s analysis of the results do indicate a cross-section of people who are invested in the district were reached through the survey process. Knowing it took time and effort to do so, the school board and MSBA deeply appreciate each and every respondent who participated in the survey. The information these individuals shared through their responses will provide valuable input for the school board to consider as they move forward in selecting the next superintendent to lead Aitkin Public Schools.

The results of all quantitative survey responses are summarized in the first five pages of this report, beginning below with those from across the district who participated in the survey.

Self-identifiers: Survey takers were first asked to identify the role that best reflected the basis for their responses. The categories selected by the survey takers are as follows:

- 39.19% of respondents selected “Parent/Guardian”
- 36.49% of respondents selected “Staff Member”
- 10.81% of respondents selected “Student”
- 6.76% of respondents selected “Community Member”
- 6.76% of respondents selected “Business Owner”
- 0.00% of respondents selected “Other”

Areas of Expertise: Those who responded to the survey were also asked to identify the top six desirable areas of expertise they believe the new superintendent must possess. The most frequently noted areas of expertise are listed below in order of preference.

- Budget and Finance
- Collaborative Leadership
- School Facilities
- Personnel Management
- Public Relations
- Strategic Planning



Previous Experience: Respondents were asked if previous superintendent experience is important. Based on the results, 40.00% of the respondents selected “Yes,” while 60.00% of the respondents selected “No.”

Specialized Skills: The top six specialized skills the new superintendent must possess were identified in the survey results as shown below.

- Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
- Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
- Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight
- Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills
- Develops and directs an effective leadership team
- Delegates authority while maintaining accountability

Personal Characteristics: Survey takers were also asked to identify the top six personal characteristics they believe the new superintendent must possess. The most frequently noted personal characteristics are listed below in order of preference.

- Effective communicator
- Ethical
- Personable
- Consistent
- Problem solver
- Transparent

The following tables provide another perspective of the quantitative data, categorizing each question’s responses by self-identifiers. The number of individual responses per category were:

- Parent/Guardian (29)
- Staff Member (27)
- Student (8)
- Community Member (5)
- Business Owner (5)
- Other (0)

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

Parent / Guardian (29)	Staff Member (27)	Student (8)	Community Member (5)	Business Owner (5)
Yes: 37.04%	Yes: 50.00%	Yes: 25.00%	Yes: 40.00%	Yes: 25.00%
No: 62.96%	No: 50.00%	No: 75.00%	No: 60.00%	No: 75.00%



TOP SIX AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Parent / Guardian (29)	Staff Member (27)	Student (8)	Community Member (5)	Business Owner (5)
Budget & Finance	Budget & Finance	Budget & Finance	Public Relations	Budget & Finance
School Facilities	Collaborative Leadership	Curriculum Development/ Evaluation	Budget & Finance	Collaborative Leadership
Personnel Management	Strategic Planning	Strategic Planning	Collaborative Leadership	School Facilities
Collaborative Leadership	Personnel Management	Collaborative Leadership	School Facilities	Student Testing Results and Achievement
Curriculum Development/ Evaluation	Public Relations	Fundraising/Grant Writing	Student Testing Results and Achievement	Personnel Management
Public Relations	School Facilities	Personnel Management	Curriculum Development/ Evaluation	Business Partnerships

TOP SIX PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Parent / Guardian (29)	Staff Member (27)	Student (8)	Community Member (5)	Business Owner (5)
Effective Communicator	Personable	Confident	Ethical	Problem Solver
Ethical	Effective Communicator	Empathetic	Problem Solver	Confident
Transparent	Consistent	Effective Communicator	Resourceful	Resourceful
Consistent	Ethical	Problem Solver	Consistent	Transparent
Personable	Transparent	Ethical	Effective Communicator	Ethical
Problem Solver	Problem Solver	Personable	Sense of Humor	Effective Communicator

The following two pages directly compare the school board's responses to the specialized skills question. These results show similar alignment between the board and public, as board members prioritized many of the same categories as a majority of the district's constituencies.

Aitkin Public Schools – Superintendent Search

Leadership Profile:

- Acts with integrity and adheres to ethical principles in interactions with the school board, staff members, students, parents, and members of the broader community
- Communicates information in a manner that is clear, self-assured, and flexible, adjusting messaging as needed to effectively reach different audiences
- Builds confidence and fosters collaborative relationships with individuals and groups from varied backgrounds and communities through transparency and mutual respect
- Approaches challenges with forward-thinking vision and creativity, consistently seeking innovative solutions to complex problems
- Encourages active participation and engagement from local businesses and community organizations to enhance educational experiences within schools
- Maintains a visible presence and exemplifies a dedication to open and approachable leadership
- Works in partnership with the school board by presenting well-considered options and professional recommendations, supporting informed decision-making processes

Aitkin Hiring Criteria and Public Input Survey:

Specialized Skills - Board

1. Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
2. Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills
3. Possesses a visionary and creative approach to problem-solving
4. Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
5. Develops trust and works collaboratively with diverse groups and communities
6. Promotes business and community involvement in schools
7. Works cooperatively with the school board; provides options and recommendations

Specialized Skills – Public Input

1. Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
2. Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community
3. Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight
4. Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills
5. Develops and directs an effective leadership team
6. Delegates authority while maintaining accountability
7. Possesses a visionary and creative approach to problem-solving

The following areas of expertise rose to the top in the public input survey:

- Budget and Finance
- Collaborative Leadership
- School Facilities

Is previous superintendent experience important?

Board: Yes =43%; No = 57% Public Input: Yes = 40%; No = 60%

All highlights are to show where there is alignment with both the school board and the community.

TOP SIX SPECIALIZED SKILLS

Parent / Guardian (29)	Staff Member (27)	Student (8)	Community Member (5)	Business Owner (5)
Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight	Develops trust and works collaboratively with diverse groups and communities	Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight
Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight	Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Effectively mediates and accommodates different perspectives	Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight	Possesses a visionary and creative approach to problem-solving
Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills	Experience in implementing practices that support student safety and mental health	Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Follows the school board's chosen educational philosophy which reflects the community's values
Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills	Develops and directs an effective leadership team	Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills	Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Demonstrates clear, confident, and adaptable communication skills
Develops and directs an effective leadership team	Experience in school finance, including resource allocation and fiscal oversight	Experience in developing and/or implementing a strategic plan	Delegates authority while maintaining accountability	Develops trust and works collaboratively with diverse groups and communities
Possesses a strong academic background with experience in curriculum	Delegates authority while maintaining accountability	Leads with honesty and in an ethical manner with the school board, staff, students, parents, and community	Follows the school board's chosen educational philosophy which reflects the community's values	Visible and accessible to the school board, staff, students, parents, and community

Additional comments: Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to answer open-ended questions in the survey, and on average, 50 of the 74 respondents provided additional commentary. These qualitative results were then reviewed by MSBA representatives, with reappearing ideas identified and grouped into themes. These themes are highlighted below for each of the questions.

The superintendent search survey asked the following four questions:

1. What are some of the good things taking place in Aitkin Public Schools today?
2. What challenges do you see ahead for our district over the next five years?
3. What does the new superintendent need to know about the history of the school district and community to be successful?
4. Additional comments.

1. What are some of the good things taking place in Aitkin Public Schools today?

<p>Aitkin Public Schools has a strong, caring staff and leadership team, with teachers and administrators who are committed to supporting students and fostering positive relationships within the school community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Leadership that cares for students and staff.</i> • <i>We have some of the best teachers in Aitkin. They are hard working, caring, kind, helpful, and goes above and beyond daily.</i> • <i>Excellent staff.</i> • <i>We have great teachers with a stake in their community.</i> • <i>The staff are doing great. Especially the special education staff.</i> • <i>There is a solid high school principal. There is a handful of talented teachers in both buildings.</i> • <i>Our teachers love our students.</i> • <i>Good teachers.</i> • <i>Great staff, people who truly care, employees who truly try to make a difference in students lives!</i> • <i>Excellent teachers.</i> • <i>A great principal at the high school.</i> • <i>We have good teachers.</i> • <i>They have some great teachers.</i> • <i>Most of the staff generally cares about the students.</i> • <i>They have a great administration that supports students, staff and community relationships.</i> • <i>We have amazing staff</i> • <i>A staff that is respected and treated well by administration.</i> • <i>The staff.</i> • <i>I like most of the staff and coaches here.</i> • <i>Great staff.</i> 	<p>38 related responses</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Friendly and approachable staff.</i> • <i>The teachers.</i> 	
<p>Aitkin students have access to a wide range of academic and extracurricular opportunities that allow them to explore their interests and talents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Athletics and extracurricular activities.</i> • <i>I like the many different options for sports and activities and the wide availability of classes to take and if we don't offer a class you can take it online.</i> • <i>I like the different opportunities to excel as a student.</i> • <i>it has an ok basketball program.</i> • <i>Fun flex days - kids really enjoy.</i> • <i>Oh my gosh, so much! The robotics team at the high school, the explosive enrollment in the music program, revitalization of the dance team.</i> • <i>Range of programs and extracurricular activities.</i> • <i>Athletics, PESO blend.</i> • <i>College in the schools, preschool program.</i> • <i>Music is growing.</i> 	13 related responses
<p>Aitkin Public Schools is seeing strong academic outcomes, supported by quality instruction, innovative teaching practices, and growing student performance as reflected in positive test score trends.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Great student test scores.</i> • <i>Student test scores</i> • <i>The school has a Highly competent science and Math department.</i> • <i>Quality of education with limited instructional periods. Also, music and choir depts are fantastic with a very limit time with kids.</i> • <i>Education equality and curriculum - the teachers are also great.</i> • <i>We are consistently pushing our students and staff to be innovative and work towards improvement. I feel the current administration is respected by the staff and the student body as well. We try to provide as many opportunities as we can to our students. Our test scores are some of the best in the area.</i> • <i>The variety of learning experience teacher develop and offer in the classroom provides a dynamic learning experience that keeps students engaged.</i> • <i>The autism classroom at Rippleside and high test scores.</i> • <i>Test scores.</i> 	12 related responses



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Great test scores.</i> • <i>Math scores increasing.</i> 	
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2. What challenges do you see for the district over the next five years?

<p>The Aitkin community is concerned about aging and inadequate school facilities and the challenge of securing community support and funding to repair, upgrade, or replace existing buildings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>New building or upgrades to existing.</i> • <i>Building failures.</i> • <i>Safe buildings for students and staff.</i> • <i>Outdated and inefficient spaces that do not allow our kids to experience contemporary options to prepare them for the next step.</i> • <i>Buildings. We need new facilities badly!</i> • <i>Facilities - Gym space & track – safety.</i> • <i>A new building.</i> • <i>Aging structures.</i> • <i>Aging buildings.</i> • <i>Infrastructure.</i> • <i>The voting of new schools of a community that consists of low income families and retirees with the understanding that the attendance levels keep declining.</i> • <i>Facilities plan.</i> • <i>New schools that are very much needed.</i> • <i>Building and referendum challenges.</i> • <i>Trying to get a new school built.</i> • <i>Facilities will be a challenge.</i> • <i>Building conditions.</i> • <i>Building that need repaired.</i> • <i>Getting a referendum passed for new school to be built.</i> • <i>We need to figure out how to get others to understand why a new elementary school will benefit everyone.</i> 	<p>31 related responses</p>
<p>The Aitkin community is concerned about financial pressures, including budget constraints, potential funding cuts, and the difficulty of gaining community support for referendums.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Money. (This single word descriptor was used 4 times.)</i> • <i>Depending on whether or not the referendum passes- how to continue moving forward with it or having to levy funds and work through all of that information within the community.</i> 	<p>24 related responses</p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Balancing the student needs with what is realistic for the community to support financially.</i> • <i>Monetary issues and loss of funding.</i> • <i>Lack of money.</i> • <i>More Budget cuts.</i> • <i>Budget constraints.</i> • <i>Budgets.</i> • <i>Budget cuts.</i> • <i>We live in a community where the median age is 55+. This poses a challenge to referendums because this is a retirement community, with those of us who grew up here coming back to raise our children.</i> • <i>Budget issues that will be associated with declining enrollment.</i> • <i>Referendum passing.</i> • <i>Hiring a successful group to pass referendum.</i> • <i>Budget concerns.</i> 	
<p>The Aitkin community is concerned about declining enrollment and the increasing number of students choosing alternative educational options.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Declining enrollment. (This phrase was used 11 times.)</i> • <i>Class sizes going down.</i> • <i>Students, especially in the upper grades, choosing to go online, PSEO, or homeschooling.</i> • <i>Dropping enrollment.</i> • <i>Enrollment.</i> • <i>Lower enrollment problems.</i> • <i>Students leaving, going online.</i> 	21 related responses

3. What does the next superintendent need to know about the history of the school district and community to be successful?

<p>Aitkin is a close-knit, traditionally minded rural community with many retirees and working-class families, where strong local relationships, longstanding perspectives, and financial considerations influence community support for the schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It is an older community - needs to be given reason to support our schools.</i> • <i>Rural working class folks. Republican.</i> • <i>This is a tight knit community that steps up and helps those in need.</i> • <i>Tight knit community.</i> 	21 related responses
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largely elderly population in Aitkin county. Largely right wing leaning political community. The community's biggest employers. • We're generally a caring, conservative community. • There is still a lot of "good ole boy" thinking still out there. • There are many views of the community. Including dying retirement community and potential growth community. • We are a tight community who have grown up together since we were little and are like one big family. • Conservative community, very willing to volunteer time for our students. • It's a good 'ol boys town. It's incredibly clique-y, and only a few families are deemed worthy of having their opinions heard. • The area is composed of low income families and retirees. • We are hard working, want the best, but money is tight. • The aging community is generally non-supportive of our district and students. • They should know how we are an old proud community. People here remember things for a long time and will hold things against you if you mess up in their eyes. • Superintendent needs to understand that most students who move in are not from affluent families. 	
<p>The next superintendent should understand that past decisions, limited transparency, and facility concerns have contributed to strained relationships and declining trust between the district and community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new superintendent should understand the dynamic between the community and the school/school board and try to better relations and bring back support to our school district. • The community does not support the schools as much as they used to, due to the lack of transparency with the community and the fact the school district ignored problems with the school facilities and allowed them to become in such poor repair. • There is a lack of trust in the school system which originated because of the teachers. The community will not support the school because there is still the staff issue with a new school/increased taxes. • Past history of board members and referendums. • They should know that half of our community does not support public education. • Past and some present administration has not always been trusted within our community. • Many hard feelings about previous decisions of the school board. • The school has been slow to seek the communities input. 	<p>14 related responses</p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Declining enrollment and WHY it happened-lack of transparency, unwillingness to see all perspectives, poor response to concerns.</i> • <i>How divided the community can feel, the lack of support from the old population in this area.</i> 	
<p>The next superintendent should understand the importance of providing transparent, ethical, and visible leadership while building trust with the community and guiding the district through needed change and future planning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A new, innovative and fresh perspective (while challenging and 'scary' to some community members) would be refreshing and make sure our kids have what is needed to be successful in a global society.</i> • <i>Be consistent, open, honest, and care for students, staff, and community.</i> • <i>The staff will get behind a strong leader! To be successful, the new supt will have to be patient and reasonable with excellent communication skills.</i> • <i>Being willing to be a change maker will help them be successful. Be visible, be positive and not be afraid to take a stand for the best interest of the district.</i> • <i>Transparency required.</i> • <i>He should know that having a kind, ethical, honest, reputable person in charge of the school means more to most of us than someone who is very smart, makes a lot of good business choices, or arrogant.</i> • <i>We need people in positions who have the best interests of the whole community, not just their own self-interests.</i> • <i>It is vital to build a new school that includes a sports complex which will require someone who understands how to work with a community and explain the benefits of a new school.</i> 	<p>12 related responses</p>

4. Additional Comments:

<p>The next superintendent should understand that the district is seeking a strong, experienced, and visible leader who can build trust, listen to staff and community members, and guide the district through important changes and challenges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We need a superintendent that will not ignore problems from other admin staff.</i> • <i>Time to change things up - give a young, energetic NEW superintendent with positivity and leadership skills a chance to come in and LEAD our staff - SO needed.</i> 	<p>11 related responses</p>
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- *We need new vision and someone with fresh eyes for the district.*
- *This will be a difficult position to fill, but the right person can bring about effective change!*
- *Whoever is hired has their work cut out for them. The previous superintendent might have been the best Superintendent we ever had. Through his impressive character, accountability, and follow through, really did an amazing job for us. He was approachable and hands on both for community and staff. His shoes will be hard to fill.*
- *Please have boots on the ground. Please spend days among the kids and staff. Meet the parents but Listen to the teachers and staff who are present every day*
- *I feel that with the need for the new school and referendum, Aitkin needs someone who will have previous superintendent experience. We don't want someone who will 'learn on the job' when we have vital deadlines to come up against.*
- *We need someone who is a STRONG LEADER!!! Someone who is willing to take our district to a new level of positive pride, following laws, policies, and listening/considering all sides before making decisions.*
- *We need a professional who knows what it means to be a leader, respecting staff and students at all times.*
- *We need someone who wants to know what is going on in our buildings because they are visiting and out and about in the schools.*
- *We need someone who will pull up the boot straps and get to work right away!*
- *The new superintendent should come in with a plan to bring people back to the table to work together towards our common goals.*
- *I think that the new superintendent should prioritize student safety over not missing a day of school for inclement weather.*