



**Lee's Summit R-7 School District
2019 Key Opinion Leader Interviews
Final Report
November 8, 2019**

In October 2019, a series of interviews was conducted with 11 community and four Lee's Summit R-7 Key Opinion Leaders to learn their views on the district's current standing, its challenges going forward and whether or not they believe a no-tax-increase bond issue would pass, if it were placed on the ballot in April 2020.

The interviews with district personnel took place in person at the Stansberry Leadership Center while the community leaders were interviewed by telephone. Fifteen community leaders were contacted and 11 chose to participate (or had time to do so within the available window). A list of those who participated is at the end of this report.

As is the case with any qualitative research process like these interviews, the objective is to determine the common ground the participants share and not to add up, for example, the number of participants who named "teachers" as a strength and extrapolate that percentage to a larger group. These individuals are thought leaders who hear from others; that makes their opinions valuable.

For this group of individuals, there was much common ground, including appreciation for the school district's quality of education, its innovative programming and dedicated teachers, and its top-of-the-line technology. They also shared similar opinions on the subject of the last two years or so, as respondents expressed what could best be described as sadness that the community is now more "wary" (as one participant put it) about decisions made by the district's leadership – along with being wary about the leadership itself.

Each interview subject was asked the same seven questions. This report is organized based on those questions and conveys the views expressed in their answers.

When you think about the Lee’s Summit School District, what’s the first thing that comes to mind? Why?

While there were some who mentioned words like “turmoil” and “lack of transparency,” the overwhelmingly consistent sentiment focused on the district’s performance in delivering a quality education that suitably prepares students for their futures – whether that be a two-year or four-year college, or vocational/technical training.

The mention of the district’s recent turmoil often seemed like the respondents wanted to make certain that the interviewer was up to speed, if you will, with what has taken place (because, perhaps, they were uncertain if the interviewer was from Kansas City). Specific comments included “paying Superintendents off,” “making bad Superintendent hiring decisions” and not being “fiscally responsible with the taxpayers’ money.”

Even so, the conversation on this question was always dominated by the educational component and the ground-level people – teachers and principals – who are responsible for delivering what they see as a first-rate education to LSR-7 students.

Representative verbatim comments

“Communications can get sidelined with news in the media and social media. But the in-class experience is extraordinary, regardless of what you hear in the media. Parents are telling the story of how well prepared their kids are for college, for trade schools, for their future.”

“We’re always looking at the whole student. We don’t just teach to the test.”

“The district is in a period of transition. It’s trying to find its identity and there’s a power struggle going on. It’s a shame, because it is such a great district with a history of success.”

As you look at the district now, what do you see as its strengths?

Though there were many disparate answers to this question, when they were coded to pinpoint similar words, phrases and ideas, the following four answers were the most prevalent:

First was the *teachers and the overall quality of education*.

It’s interesting to see that community and district thought leaders had the same views as those expressed by a cross-section of individuals who participated in the latest telephone survey, who listed these professionals and the education they deliver under the category of “strengths” as well.

These factors were primarily focused, as one would expect, on the school building level where it was said that there were “amazing teachers” who were “sincere professionals who want to help their students succeed.”

Second, interview subjects noted *the sophistication and strength of the district's approach to putting the right people and tools in place.*

This observation is a bit of an echo of the first group of answers described above. But this time, respondents were focusing on *how* the teachers and overall quality of education are made possible, rather than the building-level staff who deliver on that promise every day.

Specifically, they spoke glowingly about the commitment to hiring quality teachers and staff, to putting the necessary resources in the hands of those professionals (such as technology for the staff and for students) and how they work to make certain the funding is sufficient to stay current with changing educational practices and needs.

Third, participants also focused their commentary on the district's *substantial community support.*

While, again, there *were* mentions of how the support might have slipped – or at least become a bit more cautious – given the events of the last two years or so, that was always followed by an observation about LSR-7's long-standing positive relationship with the community.

This support is buoyed by the fact that the district has a large group of engaged parents, according to the respondents. The perfect example of this is, of course, the Citizens Advisory Committee, which has been in existence for decades.

A lot of districts have similar committees or groups, but the Lee's Summit R-7 CAC is unique in that it has successfully engaged new participants as long-term members decided they no longer want to attend, for whatever reason. Attendance at the meetings is always very solid. This, alone, shows the strength of the R-7 brand.

Fourth was *the district's reputation.*

This observation goes a bit hand-in-glove with the district's substantial community support, but there's a deeper observation here as well.

Specifically, the feeling among interview subjects is that the last two years or so have been more of a misstep than a downward trend. The focus in the community during that time period may have initially been on the issues and the headlines they created, but the *expectation is that the district will fix itself.*

That speaks directly to the issue of reputation. While it is, of course, unwise to assume that all will eventually be well as long a strong reputation has been built, these observations do suggest that the district's foundation of support has not been shaken in the community.

Representative verbatim comments

“The school district has an excellent reputation, so when it falters and does not meet the community expectations, the conversation is: ‘That’s not acceptable. How do we get it back to the level we expect?’”

“One thing is clear and that’s the district’s teachers love the profession of teaching.”

“The district is successful in reaching most students; not all, but most.”

“The students, the staff, the principals and the engagement with the community. The district has the programming that you would expect a luxury suburban community would have.”

Where can the district improve?

The thoughts on this subject were clear and the pattern used to express those thoughts was very consistent.

For example, an individual being interviewed might start talking about transparency, then move into leadership and then communications, followed by improvement in equity and diversity. The order of the conversation wasn't always the same, of course, but there was consistency in the concerns being expressed. The participants seemed to see these issues being very intertwined and important for the next phase of the school district's life.

In terms of leadership, the expressed desire was for *leaders – at the Board of Education and the Administration levels – who were strong and collaborative.*

As would be expected, the issues with the last two Superintendents were front and center, and participants said they thought the district handled both of these departures poorly. Some looked back with some appreciation for one or both of these individuals for the work they did, but the consensus was that these exits were a difficult time in the district's life.

Under the category of communication, the interview group called for *better transparency and more effective approaches to getting information into the hands of stakeholders.*

As mentioned earlier in this report, participants seemed to be *saddened* that at least some trust has been lost with the community. Their overwhelming suggestion was that the district's commitment to greater transparency extend to all levels of R-7 and not be limited to printed or electronic content, or to social media; it should be the mantra of all personnel.

The thought is this: The district *can say whatever it wants* in printed documents, on the website, etc., but the real test will come when members of the staff – from Administration and the School Board down to the building-level personnel – have an opportunity to demonstrate transparency.

Finally, the district needs to make *a stronger commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion.*

This commitment begins with hiring practices, so that the staff better reflects the diversity of the students and families being served. This problem will continue to grow, respondents said, if it is not addressed definitively.

In addition, participants said the district needs to commit to bringing greater equity into the curriculum, so that what it taught is reflective of the students and their diverse experience. However, several participants did make it clear that the push for greater equity should be balanced with the need to not harm existing programs. This will be a delicate balancing act.

Representative verbatim comments

“Leadership is accountable to the whole community, not just the people who voted for them. They’re accountable to every student in the district, including the 25% who are not white.”

“The district could be seen more as a community leader. There’s a perception that the school district operates for the purposes of the district, and not as much as a contributor to the community as a whole.”

“Transparency. That’s not the school district – that’s the senior administration and the board. I know it’s difficult to be totally transparent all the time. School leadership needs to be part of the community.”

“With two Superintendents leaving in such a short period of time, and with all the negative publicity received, the board and the school district have to be better at communicating where we’re going, who’s in charge and so forth.”

“Pieces of history are left out completely in the curriculum. For white kids, they’re learning about their history. Kids of color are not learning about their culture and history; they’re not included in the curriculum. And that’s not OK.”

“Obviously, there’s a strong need for diversity and equity that has surfaced within the last year ... there seems to be a lot of fear, and a deep rootedness on how things have always been done, what’s comfortable. The district needs to embrace discomfort and – where appropriate – wipe the slate clean in the name of doing things a better way. The district needs to be more focused on equity for all.”

“We need equal access for all students to all programs, not a revolving door of initiatives that are for the betterment of some students and the detriment of others. Historically, there’s been a wide-ranging focus up until the last couple of years. Then, the focus and attention has been on equity to the detriment of other programs.”

“Some groups of people in the community don’t feel as though they are being heard. The district needs to take steps to fix that problem.”

“One real challenge facing the district is figuring out how to get students who don’t care to start caring about their education.”

“People have been talking about the district’s hiring practices for several years, but – at least so far – the district hasn’t been responsive to those concerns.”

“Leadership is not functioning the way it should be. Something is missing and I don’t know what it is.”

What qualities do you think the next Superintendent needs to possess?

The expectations for the new Superintendent fell into both the soft skills and tangible experience areas – and the respondents made their cases for these skills rather succinctly.

The new Superintendent needs to have *a collaborative spirit and great communications skills*, according to the Key Opinion Leaders. Their specifics on this area read like a job description:

- Approachable
- Personable
- Can build a team
- Connect with the entire community
- Lead and motivate

While this may almost seem like boilerplate content, it strongly suggests that these individuals feel the last two Superintendents were lacking in some or, perhaps, all of these areas. That would appear to be why they felt the need to share this list of qualities, rather than just assume that they would be part of the district’s vetting of candidates.

There was also a call for the new Superintendent to be a tenured leader with many years of experience *running a suburban district whose demographics are similar to Lee’s Summit R-7*. Some suggested that the individual should be from the Kansas City metropolitan area and one even said that the person should be from Lee’s Summit.

This may be a bit of a tall order. But it was fairly clear that someone from outside the area would have to overcome this part of his or her history, considering how the community feels about the experiences with the last two Superintendents.

Overall, one gets the sense that these Key Opinion Leaders want the district to find a Superintendent who can execute a plan, while engaging the community all along the way. It is clear that they believe this will be one of the most important hires in the school district’s history.

Representative verbatim comments

“Listen to people in the community. Think before they speak. Someone who makes fiscally sound decisions and can see into the future – think about today, but make long-term goals. Budget money well and plan for the future.”

“The next Superintendent needs to listen more and synthesize what they hear.”

“The next Superintendent needs to come from a distinguished background where he or she has proven success in managing a large employee base. They should show proven accomplishments on a number of widespread programs and policies. The next Superintendent needs to come from a lengthy tenure where maybe the previous districts have also had difficulties – not a ‘one-hit’ wonder, so to speak.”

“The next Superintendent needs to be a leader who can collaborate, but then must be strong enough to decide and stick with it.”

“It’s all going to be about communication. How well does he or she communicate with the various stakeholder groups. I think that’s where we’ve been lacking with the last two.”

“It’s really pretty simple. The next Superintendent has to have a clear vision for how to move the district forward.”

“More than anything, the district needs stability in its leadership positions – particularly the Superintendent.”

“He or she needs to be able to bring different politicized groups together for the benefit of students. Somehow, the new Superintendent needs to make it clear that all groups are important and no one group is more important than any other.”

Based on your experiences or on what you have heard from others, what is the district’s standing in the community right now? Why?

This question was another “echo” from earlier, but, this time, the respondents added nothing of substance to their earlier comments.

They continued to focus on the “tarnished reputation” – a term which numerous individuals used specifically – of the district as a result of the issues with the last two Superintendents and concerns about the Board of Education. However, participants also reinforced that the historically good reputation of the district can help it solve these challenges, as long as it is forthcoming and actively communicates with residents.

Representative verbatim comments

“The school district was a principal reason many families moved to the Lee’s Summit community. At this moment in time, the school district is tarnished. They haven’t been successful in selecting CEOs who reflect the values of the community. The school board has changed over time, but it appears at times to be deaf to understanding the community’s expectations of the school district.”

“A lot of people have a bad taste in their mouth right now with what transpired over the last year, regardless of what side of the fence you sit on. A lot of people are not happy with how things were handled, and the horrible media attention. Trust was lost.”

“We’re going on our historically good reputation as a school system; that reputation is not forever tarnished. It’s still a good reputation, but it has teetered a bit.”

“A lot of people feel that – at the district level – it’s been in turmoil for the past two or three years, and many feel that was avoidable. But if you go down a level and talk about their child’s or grandchild’s school, the feelings are as good or strong as ever.”

“The community really wants to support the schools. But, because of the recent, high-profile decisions, they are leery.”

If the district were to run a no-tax-increase bond issue in the near future for, among other things, a fourth middle school and renovations to all the other schools, how do you think the community would respond?

It would be safe to say that the consensus among the Key Opinion Leaders – both in the community and within the school district – was cautious optimism that a no-tax-increase bond issue would pass.

While this optimism was not universal, those who could not definitively say they thought it would pass were simply uncertain about the result. No one who was interviewed expressed a conviction that the answer from the community would be “no.”

If the district decided to move forward with a ballot issue in April, their advice was not to assume that the election success of the past would necessary carry through to today. The leaders who were interviewed said it would be necessary to active *engage* the community – not just “talk at them”— to explain why these projects were necessary at this time, to be transparent about all the facts and figures and to truly build a case.

Interestingly, several interviews were conducted on the same day as a “Business Roundtable” event. Those who attended the event reported that the participants who were at that program expressed some concerns about the proposed timing of the ballot issue and whether that timing, being so close to the recent negative events, left the outcome up to chance.

Representative verbatim comments

“If it’s critical that the district needs to put it forth now, given the climate, some feel it will not get the support it needs to pass.”

“It could be a challenge. And, if it doesn’t pass, that would be worse. That would further cement the perception that the district is in turmoil. So, it’s a double-edged sword. We won’t know until we ask. But, if we ask for it, we can’t afford to have it fail.”

“I think most would vote for it because it benefits kids, and that’s the bottom line.”

“The community will always vote yes to a no-tax-increase issue. If they see ‘no tax,’ they don’t care. Maintaining the school district maintains the value of homes.”

“The citizens are good people and they know you don’t punish students for adult problems. I think there will be continued support for things that continue to benefit students and strengthen the school district.”

“I think the chances are about 50/50. I can’t say for sure which way it would go, with the mood in the community right now.”

Is there anything else you would like to share?

This wrap-up question was marked by expressions of appreciation by participants for being invited to share their opinions via a one-on-one interview. They particularly liked the fact that an open-ended, “Anything else?”-type of question closed the survey, although most of them used the opportunity to merely repeat or expand modestly on thoughts they had already shared.

The most prevalent comments on this question were:

- The School Board needs to be well-trained and to understand the boundaries between its responsibilities and the Superintendent’s. In other words, the Board of Education must provide *direction* while the Superintendent needs to be allowed to *provide day-to-day leadership*.
- The new Superintendent needs to be engaged in the community, inclusive in decision-making, experienced in a district similar to Lee’s Summit R-7, and able to execute a strategic plan.
- The district needs to do a better job of listening to the community, being transparent, dealing with issues related to boundary changes and the reasons behind moving sixth-graders to the middle school environment, and addressing concerns and questions about planned construction and renovation projects *before* the vote is taken.
- On a specific note, two respondents called out Dr. Emily Miller by name, saying that she is bringing “a great sense of calm” to the district in her Interim Superintendent role.

Representative verbatim comments

“I don’t think the current Board realizes how many people in the community have lost faith in them and feel we need to stop (the process of selecting a Superintendent).”

“Give them (School Board members) what they need to make the right hire for Superintendent, someone who can work in partnership with the Board, in teamwork. It comes down to knowing what is and isn’t the job of the Board, and a lot comes down to training.”

“We need School Board members to be as educated as possible on how to allow the administration to run the district from a micro- and macro-management view. (The Board should) provide a check and balance. The public is concerned that there isn’t that check and balance.”

“The community is 100% behind our district and willing to spend the money needed to achieve great things and put our kids first. But when we feel the (Superintendent/district/Board) is off track with the focus, we won’t be quiet. When we feel talked at rather than listened to, that’s where the discord comes from.”

“There’s lots of controversy, turmoil, anger and sadness. With the passing of the no-tax-increase bond issue, we can start a new and brighter, positive chapter. We can renovate schools and build a new school. This is the start of what could be awesome for the school district and the quality of the kids’ education.”

Addendum

Individuals who participated:

- Steve Arbo, City Manager
- Keith Asel, Hawthorn Bank, Partner in Education, Parent
- Julie Doane, Board of Education President, LSR-7
- John Faulkenberry, Optimist Club
- Ashley Frevert, Active at the School Level: Mason Elementary
- David Gale, Developer
- Trisha Goodale, Chamber of Commerce
- Erin Gregory, Active at the School Level: Cedar Creek Elementary
- Dr. Rexanne Hill, Executive Director, Student Support, LSR-7
- Tom Jackson, Central Bank
- Lia McIntosh, Pastor, Business Leader, CAC Member, Parent
- Dr. Emily Miller, Interim Superintendent, LSR-7
- Chip Moxley, Tingle Flooring, Partner in Education
- Rachel Segobia, Lee's Summit CARES
- Kelly Wachel, Executive Director of Public Relations, LSR-7