South Portland School Department
South Portland, Maine

Leadership Profile
for the position
Superintendent of Schools

Application Deadline: March 23, 2026
Start Date: July 1, 2026

ZEAL

EDUCATION GRP

Leadership Profile
Superintendent of Schools
South Portland School Department
February 2026

One of the primary responsibilities of a School Board is to hire and evaluate a Superintendent of Schools. Because this task is the Board's alone, there is no obligation to seek input from or engage stakeholders in their selection process. However, School Boards that elect to engage their community enjoy at least three benefits: First, the Board will learn what is important to their constituents, gain valuable feedback on public perception, and acquire a valuable perspective by interviewing each candidate. The second benefit is for applicants who want to understand what to expect and assess their own capabilities before applying, to determine whether they are a match for the community. The third benefit affects students who will directly benefit when the Board and selected Superintendent, functioning as a 'governance team' built on a foundation of trust, have a clear understanding of what is going well, what changes may be needed, and which of those changes should be prioritized.

Methodology

The South Portland, Maine, School Board retained Zeal Education Group to engage deeply with the community to understand which skills and dispositions the community believes the district needs for the next Superintendent to be successful. Our team had the pleasure of meeting in person and virtually with many stakeholders. We used a methodology that results in two streams of input. The first stream of information came from a weeklong engagement of all constituents that included in-person and virtual meetings, interviews, focus groups, and "Town Hall" style engagements designed to ask each stakeholder the following questions:

- *What are the district's greatest strengths?*
- *What are the district's greatest immediate challenges?*
- *What areas should be the focus of change?*
- *What should be the new superintendent's change priority?*
- *Is there anything else you want to share?*

The second stream of input came from a proprietary tool called ThoughtExchange, which facilitates open-ended discussions in which participants can anonymously share thoughts and rate others' ideas. The ThoughtExchange prompt presented one open-ended question, in each participant's native language: *"What is your top priority for the next Superintendent of Schools?"*

Participation

In an effort to meaningfully engage the South Portland schools and broader community, Zeal facilitated a total of 30 in-person and virtual individual and group meetings between Febraruy 3rd and February 18th. In all, the 113 people we met generated hundreds of independent ideas in response to the five questions that were shared previously.

Stakeholder Group	*n*
Faculty and Staff	49
Central Office	13
Middle and High School Students	11
School Board and Student Board Members	9
Family and Community	9
School Union Leaders	8
Adult Education	8
SPTA Members	4
City Leaders	2

In addition to stakeholders who participated in interviews and focus groups, 292 community members participated in the ThoughtExchange process. These participants submitted 241 independent responses to the prompt, *"What is your top priority for the next superintendent of schools?"* Those responses were subsequently rated 7,121 times, reflecting strong engagement across the community.

South Portland serves approximately 2,770 students from pre-K through 12 and has a diverse, multicultural population that speaks 39 languages at home. ThoughtExchange allows for native translation in over 100 languages. Participation in this exchange was predominantly in English (99%), followed by Spanish (1%).

The following table illustrates how responses from each of the stakeholder groups were distributed:

Stakeholder Group	n	%
Parent or Guardian	170	60
Teacher	42	15
Resident, no children in the schools	24	9
Other	19	7
Custodian, Bus Driver, Secretary, Nutrition	13	5
Students	6	2
Ed Tech	4	1
Not Answered	10	-

To better understand the perspectives represented in the exchange, participants were invited to share optional demographic information regarding their tenure in the South Portland community. More than one-half (57%) of those who participated in ThoughtExchange indicated that they have been a part of the South Portland community for 11+ years, 22% responded that they have been part of the community for 6-10 years, 15% stated 2-5 years, and only 6% indicated that they have been members of the South Portland community for one year or less.

Results of Interviews and Focus Groups

Participants identified strengths within the district, including dedicated, collaborative staff; robust programs such as reading and music initiatives; and opportunities for community building enabled by the district's close-knit environment. Despite these strengths, immediate challenges such as declining enrollment, lack of academic rigor, budget constraints, and poor communication were raised as significant concerns. Participants emphasized the need for greater trust and transparency, along with a strategic vision that addresses both staff emotional support and academic excellence.

In terms of areas needing change, a strong desire for better communication and leadership was evident. Participants advocated for a Superintendent who could build relationships, trust, and inspire confidence through visibility and engagement. Establishing clear goals for academic improvement, particularly given declining

enrollment, was deemed essential. Finally, participants shared personal insights on priorities such as fostering community engagement and understanding unique district challenges, underscoring the necessity of strategic planning and proactive communication from the new Superintendent.

What are the district's greatest strengths?

The district's strengths include a dedicated and passionate staff, strong community support, and a commitment to diversity and inclusion. The district benefits from a diverse student population and offers robust extracurricular programs, including sports, arts, and technical tracks. There is a strong focus on equitable student outcomes and a collaborative leadership team. Facilities are modern and well-maintained, with new and remodeled schools. The district also emphasizes multilingual support and community partnerships to foster a welcoming environment. Staff adaptability and crisis management are notable, alongside a commitment to innovation and improvement in educational practices.

1. **Staff Commitment**: The district's staff is frequently recognized for their dedication across roles, from teachers to administrators. Participants perceive the staff as hardworking, caring, and deeply invested in student success, with many references to their adaptability and capacity to collaborate effectively. The staff's commitment is seen as a cornerstone of the district's strength, contributing to a supportive and nurturing educational environment. There is a strong sense of loyalty and expertise among the staff, comparable to that at elite schools. The community values the staff's efforts, recognizing their role in maintaining high educational standards and fostering a positive school culture.
2. **Community Support**: Community support is a significant strength of the district, with many participants noting the active involvement of parents and community members. The community is described as engaged, supportive, and willing to rally together in times of need, including during crises and other events. This support extends to financial backing for public education and participation in school events, which enhances the overall educational experience. The community's commitment to the schools is seen as a vital component of the district's success, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. Participants appreciate the strong ties between the schools and the community, which contribute to a collaborative and inclusive environment.
3. **Diversity and Inclusion**: Diversity and inclusion are celebrated as key strengths of the district, with a growing student population from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants view this diversity as an asset, enriching the school culture and providing students with a broader perspective. The district is committed to equitable practices and programming, actively promoting an inclusive environment where all students feel welcomed and supported. Efforts to support multilingualism and cultural diversity are evident in

various programs and initiatives. The community's embrace of diversity is seen as a positive influence, contributing to a more dynamic and inclusive educational experience.

4. **Extracurricular Opportunities**: The district offers a wide range of extracurricular opportunities, which participants highly value. These include robust programs in sports, music, and the arts, as well as various clubs, providing students with avenues to explore their interests and talents. The community's engagement in these programs is strong, with high levels of participation and support. Extracurricular activities are integral to the educational experience, contributing to student development and community cohesion. Participants appreciate the district's commitment to providing diverse opportunities that meet students' needs and interests.

5. **Leadership and Innovation**: District leadership is recognized for its effectiveness and collaborative approach. Participants note a strong leadership team that is open to innovation and improvement, fostering a culture of continuous development. The district's leadership is seen as a driving force behind strategic initiatives and improvements in student learning outcomes. There is a focus on distributed leadership and teacher empowerment, which enhances decision-making processes and encourages innovation. Participants value the leadership's ability to navigate challenges and maintain a forward-thinking approach, which contributes to the district's overall success.

What are the district's greatest immediate challenges?

The district faces significant challenges, including financial instability marked by a multi-million dollar deficit and a lack of transparency in budgeting processes. High turnover in leadership roles, particularly in finance, has eroded trust and continuity. Staffing issues are exacerbated by recruitment and retention difficulties, compounded by housing affordability. Communication gaps and fragmented leadership structures hinder effective collaboration and decision-making. Equity concerns persist, with disparities in resource allocation and representation. Declining enrollment and socioeconomic divides further strain resources. Additionally, concerns about student support services, curriculum consistency, and community trust are affecting overall morale and operational efficiency.

1. **Financial Instability**: Financial instability is a significant concern, with multiple references to budget deficits and financial mismanagement. Participants frequently mention a multi-million dollar deficit, fluctuating figures, and a lack of long-term financial planning. The perception is that financial instability is exacerbated by high turnover in financial leadership, resulting in inconsistent financial oversight. There is a call for greater transparency in budgeting processes, as past decisions have eroded trust. The community is concerned about the impact of financial instability on staffing, resources, and overall district operations.

2. **Leadership Turnover**: Leadership turnover is a recurring theme, with participants highlighting the high turnover in central office and finance leadership roles. This turnover is perceived as disrupting continuity and institutional memory, undermining the district's stability. Participants express concern over the impact of leadership changes on decision-making and strategic planning. Frequent leadership changes are seen as contributing to a lack of clear direction and accountability. There is a desire for stable and consistent leadership to guide the district through its challenges.

3. **Communication and Transparency**: Communication and transparency issues are frequently raised, with participants expressing frustration over a lack of clear, open communication from district leadership. There is a perception that decisions are often made in silos, without adequate stakeholder engagement or transparency. Participants report a decline in communication quality, which has led to distrust and a sense of disconnect between the central office and the community. Improved communication and transparency are critical to rebuilding trust and fostering collaboration. There is a call for more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes.

4. **Staffing Challenges**: These are a major concern, with issues related to recruitment, retention, and representation frequently cited. Participants highlight difficulties in retaining staff due to high local housing costs and a lack of competitive salaries. There is also concern about the district's ability to recruit and retain a diverse workforce that reflects the student demographics. The perception is that staffing instability is affecting the quality of education and support services. Participants call for strategic efforts to address staffing shortages and improve staff morale.

5. **Equity and Resource Distribution**: Equity and resource distribution are significant concerns, with participants noting disparities in support and resources across schools. There is a perception of inequities stemming from neighborhood demographics and PTA disparities, which affect student experiences and outcomes. Participants express a need for more equitable distribution of resources to ensure all students have access to quality education and support. The district's commitment to equity is considered nominal, with no measurable benchmarks and no accountability. There is a call for strategic efforts to address these disparities and promote equity across the district.

What areas should be the focus of change?

The focus of change should encompass several key areas: improving vertical alignment from Pre-K through high school, ensuring financial stability with transparent budgeting, and addressing inequities among schools. Building trust and enhancing communication across staff, the central office, the board, and the community are crucial. There is a need for professional development, staff retention, and equitable resource allocation. Emphasizing academic outcomes, curriculum alignment, and career pathways, including

non-college options, is essential. Additionally, integrating AI and future-ready skills, enhancing facilities management, and fostering community engagement are vital. Finally, strategic planning, leadership stability, and addressing socioeconomic disparities are necessary for sustainable improvement.

1. **Communication and Trust**: Communication and trust are critical areas needing improvement, as highlighted by participants. Many responses emphasize the need for better communication strategies and transparency to rebuild community trust. There is a call for improved two-way communication between administration, unions, and staff, as well as more prolific communication with community members. Trust-building is essential across staff, the central office, the board, and the community, with a focus on rebuilding transparency and collaboration. Participants perceive these issues as fundamental to creating a more cohesive and effective organizational environment.

2. **Financial Stability and Management**: These are recurring themes, with participants raising concerns about fiscal leadership and budget transparency. There is a strong emphasis on developing multi-year financial plans to avoid budget fluctuations and ensure consistent fiscal management. Participants highlight the need for transparent budgeting processes and clear communication about financial decisions and priorities. The perception is that financial stability is crucial for the district's long-term success and requires careful planning and oversight. The new finance director is noted positively, indicating some progress in this area.

3. **Equity and Resource Allocation**: Equity and resource allocation are significant concerns, with participants calling for equitable distribution of resources and addressing disparities among schools. There is a focus on ensuring that all students' needs are met through equitable resource allocation and by addressing socioeconomic status (SES) inequality. Participants also emphasize the importance of aligning curricula and instructional expectations across grade levels and schools. The perception is that addressing these issues is vital for providing fair and equal educational opportunities for all students. There is a call for sustainable solutions and clear community processes to address inequities.

4. **Leadership and Organizational Structure**: Leadership and organizational structure are key areas requiring attention, with participants emphasizing the need for consistent leadership and effective management. There is a call to stabilize staffing, place the right people in appropriate roles, and provide robust technology support. Participants perceive that strong, consistent leadership is essential for driving positive change and ensuring accountability. There is also a focus on reducing single-person dependencies and strengthening central-office capacity to improve organizational effectiveness.

5. **Curriculum and Instruction**: Curriculum and instruction are key priorities, with participants calling for increased academic rigor and curricular alignment across grade levels. There is a focus on rethinking traditional course models and

considering future-focused, skill-based redesigns. Participants emphasize the need for a Vision of a Graduate to maintain accreditation and address curricular rigor. The perception is that improving curriculum and instruction is crucial for raising student achievement and preparing students for future challenges. There is also a call for integrating AI and emerging technologies into student preparation.

What should be the new superintendent's change priority?

The new superintendent's priorities should focus on enhancing communication and collaboration with leaders, teachers, and support staff, and on building strong relationships with the community. Addressing financial stability is crucial, with a clear multi-year budget plan to prevent the district from collapsing. Emphasizing transparency, trust-building, and community engagement is essential, alongside prioritizing academic success and student achievement. The superintendent should lead strategic planning processes, ensure equitable experiences for students, and stabilize leadership and hiring practices. A commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and retention strategies is vital, along with addressing operational procedures and fostering a positive organizational culture.

1. **Budget and Finance** were the most frequently cited priorities for the new superintendent. Participants emphasized the need for immediate budget stabilization and the development of a clear multi-year financial plan. Concerns about budget uncertainty and its impact on district stability were prevalent, with calls for fiscal stewardship to rebuild public and staff confidence. The perception is that financial stability is crucial to prevent district collapse and ensure effective resource management. Participants also highlighted the importance of addressing budget shortfalls and ensuring transparency in financial decisions.
2. **Communication and Trust**: Communication and trust-building were identified as critical priorities for the new superintendent. Participants stressed the importance of transparent, thoughtful, and caring communication with all stakeholders, including staff, families, and the community. Building trust through consistent, open communication was considered essential to fostering collaboration and engagement. The perception is that effective communication can help rebuild relationships and restore confidence in the district's leadership. Participants also highlighted the need for the superintendent to be visible and accessible to staff and the community.
3. **Community Engagement**: Community engagement was highlighted as a priority for the new superintendent to strengthen relationships with families, educators, and the broader community. Participants emphasized the need for a collaborative approach to strategic planning and decision-making that involves input from diverse stakeholders. The perception is that engaging the community can help address local needs and build cohesion and support for the district's initiatives. Participants also noted the importance of being a visible and vocal champion for education and workforce development in the community.

4. **Leadership and Relationships**: Leadership and relationship-building were seen as essential qualities for the new superintendent. Participants called for a leader who is empathetic, approachable, and capable of building strong relationships with staff, administrators, and the community. The perception is that effective leadership can inspire confidence and collaboration, helping to align teams and focus on shared goals. Participants also emphasized the importance of being a visible, authentic leader committed to equity and diversity within the district.

5. **Academic Success**: Academic success and student achievement were identified as important priorities for the new superintendent. Participants highlighted the need to prioritize academic learning and improve student outcomes, particularly in areas like reading and writing. The perception is that a focus on academic success can help narrow achievement gaps and prepare students for future challenges. Participants also emphasized the importance of aligning curriculum and instructional leadership to support student learning and development.

Is there anything else you want to share?

The responses highlight a strong desire for a superintendent who is visible, collaborative, and committed to equity and academic excellence. Emphasis is placed on transparent communication, fiscal competence, and community engagement. Participants express concerns about past hiring practices, budget deficits, and the need for a systematic approach to professional development. There is a call for a leader who can rebuild trust, address diversity and inclusion, and engage with all stakeholders. The community values diversity, equity, and practical experience in addressing budget and staffing challenges. The need for a strategic, mission-driven leader who can navigate complex, diverse districts is paramount.

1. **Leadership Qualities**: Participants emphasized the importance of leadership qualities in the new superintendent, focusing on attributes such as trust-building, transparency, and effective communication. There is a strong desire for a leader who is visible, approachable, and capable of rebuilding trust within the community. The community values a superintendent who is collaborative, decisive, and committed to long-term goals. Many responses highlighted the need for a leader who can balance compassion with high academic expectations and sound fiscal management. Overall, the perception is that a strong leader is crucial for the district's success and stability.

2. **Community Engagement**: Community engagement emerged as a key theme, with participants emphasizing the need for authentic, inclusive participation of diverse voices in decision-making. There is a call for increased transparency and communication to ensure that all stakeholders feel included and heard. The community values a superintendent who actively engages with families and community members, fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration. Participants also highlighted the importance of community outreach and the need

for a superintendent who listens and values community input. Overall, the perception is that strong community engagement is essential for building trust and achieving district goals.

3. **Equity and Diversity**: Equity and diversity are critical concerns for participants, with many emphasizing the need for continued focus on DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work. There is a call for systematic approaches to equity to ensure that all students have similar experiences and opportunities across the district. Participants expressed a desire for actionable equity measures that go beyond superficial changes, focusing on representation and outcomes. The community values a superintendent who can lead equity-focused initiatives and address the diverse needs of students and staff. Overall, equity and diversity are essential to creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

4. **Academic and Operational Excellence**: Participants highlighted the importance of academic excellence and operational efficiency in the district. There is a strong focus on improving academic outcomes and ensuring high expectations for student performance. Participants also emphasized the need for strategic operational support to address challenges, including budget deficits and staffing issues. The community values a superintendent who is knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction and can lead efforts to enhance academic programs. Overall, academic and operational excellence are crucial to the district's success and sustainability.

5. **Hiring and Recruitment**: Participants are concerned about hiring and recruitment, with many emphasizing the need for a thorough, transparent search for the new superintendent. There is a call for high standards in candidate selection, with a focus on avoiding rushed decisions and ensuring a diverse pool of candidates. Participants expressed a desire for a superintendent with a strong background in education and leadership, capable of addressing the district's unique challenges. The community values a recruitment process that reflects the district's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Overall, the perception is that careful and strategic hiring is essential for finding the right leader for the district.

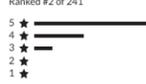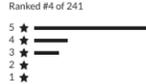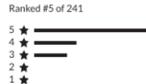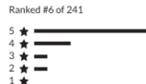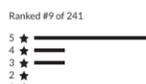**Results of ThoughtExchange Engagement:**

The following chart depicts the top themes that emerged from the ThoughtExchange:
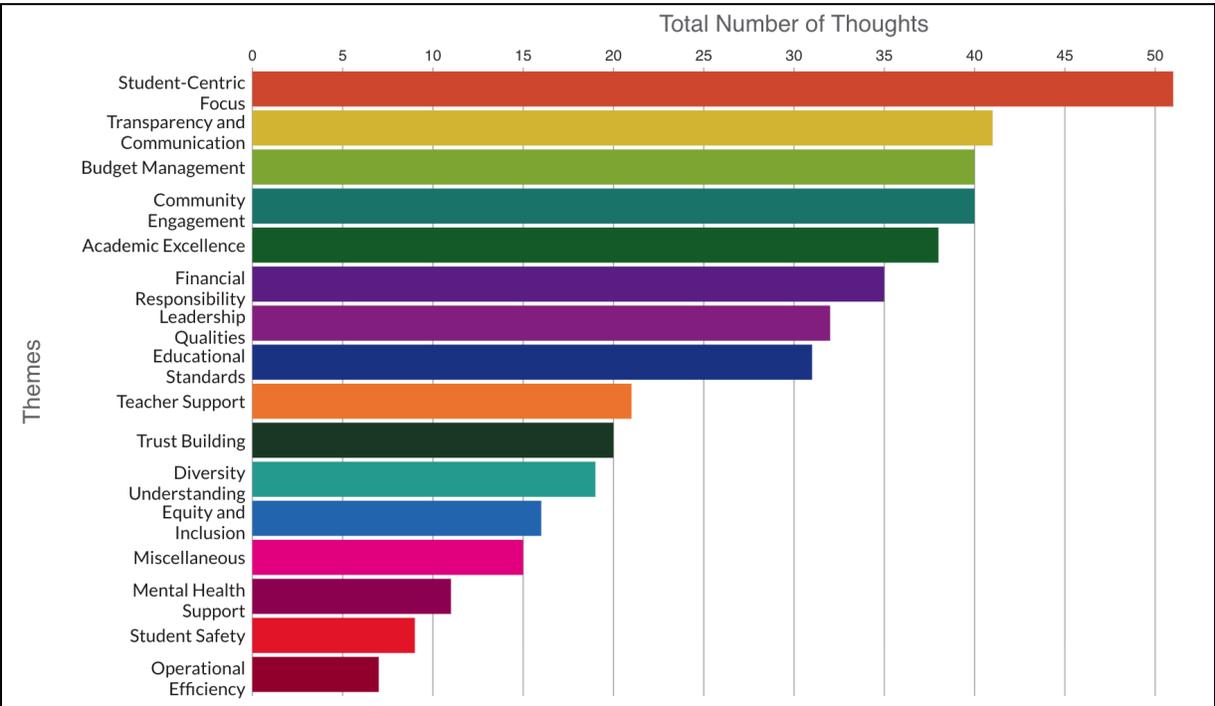
Note that Budget Management (with 40 thoughts) and Financial Responsibility (with 35 thoughts) combined would represent the single largest area of focus in the ThoughtExchange, underscoring the community's strong emphasis on fiscal stability, transparency, and long-term financial stewardship.

Of the 241 thoughts that were shared in the exchange, the following were the 10 highest-ranked thoughts based on the number of stars that each thought received out of five.

Thought		Sentiment	Count	Rating
Integrity	we need to be able to trust them and know they will always do the right thing	☺ Positive	👤 41	★★★★⯨ 4.5 — Ranked #1 of 241
Leading with openness and transparency; not afraid of being held accountable		☺ Positive	👤 40	★★★★☆ 4.4 — Ranked #2 of 241
Good communication	they need to communicate early, often, with clarity and detail	☺ Neutral	👤 41	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #3 of 241
Honesty	we need accurate information and we need to be able to trust them	☺ Neutral	👤 41	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #4 of 241
Strong communicator		☺ Positive	👤 40	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #5 of 241
Respects everyone not just people at top		☺ Neutral	👤 39	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #6 of 241
Focus on maintaining a good level of education for our children	The kids in the classrooms and the teachers there with them are the most important parts of our schools	☺ Positive	👤 34	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #7 of 241
Listens to teachers	Teachers should feel valued and have the opportunity to share their input	☺ Neutral	👤 34	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #8 of 241
Provide quality education for ALL students		☺ Positive	👤 34	★★★★☆ 4.3 — Ranked #9 of 241
Thoughtful person who can accept constructive feedback and learn from it	Someone whose attitude is not "my way or the highway"	☺ Neutral	👤 41	★★★★☆ 4.2 — Ranked #10 of 241
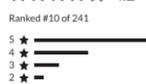
A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning framework used to assess an organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses focus on internal factors within the organization's control, while opportunities and threats examine external conditions that may influence future success. By organizing feedback in this structure, leaders can move from general impressions to clearer strategic priorities.

Based on the ThoughtExchange responses, we have categorized the feedback into a SWOT analysis. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the district's current status and future opportunities.

Strength	Weakness
Participants identified communication, transparency, and trust-building as key strengths for the Superintendent. Effective financial management and a commitment to equity and inclusion are also vital strengths that can positively impact the district.	The feedback highlights financial mismanagement and a lack of transparency as significant weaknesses. Participants are concerned about the district's top-heavy structure and the perceived disconnect between leadership and the community.
Opportunities	Threats
There are opportunities to rebuild trust and improve academic standards by engaging with the community and implementing innovative solutions. The Superintendent can focus on fostering equity and inclusion and supporting staff to improve educational outcomes.	Financial challenges and loss of trust in leadership pose significant threats to progress. The changing educational landscape and the need to adapt to new challenges, such as technology and mental health support, present ongoing threats that require strategic leadership.

Key Takeaways:

Strengths:
- Strong communication and transparency are essential for trust-building.
- Effective financial management is crucial for stability.
- A commitment to equity and inclusion is highly valued.

Weaknesses:
- Address financial mismanagement and improve transparency.
- Reduce top-heavy structure and focus on student-facing roles.
- Rebuild trust and confidence in leadership.

Opportunities:

- Engage with the community to rebuild trust.
- Focus on improving academic standards and equity.
- Support staff to enhance educational outcomes.

Threats:
- Address financial challenges to ensure stability.
- Rebuild trust to prevent community division.
- Adapt to changing educational needs and challenges.

Conclusion and Summary

The South Portland School Department stands at an important crossroads. This engagement revealed a district rich in strengths: a deeply committed and talented staff, strong community pride and involvement, modern facilities, diverse and multilingual learners, and a shared belief in the transformative power of public education. Students benefit from robust extracurricular programs, inclusive practices, and a community that values equity and opportunity. These assets provide a powerful foundation for the district's next chapter.

At the same time, feedback from interviews, focus groups, and ThoughtExchange indicates a community seeking stability, transparency, and renewed trust. Financial uncertainty, leadership turnover, communication gaps, and perceived inequities have created strain and, in some cases, eroded confidence. Participants consistently emphasized the need for a Superintendent who can stabilize finances, strengthen communication, rebuild trust, and articulate a clear, multi-year strategic direction that balances academic excellence with operational discipline.

The next Superintendent must be both a relationship builder and a systems thinker. South Portland's community is seeking a leader who is visible, approachable, and transparent, yet decisive and fiscally responsible. They seek someone who will prioritize academic rigor, equitable student experiences, and staff support, while also ensuring long-term financial sustainability. Above all, they want a leader who listens carefully, communicates clearly, and aligns diverse stakeholders around shared goals.

South Portland's diversity, engaged families, and dedicated workforce position the district for continued growth and innovation. With thoughtful leadership, transparent financial stewardship, and a renewed focus on trust and collaboration, the district is well-positioned to move from a period of challenge to one of stability and progress. The Board's selection of the next Superintendent represents a pivotal opportunity to unify the community, restore confidence, and advance a clear vision for the future of South Portland's students.

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The South Portland School Board invites exceptional educational leaders to apply for the position of Superintendent of Schools. This is an opportunity to lead a dynamic, student-centered district committed to academic excellence, equity, and strong community partnership. The Board seeks a visionary and collaborative leader who can build trust, inspire staff, engage families, and guide the district with clarity and purpose during its next chapter of growth.

South Portland offers a vibrant coastal community, dedicated educators, and a School Board committed to thoughtful governance and long-term sustainability. The next Superintendent will have the opportunity to shape strategic direction, strengthen instructional systems, and ensure that resources are aligned to support student success.

Key Dates

- March 23, 2026, at 11:59 PM EST — Application Deadline
- April 8, 2026 — Presentation of State of Candidates
- April 17, 2026 — In-Person Semi-Finalist Interviews with the School Board
- April 27, 2026 — Finalist Interviews
- May 11, 2026 — Anticipated Appointment of New Superintendent
- July 1, 2026 — Start Date of New Superintendent

Interested candidates are encouraged to apply at www.zeal-ed.com/southportland

Questions can be directed to southportland@zeal-ed.com