

ACES

Executive Director Leadership Profile



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January 26, 2026

About ACES

ACES is a mission-driven regional educational service center dedicated to expanding opportunity for students, families, and districts across its region. Founded on a commitment to serve children with diverse learning needs, ACES has grown into a multifaceted organization providing special education programs, magnet schools, and a wide range of instructional, clinical, and operational services. At its core, ACES exists to meet needs that individual districts cannot meet alone—bringing expertise, innovation, and collaboration to some of the most complex challenges in public education.

Today, ACES operates at significant scale, serving thousands of students across multiple schools, programs, and service models while partnering closely with member districts, families, and community agencies. Its work spans intensive special education settings, choice-based magnet programs, and shared services that support districts academically, operationally, and financially. This breadth is both a strength and a responsibility: ACES must continually align its diverse offerings around a clear mission while responding flexibly to evolving student needs, district priorities, and policy expectations.

What distinguishes ACES is not only the scope of its work, but the depth of its commitment to students and staff. Educators, clinicians, and support professionals across the organization work daily with students facing complex academic, behavioral, social, and emotional challenges. This work is demanding and deeply human, requiring skill, resilience, and compassion. ACES's impact depends on highly effective teams and a workforce that is supported, valued, and empowered—because student success is inseparable from staff wellbeing.

ACES operates within an increasingly complex and constrained educational environment shaped by rising costs, workforce shortages, regulatory demands, and shifting state and federal policies. As both an educational organization and a public service provider, ACES must balance fiscal responsibility with its obligation to deliver high-quality, student-centered programs. Its role as a regional partner also requires strong relationships with districts, legislators, and state agencies, as well as clear advocacy for policies and funding structures that reflect the real needs of students and schools.

At this moment, ACES stands at an important inflection point. The current Executive Director is widely viewed as a strong leader who has garnered the trust and respect of a broad constituency. The organization has a solid foundation, deep institutional knowledge, and a dedicated community of professionals who believe in its mission. The next chapter will require leadership that brings clarity, stability, and vision—strengthening identity, aligning growth with capacity, and ensuring that innovation serves purpose. With the right leadership, ACES is poised not only to meet today's challenges, but to shape the future of inclusive, collaborative, and student-centered public education.

Introduction

Selecting an Executive Director is an enormous responsibility for the governing board of a Regional Education Service Center. There are tangible and intangible aspects of leadership required in a Executive Director who will work with a vast array of students, parents community members, member districts, faculty and staff, departments, non-profits, elected officials, and a broad community (in ACES's case, consisting of 25 cities and towns) to provide a high-quality education for a region's children. The position of Executive Director of a Regional Education Service Center (RESC) is different from that of a superintendent of schools or of a business leader, but combines responsibilities of both.

In light of the critical nature of this responsibility, the ACES Governing Board sought the input of its community through interviews, focus groups, and a survey. The focus group options were as follows:

Constituent	Date	Time	Location
ACES Teacher	Mon., January 12	4:00 pm or 7:00 pm	ZOOM
Union Leader	Mon., January 12	5:15 pm	ZOOM
Other non-bargaining unit staff	Tues, January 13	4:00 pm	ZOOM
ACES Administrator	Tues., January 13	5:00 pm	ZOOM
HR Fiscal	Wed., January 14	1:00 pm	SDA 205 Skiff
BCBAs, PTs, OTs, Nurses	Wed., January 14	2:00 pm	SDA 205 Skiff
ELC Member	Wed., January 14	12:00 pm	SDA 205 Skiff
Student	Thur., January 15	6:00 pm	ZOOM
Parent	Thur., January 15	7:00 pm	ZOOM
RESC Directors	Thur., January 15	2:00 pm	ZOOM
ACES Business member/ Community Organization representative/ Friend of ACES	Thurs., January 15	3:00 pm	ZOOM
Civil Service Employees Association plus	Thur., January 15	4:00 pm	ZOOM

This Leadership Profile presents findings from these focus groups, interviews, and a survey conducted between December 22, 2025 and January 16, 2026. In addition to the groups cited above, the consultants met in December with the ACES Governing Board, and superintendents and special services directors from member districts. They also added a focus group at the last minute for CSEAs when they realized that group had been omitted, but no one joined that focus group. Overall, the consultants offered 16 interviews and focus groups and spoke with 86 individuals. In total, 166 ACES constituents took the online survey.

The consultants employed an unbiased and structured approach when conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, and developing the survey. In addition to asking about the strengths and challenges of the

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ACES Public Schools and community that could affect future leadership requirements, they asked about the qualities and expertise most desirable in the next Executive Director.

The ACES Governing Board will use these results as it considers its next steps in finding the best possible fit for ACES at this time. We are presenting these findings to the Governing Board without revealing the identity of any individual contributor.

The ACES Board has made a thoughtful effort to include voices from constituents across the agency and broader community. Many thanks to focus group participants, interviewees, and survey respondents whose pride in and commitment to ACES was evident as they provided their perspectives.

We had many incredibly rich conversations with constituents. While we are grateful to all who participated, we would like especially to thank the students who spoke with us. Not only did they express clear and insightful perspectives on the strengths and needs of ACES, they also demonstrated exceptional capabilities developed within their ACES program. We must maintain anonymity, as promised, but we want them and others to know of their exceptional contributions. Special thanks, also, to Dee Colson, who helped to spread the word about the opportunity to participate.

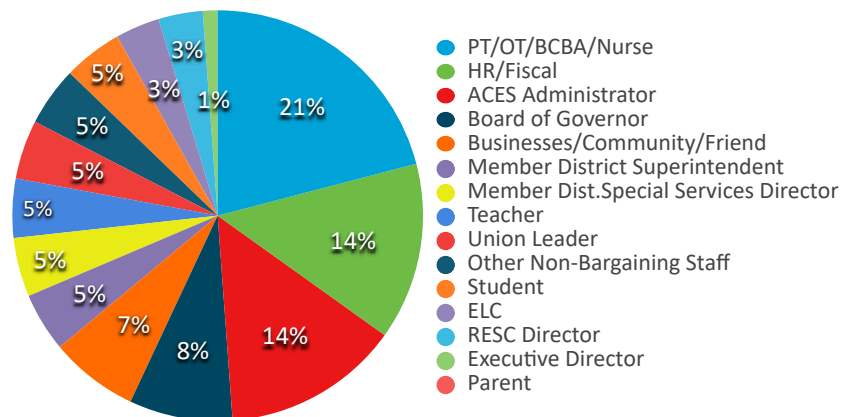
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Data Collection

In total, 252 individuals participated through interviews, focus groups, and the online survey. The data collected do not constitute a scientific sampling, but rather represent a snapshot of ACES at a moment in time. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Though the consultants heard a number of perspectives, this profile cannot entirely capture the complexity and nuances of the schools and programs. Nevertheless, the information yields useful insights for the search process. Items are included in the following report if, in the consultants' judgment, they were repeated by a sufficient number of respondents to warrant the Governing Board's attention.

Interview and Focus Group Participants

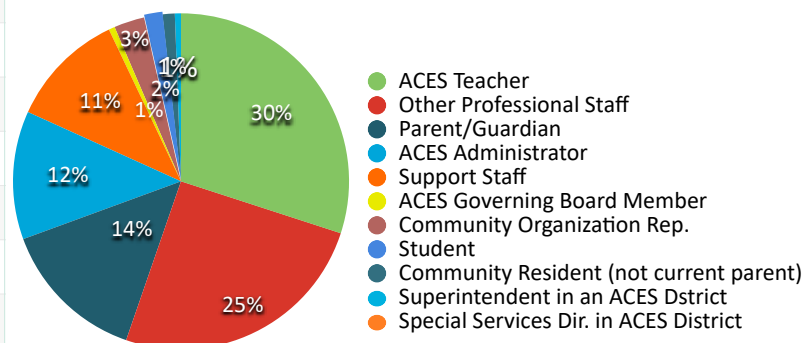
PARTICIPANTS	#	%
PT/OT/BCBA/Nurse	18	20.9%
HR/Fiscal	12	14.0%
ACES Administrator	12	14.0%
Board of Governor	7	8.1%
Businesses/Community/Friend	6	7.0%
Member District Superintendent	4	4.7%
Member Dist.Special Services Director	4	4.7%
Teacher	4	4.7%
Union Leader	4	4.7%
Other Non-Bargaining Staff	4	4.7%
Student	4	4.7%
ELC	3	3.5%
RESC Director	3	3.5%
Executive Director	1	1.2%
Parent	0	0.0%
TOTALS	86	100.0%



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Survey Responses

PARTICIPANTS*	#	%
TOTAL Participants	166	
ACES Teacher	51	30.0%
Other Professional Staff	43	25.3%
Parent/Guardian	24	14.1%
ACES Administrator	21	12.4%
Support Staff	19	11.2%
ACES Governing Board Member	1	0.6%
Community Organization Rep.	5	2.9%
Student	3	1.8%
Community Resident (not current parent)	2	1.2%
Superintendent in an ACES Dstrict	1	0.6%
Special Services Dir. in ACES District	0	0.0%
*	170	100%



*Please note that survey participants identified themselves under multiple categories so numbers add up to more than 166.



Strengths of ACES and its Programs and Services

Across constituent voices, a consistent and compelling picture of ACES emerges. Respondents describe an organization grounded in vision and mission, driven by innovation, and sustained by deeply committed people. The themes below reflect what ACES does exceptionally well, how it does that work, and why it matters—to students, families, districts, and staff. Together, these themes tell the story of an organization that meets complex educational challenges with purpose, skill, and heart and of local organizations working together to create enriching opportunities for all learners. With a focus on holistic education, global citizenship, and well-rounded extracurricular programs, the agency prepares students not only for academic achievement but also for meaningful contributions to society.

(Please note: “n=” indicates the number of times a theme was cited by study participants.)

Student-Centered Focus & Commitment to Students (n=140)

According to 140 study participants, ACES places students at the center of every decision. The organization designs programs around individual strengths, needs, and potential, ensuring that every learner—especially those with complex challenges—receives meaningful, responsive support. Staff consistently prioritize student voice, engagement, and well-being, creating environments where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to grow. Whether through individualized instruction, therapeutic supports, or enrichment opportunities, ACES measures success by student progress, dignity, and opportunity.

Special Education Expertise & High-Need Services (n=120)

ACES serves as a regional leader in special education and high-need services. Participants (120) noted that the agency brings deep expertise in supporting students with autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, behavioral and emotional challenges, medical fragility, and complex mental health needs. Multidisciplinary teams collaborate to deliver evidence-based instruction and therapeutic care that many districts cannot provide independently. ACES does not shy away from the most challenging cases; instead, it builds programs that help students thrive where others cannot.

Breadth & Diversity of Programs and Services (n=115)

ACES offers an expansive continuum of programs and services that spans early childhood through high school and beyond. The organization operates specialized schools, magnet programs, arts-focused academies, pathways initiatives, and district-based services, all tailored to meet regional needs. Respondents (115) felt that this breadth allows ACES to match students with the right setting and to

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adjust services as needs evolve. Districts rely on ACES because it provides both scale and precision in meeting diverse educational demands.

Dedicated, Caring, High-Quality (n=110)

ACES succeeds because of its people, according to 110 participants. Educators, clinicians, administrators, and support staff bring expertise, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to students. Staff members take pride in their work and often dedicate long careers to the organization, reflecting strong alignment with ACES's mission. The agency attracts highly qualified professionals and retains them by valuing their contributions, supporting their growth, and trusting their judgment.

Staff Sense of Community, Family, & Culture (n=105)

ACES fosters a culture of belonging and mutual support. ACES creates teams of highly specialized staff that smaller organizations cannot replicate. Staff describe the organization as a family—welcoming, collaborative, and deeply interconnected. The teams support one another through challenges, celebrate shared successes, and carry a collective sense of responsibility for students and colleagues alike. This strong internal culture translates into stability, trust, and a shared commitment to excellence across programs and roles.

Innovation, Flexibility, & Risk-Taking (n=95)

ACES embraces innovation as a core strength. The organization encourages staff to propose ideas, pilot new approaches, and refine programs based on evidence and experience. Leaders support thoughtful risk-taking and remain open to change, including providing a structure to analyze viability and to sunset programs when needed. This flexibility allows ACES to respond quickly to emerging student and district needs while remaining forward-thinking and solutions-oriented.

Strong Leadership & Governance (n=85)

ACES benefits from stable, principled leadership at every level, according to 85 participants. Administrators lead with clarity, accessibility, and integrity, aligning daily decisions with long-term strategy. The Governing Board provides strong partnership and support without unnecessary political pressure, enabling the organization to stay focused on mission and outcomes. Shared vision and trust between leadership, staff, and governance create consistency and confidence throughout the agency.

Collaboration & Partnerships (n=80)

ACES builds strong partnerships with districts, families, community organizations, and state and national networks. The agency works side by side with districts to design programs, solve complex problems, and fill service gaps efficiently. Internally, staff collaborate across disciplines and schools to share expertise and resources. Externally, ACES serves as a trusted partner and regional hub for cooperation and collective problem-solving.

Professional Development & Staff Growth (n=75)

ACES invests deliberately in the growth of its workforce. The organization provides robust professional development, including conferences, certifications, mentorship, and leadership opportunities for both certified and non-certified staff. Leaders encourage continuous learning and reflective practice, recognizing that staff development directly improves student outcomes. This commitment strengthens expertise, morale, and retention.

Financial Stewardship & Organizational Stability (n=65)

ACES manages resources with care and strategic intent. The organization maintains strong financial health, controls costs for districts, and reinvests revenue into staff development, program quality, and innovation. Leaders make fiscally responsible decisions that balance sustainability with opportunity, ensuring that financial strength supports—not constrains—the mission.

Reputation, Trust, & Regional Leadership (n=60)

ACES holds a strong reputation across the region and beyond. Districts, families, and partner organizations view ACES as a reliable, high-quality provider and a leader in complex educational services. The agency's work in special education, innovation, and collaboration positions it as a model for others, reinforcing trust and demand for its programs.

A Sense of Belonging (n=55)

ACES values and reflects diversity in its students, staff, and programs. The organization actively promotes inclusive practices, equitable access, and culturally responsive approaches. By honoring differences and fostering respect, ACES creates environments where all students and families feel seen, supported, and empowered. Inclusion remains integral to both organizational culture and service delivery.

Operations, Infrastructure & Organizational Effectiveness (n=45)

ACES operates as a highly organized and effective system. Strong operational structures—ranging from transportation and facilities to Human Relations, finance, and technology—allow programs to function smoothly and responsively. Efficient systems free staff to focus on teaching, learning, and student support, reinforcing ACES' reputation as a well-run organization.

Magnet Schools, Arts & Enrichment (n=40)

ACES offers distinctive magnet and arts-based programs that provide opportunities students cannot access elsewhere. Schools such as ECA and Chase deliver rigorous, specialized instruction in small, supportive environments. These programs cultivate creativity, leadership, and confidence while maintaining high academic and professional standards. Students often discover new pathways and aspirations through these experiences.

Other Strengths:

While the themes above capture the core strengths and identity of ACES extremely well, there are several important nuances and secondary signals in the data that are present but not fully surfaced as distinct themes. These elements don't contradict the themes—but they add strategic depth, risk awareness, and future-facing insight that may be important for leadership, board governance, or planning.

Organizational Learning, Reflection, and Knowing When to Stop

ACES demonstrates organizational maturity by not only launching innovative programs, but by thoughtfully evaluating their effectiveness and making disciplined decisions about refinement or closure. This ability and the structure to reflect, sunset, and recalibrate ensures that resources remain aligned with mission and impact rather than momentum alone.

Emotional Labor, Moral Purpose, and Psychological Safety

The work at ACES requires staff to carry significant emotional responsibility as they support students and families facing complex challenges. The organization's culture of trust and openness creates psychological safety, allowing staff to speak honestly, take risks, and sustain their commitment over time.

ACES as a Capacity-Builder for Districts

Beyond providing services, ACES strengthens districts by building internal capacity, sharing expertise, and modeling effective systems and practices. This role as a coach and partner enables districts to grow more resilient while ensuring students receive timely, high-quality support.

Talent Pipeline and Internal Mobility

ACES functions as a talent incubator, offering clear pathways for professional growth, cross-role learning, and advancement from within. By investing in both certified and non-certified staff, the organization strengthens leadership continuity and preserves institutional knowledge.

Scale, Complexity, and Organizational Load

ACES operates at significant scale across multiple towns, disciplines, and service models, requiring constant coordination and adaptability. Managing this complexity effectively is both a strength and an ongoing responsibility that demands strong systems, communication, and shared leadership.

Independence from Political Constraints with Accountability

ACES benefits from operating outside many of the political pressures faced by local districts, allowing it to act nimbly and creatively in service of students. With this independence comes a responsibility to maintain transparency, accountability, and fidelity to mission.

Future Tensions and Strategic Balance

The data hint at emerging tensions around growth, compensation structures, and maintaining special education as the core focus amid expansion. Recognizing these signals early allows ACES to address them proactively while preserving culture, quality, and sustainability.

Taken together, these findings present ACES as a strong, values-driven organization with deep expertise, a committed workforce, and a well-earned reputation for excellence in serving students with complex and diverse needs. ACES's strength lies not only in the breadth of its programs, but in its ability to balance innovation with reflection, scale with personalization, and independence with accountability. The data reveal an organization that understands its moral purpose, values psychological safety, and recognizes that staff wellbeing is inseparable from student success. At the same time, the emerging signals around growth, equity, and sustainability underscore the importance of thoughtful leadership that can preserve ACES's core identity while navigating future tensions with clarity and intention. With its strong foundation, collaborative culture, and student-centered mission, ACES is well positioned to continue leading regionally—provided it remains anchored in its values and deliberate in shaping its next chapter.



Challenges Facing ACES Public Schools

Respondents consistently describe ACES as a mission-driven organization operating within an increasingly complex, constrained, and emotionally demanding educational landscape. The challenge themes that emerge from the data reflect both the scale of ACES's work and the intensity of pressures facing special education, magnet schools, and regional education service centers. Together, these themes highlight the urgent need to continue strong, visible leadership that can balance ACES's unwavering commitment to students and staff, workforce stability, financial stewardship, and legislative advocacy, compliance, and navigation.

Staffing, Recruitment, Retention, and Burnout (n=120)

ACES faces persistent challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly in special education and related service roles where national shortages threaten students' access to essential services, according to 120 study participants. ACES must compete in a shrinking labor market while supporting employees who face high stress, safety concerns, and emotional exhaustion. Low morale, burnout, and turnover threaten program stability and student progress, especially when experienced staff leave faster than replacements can be trained. Staff repeatedly call for competitive compensation, meaningful professional development, longevity incentives, and leadership that visibly understands classroom realities.

Financial Sustainability, Budgeting, and Rising Costs (n=110)

Rising operational costs place continuous strain on ACES's programs and services and the districts it serves. Transportation, facilities, staffing, benefits, and specialized programming costs continue to increase while funding models remain uncertain. Leaders must manage rate setting, tuition caps, and reimbursement structures without sacrificing program quality. Respondents emphasize the need for strong financial expertise to navigate deficits, inflation, and long-term sustainability while keeping services affordable for member districts.

Legislative, Political, and Policy Pressures (n=90)

State and federal policy decisions significantly shape ACES's ability to operate effectively. Legislative mandates, evolving special education reforms, and shifting definitions of RESCs as "third parties" constrain flexibility and increase administrative burden. Respondents express concern about political instability, federal funding changes, paid leave laws, and heightened scrutiny of special education costs.

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The leader must proactively advocate for ACES, anticipate and interpret policy impacts clearly, and plan ahead to minimize disruption to schools and services. Though it is important for ACES to operate within the legal framework, it is equally important that the legal framework be rooted in the needs of students as identified and articulated by ACES. The Executive Director will need to be proactive and collaborative with peers to guide and demand legislation and funding that address student needs.

Organizational Complexity and Scale (n=85)

ACES is a large, sprawling organization with a wide range of programs, locations, and service models. This complexity creates coordination challenges and makes it difficult for leadership to maintain coherence across the agency. Staff describe ACES as “having its hands in many pots,” which can dilute focus and strain systems. Effective leadership must bring clarity, alignment, and prioritization to ensure that growth does not overwhelm capacity or obscure core purpose.

Special Education Intensity & Changing Student Needs (n=80)

Student needs have become more complex, intense, and frequent, particularly in special education settings. Behavioral challenges, mental health concerns, trauma, and post-COVID impacts place heavy demands on staff and programs. Leaders must ensure that ACES provides safe, supportive, and appropriately resourced environments while maintaining high expectations for student growth. Respondents stress that expanding services without adequate staffing or supports risks compromising quality and safety.

Leadership Visibility, Trust, Culture, and Communication (n=75)

Many respondents perceive a disconnect between Central Office leadership and the lived experiences of staff in schools and programs. They would like to be sure leaders are actively engaged with buildings, listen to concerns, and make informed decisions grounded in firsthand understanding. Transparent communication, consistent follow-through, and fairness play a critical role in ensuring trust and psychological safety. A strong organizational culture depends on leaders who remain present, accessible, and responsive.

Balancing the Business Model and Educational Mission (n=70)

ACES functions as both an educational organization and a business, and 70 respondents describe tension between these roles. ACES develops programs to address needs of a wide variety of students, resulting in significant diversity in services. Though entrepreneurial thinking and revenue generation matter for sustainability, staff worry that business priorities can overshadow student-centered decision-making. Effective leadership must manage finances strategically without allowing profit motives to drive educational choices. Respondents consistently emphasize that ACES must never compromise educational integrity for expansion or revenue.

Magnet Schools: Identity, Funding, and Enrollment (n=60)

Magnet schools face unique challenges related to funding, enrollment, and public perception. Families often misunderstand the relationship between magnet programs and special education, leading to identity confusion and uneven resource distribution. Enrollment declines, particularly in arts programs, threaten program viability, while state funding models, and eroding commitment create ongoing uncertainty. Leaders must reaffirm the value of magnet schools, stabilize enrollment, and ensure that resources align with student needs.

Program Growth, Expansion, and Sunsetting (n=50)

ACES continues to grow, but respondents question whether expansion always aligns with capacity and mission. Older or smaller programs can feel overlooked as new initiatives emerge, while sunsetting programs remains emotionally and politically difficult. Leaders must evaluate growth strategically,

ensuring sustainability and effectiveness rather than expansion for its own sake. Thoughtful decisions about continuation, consolidation, or closure protect both staff morale and student outcomes.

Operations, Logistics, and Infrastructure (n=45)

Operational challenges affect daily functioning across the agency. Facilities, transportation, safety protocols, and real estate decisions require careful planning and coordination. Respondents highlight outdated systems, inconsistent communication platforms, and logistical inefficiencies that complicate service delivery. Strong operational leadership can improve clarity, reduce frustration, and allow educators to focus on teaching and learning rather than administrative obstacles.

Innovation and Technology, including AI (n=35)

Constituents see potential in innovation and emerging technologies such as AI, but they urge thoughtful implementation rather than trend-driven adoption. Leaders must evaluate how technology supports instruction, therapy, governance, and operations while safeguarding student needs and staff workload. Respondents emphasize the importance of training, ethical considerations, and strategic planning to ensure that innovation enhances—rather than distracts from—core educational goals.

District and Community Relationships (n=35)

ACES depends on strong partnerships with districts, families, and communities. Financial pressures on sending districts increase the need for cost-effective, collaborative solutions. Respondents stress the importance of maintaining trust, communicating clearly, and aligning services with district needs. Leaders who build regional cooperation and shared problem-solving strengthen ACES's role as a trusted partner rather than a competing provider.

Together, these themes reveal an organization at a challenging crossroads. ACES must navigate financial uncertainty, political pressure, workforce instability, and increasingly complex student needs while preserving its mission and identity. The next phase of leadership will require visibility, trust-building, fiscal expertise, and deep understanding of special education and magnet programming. By centering decisions on students and staff, aligning growth with capacity, and advocating effectively at the state level, ACES can strengthen its impact and sustain excellence in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

While the themes capture the major structural and strategic challenges, several important cross-cutting issues and subtleties appear in the data that are not fully visible when the feedback is grouped into high-level themes. These elements matter because they speak to *how people feel* inside the organization, not just what problems exist. Below are the key gaps and under-represented dimensions in the thematic summary:

Emotional Tone: Trauma, Fear, and Moral Distress

Staff frequently describe experiencing physical, emotional, and psychological trauma as they manage increasingly aggressive student behaviors. Leaders must recognize trauma as a systemic condition affecting staff safety, morale, and retention, not merely as individual burnout.

Loss of Professional Voice and Agency

Some educators feel excluded from decisions that directly affect their classrooms and programs, especially when leadership mandates come from individuals unfamiliar with their students' needs. Restoring professional voice will require consistent listening, timely responses, and shared decision-making structures.

Internal Equity Across ACES

Staff perceive inequities in resources, recognition, compensation, and support across programs, schools, and roles within ACES. Addressing internal equity will require transparent criteria for funding, staffing, and leadership attention.

Identity Confusion and Reputation Anxiety

Employees express concern that rapid growth and diversification have blurred ACES's identity and weakened its reputation for excellence. Leadership must clearly articulate who ACES serves, what it prioritizes, and what it will not compromise.

Loss of Institutional Knowledge

High turnover and frequent restructuring have eroded institutional memory and disrupted continuity in programs and leadership practices. ACES must intentionally preserve expertise through mentorship, documentation, and succession planning.

Safety as a Core Educational Condition

Staff consistently frame physical and psychological safety as foundational to teaching, learning, and staff retention. Leadership must elevate safety from an operational issue to a central organizational priority.

Time, Pace, and Change Fatigue

Many staff feel overwhelmed by the speed and volume of change layered onto unresolved challenges. Leaders must pace initiatives intentionally and allow time for implementation, reflection, and stabilization.

Hope, Pride, and Commitment

Despite challenges, staff express deep pride in their students, programs, and colleagues and remain committed to ACES's mission. Leadership can harness this resilience by recognizing strengths and building on what already works well.

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Desired Expertise and Qualities in a New Executive Director

What would be the most important expertise and qualities in a new Executive Director to tap ACES's strengths and meet its challenges? An analysis of survey responses yielded the following:

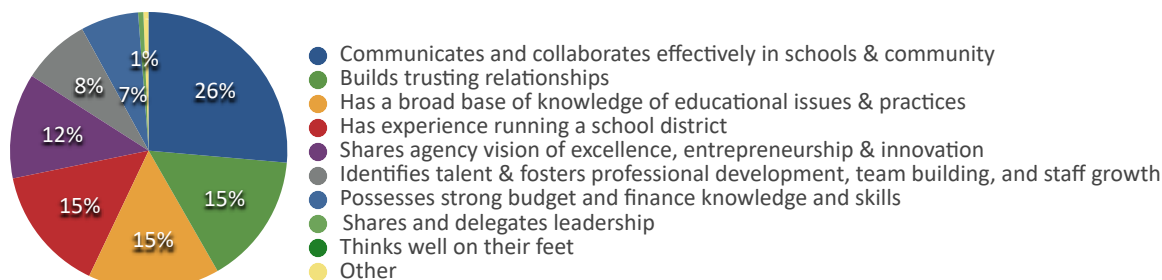
Expertise

Participants were asked to choose their top five most important areas of expertise desired in a new ACES leader. If we look at participant's **first choices**, *Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community* is the runaway favorite, selected as #1 by 26.4%. Tied for second place are *Has a broad base of knowledge of educational issues and practices* and *Builds trusting relationships*, both at 15.3%. A close fourth is *Has experience running a school district* (14.7%), and quite close behind that is *Shares agency vision of excellence, entrepreneurship, and innovation*, at 12.3%.

The majority of the 163 participants selected six areas in their **top five choices**. In order of most often selected, they are *Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools and community* (85.9%), *Builds trusting relationships* (67.5%), *Has a broad base of knowledge of educational issues and practices* (64.4%), *Identifies talent and fosters professional development, team building, and staff growth* (63.8%), *Possesses strong budget and finance knowledge and skills* (59.5%), and *Shares agency vision of excellence, entrepreneurship, and innovation* (56.4%). Close to half also selected *Has experience running a school district* (47.9%).

DESIRED EXPERTISE IN NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	#1	%	#2	#3	#4	#5	TOTAL VOTES 1-5	% WHO CHOSE IN TOP 5
Communicates and collaborates effectively in schools & community	43	26.4%	33	28	20	16	140	85.9%
Builds trusting relationships	25	15.3%	21	20	25	19	110	67.5%
Has a broad base of knowledge of educational issues & practices	25	15.3%	29	17	22	12	105	64.4%
Has experience running a school district	24	14.7%	12	16	9	17	78	47.9%
Shares agency vision of excellence, entrepreneurship & innovation	20	12.3%	16	20	18	18	92	56.4%
Identifies talent and fosters professional development, team building, and staff growth	13	8.0%	17	20	26	28	104	63.8%
Possesses strong budget and finance knowledge and skills	11	6.7%	17	21	27	21	97	59.5%
Shares and delegates leadership	1	0.6%	7	14	8	16	46	28.2%
Thinks well on their feet	0	0.0%	6	5	3	11	25	15.3%
Other	1	0.6%	2	1	3	4	11	6.7%
Totals	163	100.0%	160	162	161	162		

First Choice Expertise



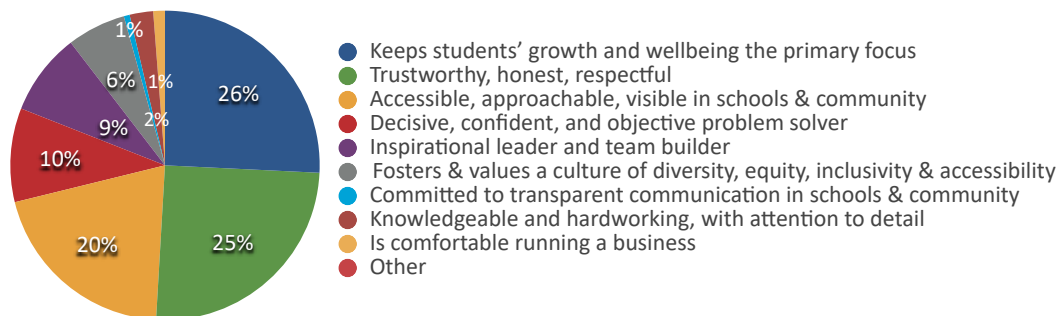
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Qualities

In addition to the leadership characteristics and expertise identified in the prior section, ACES survey respondents reflected some clear preferences for **qualities** desired in a new leader. The top **first choices** respondents identified were *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus*, at 25.8%, *Trustworthy, honest, respectful* at 25.2%, and *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* at 20.2%, all significantly ahead of the other qualities. If we look at the top five choices of all respondents, those three qualities remain the top choices, though in a different order: *Trustworthy, honest, respectful*, a top five choice of 80.4%, now leads, followed very closely by *Accessible, approachable, visible in schools and community* (79.8%) and *Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus* (74.2%). Also selected by over half of respondents were *Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver* (55.2%) and *Inspirational leader and team builder* (50.3%). Nearly half of participants selected *Fosters & values a culture of diversity, equity, inclusivity, & accessibility* (49.7%).

DESIRED QUALITIES IN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	#1	%	#2	#3	#4	#5	TOTAL VOTES 1-5	% WHO CHOSE IN TOP FIVE
Keeps students' growth and wellbeing the primary focus	42	25.8%	29	17	20	13	121	74.2%
Trustworthy, honest, respectful	41	25.2%	39	16	18	17	131	80.4%
Accessible, approachable, visible in schools & community	33	20.2%	28	38	15	16	130	79.8%
Decisive, confident, and objective problem solver	16	9.8%	8	24	14	28	90	55.2%
Inspirational leader and team builder	14	8.6%	13	20	20	15	82	50.3%
Fosters & values a culture of diversity, equity, inclusivity & accessibility	10	6.1%	14	16	23	18	81	49.7%
Committed to transparent communication in schools & community	1	0.6%	15	16	26	20	78	47.9%
Knowledgeable and hardworking, with attention to detail	4	2.5%	10	8	12	17	51	31.3%
Is comfortable running a business	2	1.2%	5	5	11	12	35	21.5%
Other	0	0.0%	0	1	1	2	4	2.5%
Totals	163	100.0%	161	161	160	158		

First Choice Qualities



Needless to say, all of these qualities and skills are essential in a leader, yet they point to the prioritized needs of ACES at this point in time. The remainder of this profile will explore these areas of expertise and dimensions of leadership, integrating perspectives garnered through interview, focus group, and survey comments.

Executive Director LEADERSHIP PROFILE

ACES stands at a pivotal moment, operating within an increasingly complex educational, financial, and political landscape while remaining deeply committed to students with diverse and intensive needs. The challenges facing the agency—workforce instability, rising costs, legislative pressures, organizational scale, and evolving student needs—are compounded by the emotional weight carried daily by staff who serve children and families with extraordinary care and dedication. At the same time, the data reflect profound pride in ACES’s mission, programs, and people, as well as a shared belief that strong, visible, values-driven leadership is essential to sustaining excellence. The following qualities and characteristics define the leadership ACES seeks in its next Executive Director: a leader capable of balancing compassion with accountability, educational integrity with fiscal responsibility, and innovation with stability—while centering students and supporting the staff who make the work possible.

Communicates and Collaborates Effectively in Schools & Community

The next Executive Director must be an exceptional communicator who collaborates authentically across schools, districts, families, legislators, and community partners. In a large, complex organization like ACES, clear, consistent communication is essential to reduce confusion, align priorities, and build shared understanding of decisions that affect students and staff. Respondents emphasize the importance of a leader who listens deeply, translates complex financial, legislative, and operational realities into accessible language, and facilitates productive dialogue among diverse constituents. Effective collaboration includes being proactive with districts, responsive to community needs, and skilled at advocating for ACES’s mission in public and political arenas. This leader must communicate with steadiness and transparency, especially during times of uncertainty or change.

Builds Trusting Relationships

Trust emerged as a foundational need across all levels of ACES. Staff, districts, and partners seek a leader who builds relationships through presence, humility, fairness, and follow-through. Trust is earned by being visible in schools, honoring professional expertise, and demonstrating respect for all roles within the organization. Respondents consistently call for a relationship builder who values people over process, treats staff as human beings rather than commodities, and understands that trust directly affects morale, retention, and student success. The Executive Director must foster psychological safety, navigate difficult conversations with empathy, and create an environment where people feel heard, valued, and confident in leadership decisions.

Has a Broad Base of Knowledge of Educational Issues & Practices

ACES requires a leader with deep and comprehensive knowledge of education—particularly special education, magnet schools, related services, and evolving student needs. Respondents stress the importance of hands-on experience and understanding of classroom realities, clinical services, special education law, and whole-child development. This breadth of knowledge allows the Executive Director to make informed, ethical decisions that balance compliance, best practice, and student dignity. The leader must stay current on educational trends, innovation, and technology, including AI, while ensuring thoughtful implementation that supports—not burdens—educators and students. A systems-level understanding of how instruction, services, operations, and policy intersect is essential.

Has Experience Running a School District

The complexity and scale of ACES demand an Executive Director with proven experience leading a school district or similarly multifaceted educational organization. Respondents emphasize the need for someone who understands governance, labor relations, budgeting, compliance, and the day-to-day realities of running schools. District leadership experience equips the Executive Director to manage competing priorities, respond to crises calmly, and maintain credibility with superintendents, boards, unions, and state agencies. This role requires the dual capacity to act as both CEO and superintendent—seeing the big picture while remaining grounded in operational realities.

Shares Agency Vision of Excellence, Entrepreneurship & Innovation

Respondents seek a leader who embraces innovation and entrepreneurial thinking while remaining firmly anchored in ACES's educational mission. Excellence is defined not by growth alone, but by quality, sustainability, and positive outcomes for students and staff. The Executive Director must foster innovation that is intentional, ethical, and responsive to real needs—whether through new programs, partnerships, or technologies—while resisting expansion that outpaces capacity. This leader should articulate a clear vision of whom ACES serves, what it prioritizes, and what it will not compromise, reinforcing the agency's identity and reputation for excellence.

Identifies Talent and Fosters Professional Development, Team Building, and Staff Growth

Staff consistently identify people as ACES's greatest strength and call for leadership that invests in talent development, retention, and wellbeing. The Executive Director must be skilled at hiring strong leaders, trusting their expertise, and empowering them to grow. Respondents emphasize coaching over micromanagement, shared decision-making, and professional development that reflects the realities of high-intensity educational environments. Building strong teams, preserving institutional knowledge, and creating systems that reduce burnout are viewed as strategic imperatives—not optional benefits. A leader philosophy that values the growth of all levels of staff, fairness, and recognition strengthens both staff morale and student outcomes.

Possesses Strong Budget and Finance Knowledge and Skills

While respondents repeatedly stress that ACES is more than a business, they also recognize the necessity of strong financial leadership. The Executive Director must demonstrate expertise in budgeting, rate setting, long-term financial planning, and navigating rising costs without sacrificing program quality or staff wellbeing. Financial decisions must be transparent, data-informed, and aligned with educational values. Respondents emphasize patience with short-term deficits when necessary to protect students and staff, alongside disciplined planning for sustainability. Effective financial stewardship allows ACES to remain affordable for districts while preserving excellence.

Keeps Students' Growth and Wellbeing the Primary Focus

At the core of all expectations is an unwavering commitment to students. Respondents consistently assert that the Executive Director must prioritize student safety, dignity, growth, and long-term success above all else. This includes understanding increasingly complex student needs, supporting trauma-informed practices, and ensuring that educational decisions are not driven solely by financial or political pressure. When leadership prioritizes student and staff wellbeing together, outcomes improve for everyone. The Executive Director sets the moral compass of the organization by consistently centering students in every decision.

Trustworthy, Honest, Respectful

Integrity is non-negotiable. Respondents repeatedly call for honesty, transparency, and ethical leadership without duplicity. Trustworthy leadership means explaining decisions clearly, acknowledging challenges openly, and holding oneself and others accountable with respect. Staff value leaders who admit what they do not know, seek input, and act consistently with stated values. Respect for people, roles, and expertise builds credibility and stability, especially during times of stress or change.

Accessible, Approachable, Visible in Schools & Community

Visibility matters deeply at ACES. Respondents want an Executive Director who is present in schools, approachable in demeanor, and genuinely interested in understanding daily realities. Accessibility includes being available to listen, responsive to concerns, and willing to “be in the trenches” when needed. This presence strengthens trust, improves decision-making, and reinforces a culture where

Executive Director LEADERSHIP PROFILE

leadership is connected rather than distant. Visibility in the broader community and with legislators further strengthens ACES's advocacy and reputation. Legislators will consider the successful leader a trusted guide in crafting legislation to improve the lives of students and staff. A sense of humor will be vital to the successful leader.

Decisive, Confident, and Objective Problem Solver

ACES operates in a fast-paced environment with constant competing demands. The Executive Director must be able to prioritize effectively, make difficult decisions, and say no when necessary—while remaining thoughtful and fair. Respondents seek a leader who can assess complex situations objectively, consider human impact alongside data, and act decisively without being reactive. Confidence grounded in values and evidence reassures staff and partners that the organization is being led with clarity and purpose.

Inspirational Leader and Team Builder

Respondents envision an Executive Director who inspires confidence, hope, and shared purpose. This leader sets the emotional tone of the organization—calm under pressure, empathetic in crisis, and optimistic about what is possible. By bringing people together into highly effective teams, breaking down silos, and recognizing strengths across the agency, the Executive Director can harness the deep pride and commitment that already exist within ACES. Inspirational leadership at ACES means leading with heart and intellect, steadiness and vision, ensuring that the organization not only endures but thrives in service of students and communities.

Fosters a Culture of Diversity and Belonging

Across the data, respondents consistently express that diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility are not optional values at ACES—they are foundational to the agency's mission and credibility. Serving students with disabilities, diverse cultural backgrounds, and complex needs requires leadership that genuinely understands and champions inclusive practice at every level of the organization. Respondents call for equity not only in student access and outcomes, but also internally—in compensation, staffing, resources, recognition, and leadership attention across programs and roles. Many voices underscore that accessibility must extend beyond compliance to include psychological safety, respectful communication, and decision-making structures that ensure all staff have a meaningful voice. As ACES continues to grow and diversify, leaders must actively guard against inequities that can emerge across schools, service models, and communities. Fostering a culture of belonging—where differences are understood, valued, and leveraged—requires intentional leadership, transparent criteria, and ongoing reflection.

Respondents are clear that ACES's ability to fulfill its mission, retain staff, and maintain trust depends on leadership that not only affirms DEIA values, but operationalizes them consistently in policy, practice, and culture.

The next Executive Director of ACES must be more than an effective administrator; they must be a team player and trusted steward of the agency's mission, culture, and future. This leader will guide a vast and diverse organization through financial uncertainty, political complexity, and changing student needs with steadiness, humility, and purpose. By building trust, honoring professional expertise, advocating effectively, and making thoughtful, student-centered decisions, the Executive Director will help ensure stability, strengthen identity, and sustain excellence across ACES. Ultimately, success in this role will be measured not only by balanced budgets or program growth, but by the wellbeing of students, the resilience of staff, the confidence of districts, and the continued belief that ACES exists first and foremost to help children and communities thrive.