

Finalist Susana Cordova

1. You've devoted your career to Denver schools, from teaching to now leading as the deputy superintendent. One theme identified in community engagement on the superintendent search was the desire to have a leader who will prioritize the many issues facing DPS. What are the top three issues you would prioritize and how do they differ from current priorities?

The most critical issues in DPS are closing the achievement and opportunity gap; investing in our teachers and schools; and establishing authentic community engagement. DPS must be a district that serves all of our community well and a tight focus on these three priorities will help us make this a reality. People are drawn to DPS because of our belief in equity and we need to nurture this by focusing on culturally responsive teaching for all educators. Culturally responsive teaching invests in our students by creating the kind of classrooms where students feel both valued as individuals as well as pushed and supported to work at high levels. Students deserve teachers who have sustained support and coaching on both culture and content. This will help them grow both academically and socially.

It is equally important that we invest in our teachers and schools and to do so, we must drive greater efficiencies in departments outside our schools. Having a more efficient central office will allow for greater investments in schools as well as a tighter focus on what works.

Finally, we must re-establish trust with our community as we go about the hard work of improving schools. Trust and authentic community engagement will promote greater involvement in schools and allow us to work with our internal and external partners to support struggling schools. These three priorities — closing the achievement and opportunity gap, investing in our teachers and schools and authentic community engagement — will be my initial areas of focus.

2. Community members also were clear they wanted the next DPS superintendent to be someone with experience working with the many diverse communities interested in Denver's schools. Please share a specific example or examples of how you've successfully worked with diverse communities.

As a Latina myself, I understand how important it is for DPS to focus on diverse communities and I have a long history of working with diverse communities to improve the outcomes of our students. Two examples of this are the work I have led to increase the number of students graduating college ready through rigorous coursework like concurrent enrollment and Advanced Placement classes; and the work to redesign services for English learners in DPS.

In both examples, the groups who have gained the most from the initiatives are diverse students — largely Latino and African-American students as well as students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch. As an example, we have increased the number of Latino and African-American students graduating with Advanced Placement college credit from 198 to 1,300 over the past decade. And the number of African-American and Latino students graduating has more than doubled in this same time period.

Our English learners have also dramatically improved their performance as well. Ten years ago, prior to the transformation of the ELA department, our English learners significantly lagged behind peers in other districts. Now, DPS English learners outperform their peers on state assessments. I believe deeply in the talents and gifts our students bring with them into our classrooms and our job is to ensure that they are successful, because each and every child in DPS deserves the support they need to succeed.

3. Teaching and administrative experience in K-12 education was identified as an important consideration by the community during the search. How would your experiences as a teacher and administrator inform your efforts if you're selected as the next superintendent?

I have a long history in DPS — as a student, a teacher, a parent, an assistant principal and principal and as a leader in the central office. I deeply understand how our district works — and doesn't work — and I am firmly committed to working in collaboration with our teachers, leaders and community to immediately confront the challenges that face us. I know what it is like to be a teacher in DPS — to care deeply about our students and also to feel overwhelmed by responsibilities. I have been a collaborative leader in our district and I have a proven track record of working both with and across teams to put students first and make hard decisions that will support improvement.

Teaching is a complex profession — teachers need time to collaborate and plan; to assess progress; to work in collaboration with their teams and the school community. We have examples of where this works well in our district and much to learn about how to do this at scale. As a lifelong member of the Denver community, I know how critical it is for us to have a thriving school district; I am deeply committed to working with our community to achieve excellence for all of our students.