

A GREAT CITY NEEDS A GREAT SCHOOL SYSTEM

We two Mayors have worked hard for many years, together with thousands of our fellow residents, to create a “Great City.” Prior to Covid-19, our economy was strong and diverse, unemployment was low, new companies and skilled workers moved here, neighborhoods and their local retailers were improving, more sports and cultural opportunities were available, and people were proud of our progress. To be sure, troubling challenges remain: air pollution; traffic congestion; homelessness and mental health needs; among others.

What’s clear is that the road to our collective vision of a great city begins with great schools. We have been involved in education for decades and are deeply concerned about the current board of education’s undermining of Superintendent Susana Cordova which caused her to take her many talents to Dallas, Texas.

Notwithstanding a mixed record of performance over two decades, we have witnessed an improved DPS. DPS was a school district which was losing students, facing financial ruin and rated one of the worst school districts on achievement in Colorado twenty years ago. But over the past two decades, DPS has steadily made improvements. In the early 2000’s, only one third of all 4th graders were reading at grade level. Today, 44% are proficient as measured by higher academic standards under CMAS. Back then, less than half of Latino and Black students graduated from high school. Today, 68% of these students are graduating and 46% of Latino students are enrolling in higher education (a record number) and over 50% of all students are also progressing to higher education...also a record number. Student enrollment has increased over the years. DPS today has a growing number of Colorado’s highest performing high schools for low-income and students of color...there were none in 2003. No other Colorado school district has made such progress across every measure: test scores; high school graduation and college attendance.

Tragically, this steady progress is now jeopardized as we lose Superintendent Susana Cordova, the first Latina school superintendent in Denver. Born and raised in Denver, Dr. Cordova attended DPS, and was a first-generation college graduate. Her life-long commitment to education progressed as a bilingual teacher, principal, administrator, Deputy Superintendent, and then Superintendent over a thirty-one-year career. Her children attend DPS. She is recognized nationally as an outstanding education leader. She was arguably the most qualified and community focused Superintendent in decades. She prioritized student equity and success for all students.

Rather than galvanizing behind this extraordinary talent once she was unanimously selected (after a broad, national search) she was confronted with a teacher strike her first week as Superintendent. We found it troubling that past Anglo, male superintendents were never “struck.” New school board members (some seeking to fire Dr. Cordova) were recruited and have opposed her efforts at almost at every opportunity. They mistreated her in public board meetings, interfered in the day-to-day management of the school system, rather than

collaboratively establishing policies and direction for the district. They still have not developed a new district plan or long-term strategy beyond the expiring 2020 Plan.

We cannot remain silent over this mis-treatment of a hard-working and committed Superintendent. We care too deeply for the future of our students and our city and we urge other residents to also become informed about the precarious condition of DPS. Sadly, some celebrate the loss of Dr. Cordova...while Dallas, Texas is cheering her arrival.

It is tragic to watch political fights among adult school board members with personal agendas and little focus on student success. The credibility of the Denver Board of Education was further undermined when the Colorado State Board of Education recently reversed the decision of the Denver board denying DSST-Noel from extending its current 8th Grade to a Noel High School. The current middle school, which is composed of 94% students of color, was the top performing school in Denver. The State Board's stern reversal implies that the Denver Board's decision was more politically, rather than educationally, based.

Now we will be subjected to another costly, national search for a new superintendent which will likely become a "politized process." We do not believe that this dysfunctional board can now attract a more capable superintendent than Susana Cordova, the leader who has worked her entire adult career for the students of Denver and for our city. **The job is going to be even more challenging since we know that both Jefferson County and Douglas County are also looking for superintendents. Competing for talented leadership when the Denver Public School Board has yet to finalize a post-2020 plan is deeply concerning.**

Therefore, we urge the Denver Board of Education to take the following steps to begin to regain some semblance of credibility among the broader community:

First, an independent committee of residents should take the lead in recruiting, screening and recommending potential superintendent candidates to the school board. Working with a superior search firm, these residents should be objective and experienced in screening candidates and must not have a personal or political bias.

Second, the board must immediately develop a new strategic plan (beyond Denver 2020) which describes the vision for DPS. Any prospective candidate Superintendent will want to know where DPS is headed other than personal opinions of board members.

Third, the board must take action to restore the confidence of the broader community, especially the Latino, African American and other communities of color, and **reassure** Denver residents that they will act responsibly and only in the best interests of students. **It's time to put aside personal political agendas and work collaboratively as a board should.**

This is a critical time for the Denver Public School District. We must all act to ensure the overall progress of Denver