In December, the Board of Education concluded a nationwide search by unanimously approving Susana Cordova as the next superintendent of Denver Public Schools. With her wealth of experience as a DPS teacher and administrator, her deep roots in the community and her network of leaders from the education, business and philanthropic sectors, we believe that Susana is uniquely qualified to lead DPS effectively and inclusively.

During our months-long search process, we listened to a wide variety of voices from across the DPS community. We learned about the strengths our parents, students and educators most wanted in our new superintendent: an ability to set priorities for a large, complex organization, extensive experience as an educator, and a longstanding commitment to working with the diverse communities that are such a source of strength for our schools. Susana has demonstrated all of these qualities throughout her DPS career.

Perhaps more importantly, Susana’s personal experiences growing up in DPS and becoming the first of her family to graduate college have given her a deep understanding of the power of education to change lives and the belief that every one of our students deserves caring, knowledgeable educators who are committed to bringing out the excellence that exists within them. She truly believes in the success of every student, not as an ideal but as an attainable goal.

In the following pages, you’ll learn more about Susana’s first steps toward reaching that goal. You’ll learn about the personal values that inform her work, as well as the questions that will guide her as she seeks to collaborate with our community to build an understanding of what is working in our schools and what isn’t. You’ll also learn about Susana’s core beliefs and the specific action steps she is planning to advance them from Day One. In March, the board will hold a retreat with Susana to learn more about her steps for implementation. We hope you’re as excited as we are to get started on this critically important work.

Sincerely,

Your DPS Board of Education
Jennifer Bacon, Angela Cobián, Lisa Flores, Happy Haynes, Barbara O’Brien, Carrie Olson and Anne Rowe
What does it take to ensure that every child thrives in our city? How do we ensure that all the children of Denver have access to great schools in their neighborhood? Why are there such large gaps in academic outcomes for different groups of our children in Denver? These are questions I heard repeatedly as I engaged with our DPS community in the superintendent search process — and these questions set the foundation of what I hope to answer as DPS’ superintendent.

In my role as superintendent, I want to re-focus our effort where it matters most: on creating classrooms that are vibrant centers of learning, where caring teachers are engaging their students in rigorous, culturally responsive experiences so that all children excel. Ensuring that this happens in every DPS classroom requires leadership from everyone — our Board of Education, and great teachers and leaders in every school. Our teachers and school leaders do the most important work in our society — preparing students for the future — and I am excited to work with them to create greater equity.

In this entry plan as superintendent, my goal is to create a foundation upon which we can build a stronger future — for our community, for our DPS team members and, most importantly, for our students. And I look forward to hearing your continued feedback to expand and update this plan as needed as we all strive, focus on and believe in our shared vision, that Every Child Succeeds.

Warm regards,
Susana
Vision

My vision is that every single one of our students thrives — not by accident, but by design. Our students graduate ready for college and career because our schools are joyful places that create excellence for all, especially for our students of color. Our children experience both meaningful rigor and support from teachers, support providers and leaders. Students, families and staff work together to build vibrant school cultures designed to ensure our community thrives.
Personal Values and Beliefs

BELIEFS

Equity
Our schools must be places where every student is affirmed for who they are, while being challenged to excel. We must lean into the hard work of eliminating barriers, providing the right resources and ensuring that all students, particularly African-American and Latinx students, have teachers and leaders who both care about them and push them to succeed. We must break the historical patterns of inequity that have resulted in far too few black, brown and low-income children succeeding at high levels. We can do this if we focus our resources, energy and talent on leveling the playing field for our most vulnerable students.

Instructional Excellence
Our students deserve the highest quality instruction each and every day. This means we need to deliver the highest quality supports to our teachers and leaders as they work day in and day out with our students. Our classrooms must be vibrant centers of learning where caring teachers are engaging their students in rigorous, culturally responsive experiences so that all children excel. Teachers should feel valued in our district. We need to invite teachers into authentic conversations about how to achieve instructional excellence, and value their professional expertise and perspective.

Collaborative Teamwork
Our schools are the centers of our communities and we must work hand-in-hand with our families and community members to ensure that Every Child Succeeds. We need to build strong, collaborative teams to help design solutions to our most persistent problems. We need everyone to work together toward our common goals.

PERSONAL VALUES

Excellence
We must always ask, “how can we do better?” in the pursuit of excellence for all.

Relentless Optimism
I believe in the possible. We don’t yet know just how great we can be!

Hard Work
We owe it to our kids and each other to work as hard as we can to achieve our goals.

Teamwork
We are in this together and our strength will always be in our ability to work as a team.
Entry Plan Goals

My goals are to:

- Ensure a strong leadership transition, aligned to an explicit focus on closing the achievement and opportunity gaps for students.

- Host listening sessions with a broad set of stakeholders to develop deep understandings of how people view what is working, what isn’t working and what the stakeholders’ best hopes are for the future.

- Reach out with new and intentional modes of engagement to interact with all members of the community, ensuring that our underrepresented communities are involved in the engagement and feel heard.

- Build a plan for schools to embrace the excellence of Black and African-American students that will prioritize and target their academic achievement.

- Learn more about what the historical and recent barriers to authentic collaboration have been so as to disrupt those patterns and create new ways of working together.

- Collaborate with our teachers and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to establish a more productive working relationship. Ensure that our teachers feel a greater sense of efficacy in their craft and feel valued as professionals.

- Ensure the diversity of ideas and approaches to educating children within our Family of Schools (traditional, innovation and charter schools) remains both a strength and an opportunity to put Students First.

- Build excitement and momentum for the next steps in the DPS vision, mission and future strategic plan, while committing to make necessary changes to ensure a system of continuous improvement.

- Develop a trusting, productive and collaborative relationship with the Denver Board of Education.
Entry Plan

Key Questions

In meeting with individuals and groups throughout the city, I will ask the following Key Questions to build a deeper understanding of what is working, what isn’t, and how we can work together to rapidly improve:

- What are the most important characteristics of a quality school for you?

- What three things happened in DPS/in your school in the last three years that you are most excited about?

- What three things happened in DPS/in your school in the last three years that you are most disappointed about?

- What unique assets of your school community do you want to make sure I’m aware of?

- Who are the employees on staff you respect the most and who do you turn to for help when you need it?

- Who are the key stakeholders who are critical to our success?

- What obstacles or barriers could I remove that would help you be more successful?

- What are you willing to commit to do to make this transition successful?

- How can we improve student voice, agency and experience across DPS?

- What didn’t I ask that you believe I should know?
Convene representatives of groups such as the African-American Equity Task Force, the Congress of Hispanic Educators, the Teacher Leader Advisory Council, DPS Belong Group representatives, and key staff and principals to develop joint recommendations for a Unified DPS Equity Plan, which aligns efforts that currently exist in silos and addresses gaps in supports, including required Culturally Responsive Education training for all staff.

Work with all high schools to increase the number of students, particularly African-American and Latinx students, taking concurrent enrollment Ethnic Studies, African-American Literacy and History, and Chicano American Literacy and History.

Review, adjust and reaffirm all recommendations and requirements for embedding Restorative Practices in all DPS schools.

Build trust and community by hosting a convening with Indigenous communities at the Denver Indian Center.

Create required individualized plans to monitor high school student progress toward competency and credit-based graduation requirements.

We need to create schools that are organized to meet the needs of the kids they serve instead of what we’ve been doing. We expect kids to adjust to the schools and if they can’t, we say something is wrong with the child — instead of focusing on engagement and nurturing the love of learning in kids.”

— Pedro Noguera
Entry Plan
Instructional Excellence

This spring, I will:

- Visit 30 schools across all regions of Denver; observe classroom instructional practices with a focus on rigor and adherence to grade level expectations.

- Convene a teacher advisory council to advise district leadership on a targeted set of instructional priorities that will accelerate the academic growth and achievement of black and brown students, and to identify the supports teachers need to provide instructional excellence.

- Launch a PSAT/SAT campaign for high school students to ensure that students have access to free PSAT/SAT preparation resources with a specific focus on parent engagement for PSAT/SAT preparation.

- Partner with the DPS Foundation to create a “Black and Brown Excellence” initiative to accelerate student achievement, aligned to the Unified DPS Equity Plan.

- Create a district-wide book study, starting with the TNTP report, The Opportunity Myth, to raise understanding about the critical importance of rigor for low-income students, African-American students and Latinx students.

- Evaluate the outcomes of current school autonomies especially related to staffing counselors, libraries, restorative practices staff, mental health supports and electives to understand the current landscape of offerings related to Whole Child supports in DPS schools.

- Using preliminary feedback from community forums, create a timeline and work plan to make recommendations for DPS School Accountability System.

- Prioritize putting Special Education Task Force recommendations into effect.

"Excellence in education is when we do everything that we can to make sure they become everything that they can.”

— Carol Ann Tomlinson
Entry Plan
Collaborative Teamwork

This spring, I will:

- Meet individually with all seven board members to develop strong relationships as the foundation for an effective governance team.

- Hold a board retreat to discuss communication protocols, roles and responsibilities, norms of behavior and interaction, expectations for first year and agenda setting.

- Collaborate with the Board of Education on the design of a community engagement plan, including structure of the engagement, intended outcomes, process and timeline.

- Recruit a leader for Family and Community Engagement, with first deliverable to be the engagement plan, and with a top goal of intentionally building connections across our communities of color.

- Meet with staff members: 30 teachers, 30 principals and key leaders in central departments to ask Key Questions and collect feedback.

- Meet with charter school leaders to understand how we can collaborate in the drive for instructional excellence.

- Meet with all DPS Union Leaders to ask Key Questions and listen to feedback.

- Meet with civic leaders, including our mayor, city council members and other elected officials to ask Key Questions and listen to feedback.

- Host regional community forums for the following groups: high school students, parent/community members, the faith-based community, civic and business leaders, all with interpretation services for multi-lingual community members.

- Conduct a Twitter town hall.

- Have all principals host forums with their school communities to ensure deep and broad participation in the process.

- Once all feedback is collected, analyze for trends so that I can make recommendations to the board.

“Everyone in a complex system has a slightly different interpretation. The more interpretations we gather, the easier it becomes to gain a sense of the whole.”

— Margaret Wheatley
Prior the start of the 2019-20 school year, I will submit a summary report of what I have learned. This will also include recommendations for next steps as we work together to ensure that EVERY CHILD SUCCEEDS.