

PERFORMANCE
EVALUATION
FOR
SUSANA CORDOVA

SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Evaluators: DPS Board of Education
Evaluation Period: January 7, 2019 – June 30, 2020



Introduction:

Susana Cordova entered the Superintendent role in December of 2018 after her predecessor served in the role for ten years. Her arrival marked the tail end of the previous Board of Education's ambitious strategic plan and goals: The Denver Plan 2020. Immediately upon her hire, she entered challenging negotiations with our teachers that resulted in increased teacher pay but necessary reorganization and cuts at our central administrative office.

As she navigated these changes and as the Denver Plan 2020 was coming to an end, Susana conducted a listening tour and created her Entry Plan. The Entry Plan served as targets to meet along with the 2020 Plan goals. The majority of the 2020 Plan Goals became difficult to measure, as our main tools and strategies (such as shift in assessment) changed towards the end of its evaluation period. Nevertheless, as evidenced by community input from the Superintendent Search and from Susana's entry listening tour, the landscape shifted in that community members were more vocal and demanded access to the district, its decisions (transparency), an increase in focus on equity, and noticeable shifts away from the way the district operated in the previous administration.

In her Entry Plan, Susana named her vision as "...that every single one of our students thrives -- not by accident, but by design." She also named Instructional Excellence and her Collaborative Culture as her cornerstones. In addition to the 2020 Plan goals nearing its end, she named the following targets: 1. Increase in educators of color; 2. Increase community relations. A new set of Board members were elected in the fall of 2019.

The current BoE, voted on in late 2019, along with Susana and her cabinet named themselves the governance team. The BoE's role was to set vision, values, and top line goals for the district; and the Superintendent's role is to create goal targets and execute on the vision and values. The Board began to set priorities in a change of direction for the district, however after three months of service the new Board was confronted by the COVID Pandemic. Ultimately in lieu of setting standard goals for the 2020 School Year, we directed the Superintendent to focus her staff and energies on addressing COVID. In the interim, the governance team clearly set values and [crisis priorities](#) to navigate the pandemic.

Susana's initial evaluation was scheduled to be conducted late in 2019 or early 2020. Susana's contract does not include performance based pay, nor includes any bonus structures. Her evaluation process is to determine if she has acted in accordance to her contract, the goals and values set by the Board, and to help support the governance team in successfully moving forward. However, through the challenges and changes due to the pandemic, we were unable to conduct her evaluation until now.

Given the circumstances, new political climate, major events that impacted the district; and the conclusion of the Denver Plan 2020 the BoE did not formally set goals for this evaluation period. However, the BoE decided to conduct an evaluation process to assess the Superintendent for core values and competencies as well as position the BOE to lead the district into a new direction. The core values and competencies are:



<p>Superintendent Leadership and Management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates and communicates a compelling long-term vision of the future that inspires and motivates DPS employees at all levels and the community • Develops clearly defined and actionable long-term road maps • Makes clear and resolute decisions that drive strategic priorities; • Makes trade-offs and uses sound judgment that enhances organizational standing and credibility across the industry; • Establishes organizational priorities, budget, and metrics consistent with the strategy Appropriately allocates and directs resources to deliver results
<p>Staff Organizational Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a healthy, trusting, and high-performing leadership team • Establishes the organizational imperative to improve bench strength through strategic talent and succession planning • Prioritizes staff diversity, especially among district leadership • Actively plans and works to build greater trust among district staff
<p>Community & Equity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes organizational vision and provides appropriate resources for the advancement of equity, diversity & inclusion • Prioritizes the closing of opportunity gaps experienced by DPS students; especially Black and Brown students • Is an inspiring and positive spokesperson of DPS who builds greater trust with the broader community
<p>Superintendent Board Relationship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects and advocates mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of superintendents and board • Models interactions during meetings between the board and the superintendent that are professional and respectful • Provides the board with timely information and the necessary support for effective board decision-making • In addition, there is evidence that public comments by the superintendent and board members regarding district performance goals are aligned and consistent with adopted strategic plans and goals.

In alignment with the BOE's commitment to *community driven district supported decision* making, the BOE conducted a 360 Degree Performance Evaluation. This process includes performance feedback that comes from key stakeholders that *surround* the Superintendent. The BoE engaged [The Equity Project](#), led by Chief Catalyst Dr. Nita Mosby Tyler to gather and analyze feedback. The feedback collected by Dr. Tyler came from parents, students, staff, community members (including feedback externally conducted by the community), the Superintendent's self-evaluation, and the BOE. The process itself proved to be meaningful to those involved from the broader Denver community. In particular Spanish speakers interviewed were elated to be involved and have their voices contribute to something so important. Though the final rating rests with the DPS Board of Education, the stakeholder feedback strengthened our knowledge base, insights and our decision-making.

Board Narrative: Superintendent Performance

Overall The BOE rated the Superintendent as [Meets Expectations](#) with a 3 on a scale of 1: Unsatisfactory - 5: Exceeds Expectations.

Her overall score was consistent with the scores across each category. The BOE found consensus amongst their own feedback as well as the community's and Superintendent's self-evaluation on the context to which the Superintendent faced over the past year and a half; the Superintendent's strengths and motivations; as well as acknowledgement of the shifts in the political landscape and community interests. The Board differed in areas of growth overall but there is consensus on a few key areas which we hope to target in goal setting for the upcoming school year. In addition to the crisis priorities, the BOE will also use opportunity-areas to launch a short term strategic plan. The following evaluation categories relay high level themes from the Board's evaluation of the 360 performance review. We focused on areas of convergence across our seven member board, given the broad range of experiences, opinions, and findings in the disaggregated scores.

1. Superintendent Leadership and Management

Weighted Average - 3.0

The BOE recognizes that Susana has maintained steady leadership in the context of a strike, reorganization, pandemic, and budget crisis. Managing through crises is no easy task. Districts can easily fall apart without strength of leadership while facing these circumstances. Susana has clearly laid the course for moving forward and led her team through deeply impactful challenges. Together the governance team led with values as evidenced by our crisis priorities, our commitment to staff, and commitment to Denver's public health.

Susana is also highly regarded in her field. She has been profiled by the University of Denver, the University of Colorado at Denver, and the 5280 Magazine. She also was featured in the Chiefs for Change *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* white paper. She's spoken at the National Association of Elected Latino Officials; Council of the Great City Schools; Aspen Institute;



Leadership Exchange LEX; the TUDA Trial Urban District Assessment; the Global Cities Education Network – Asia Society; and testified before the U.S. Congress on return to school planning. In a district that is majority Latinx and children of color, the Board of Education (BOE) and community stakeholders recognize and value the importance of having a homegrown, bilingual Superintendent who is a former educator.

We see Susana actively draw from her classroom and school experience in her leadership. We affirm the need to focus on instructional excellence, equity, and collaborative teamwork as cornerstones. However, the opportunities for growth lie in a compelling **long term vision and aggressive plan to shift the culture away from the shortcomings of the former “reform” narrative** (as well as the policies that reinforce said culture such as competition over cooperation or an over prescription of decisions made from the results of standardized testing) and towards providing non-negotiables and baseline resources and opportunities across all schools and propel all kids into actualizing their excellence. The BOE expects the outcomes of the Superintendent’s leadership and management of said vision to be racially equitable, as well as emphasize social emotional and academic outcomes for Denver Public Schools students, teachers, and staff.

2. Staff Organizational Culture

Weighted Average - 3.0

It is clear that Susana brings her own experiences and curiosity to the position. This is evidenced by the diversity and level of experiences she has brought to her cabinet, as well as to school leaders. It is further clear she values all voices – often encouraging and expressing them (from supporting the LGBTQ+ community to ASL support to elevating the district’s Belong groups). Susana also has been adept at being mindful of divisive dispositions amongst communities and takes steps to be present, listens and tries to mitigate negative outcomes in the community.

While the BOE believes her senior team is high functioning and respectful, even throughout the hardest of criticisms, we believe they are too attached to the direction of the former administration (reform and bureaucratic central admin structure). Many of her senior staff also served in senior positions for the last Superintendent. We are concerned that there is a lingering collective mindset. Further, we see that new hires perhaps are people Susana trusts and compliments or supports her, but may not be the people she needs, or people that know the school communities deeply. This has caused friction between the BOE and the senior leadership team as the Board pursues new directions. As our sole employee, the BOE encourages Susana to reflect on this and consider such reflections in her managerial conversations as she sees appropriate or necessary.

It is not lost on all of us though that we still need to continue to grow trust across the entire organization. Her strength and strongest relationships are in the west side and central portion of the city. There is consensus that the district still struggles with inclusion and even developing a pipeline and bench for leadership across the district. We see many interim leaders concentrated in particular regions of the city. The Far Northeast, and African American communities are in

need of support through district leadership and in developing a pipeline of leadership. We would benefit from being clearer and creating managerial infrastructure for inclusion.

It is clear Susana believes in instructional excellence as her approach to achieving equality. However, a consequence of the current organizational structure related to instruction is a concentration in central academic teams, instructional/operational superintendents, and school partners. The added layers and bureaucracy aren't consistently helpful to schools. As we move in new directions **and** need to save more financially, it may be necessary to reorganize and eliminate redundancies.

3. Community and Equity

Weighted Average - 2.57

It is clear that Susana deeply values community and equity. It is her motivation. Again, her own background and experiences lend themselves well, and the community is grateful for her presence this way. This is evidenced by her increased presence in the community to support the "community driven, district supported" notion. She has made a concerted effort to be more available and visible in the community than her predecessor and she carries herself well. We've seen increased academic support around equity training, as well as open forums and town halls.

Stakeholder comments and community engagements demonstrate a strong base of support along the west side of the city with critical engagement in Spanish. However, the Superintendent continues to struggle with northeast Denver, across African American people and Spanish speaking communities.

Susana's challenge with community engagement and equity is compounded by other challenges mentioned above: staff that reflect old culture and beliefs; hires that support her and who are maybe disconnected with school communities; and leaning on diversity while still needing to more deeply develop an understanding of inclusion, and systemic actions that promote the district's orientation to these values. For example, the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, and the Cultural Responsive teams are vastly understaffed and under-resourced, even though we have a district priority for equity.

The superintendent could benefit from sharing more about her approach of instructional excellence and the steps she has taken (with the support of the Comms team). Much of her efforts have been encouraged by the Board and community (Black Excellence Resolution and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr students), yet these efforts have not been strategically highlighted. DPS has been reactive and could be more proactive in sharing key achievements and future initiatives.

Next steps in Community Engagement and Equity include a marked shift in academics and school improvement strategies in culture, policy, and outcomes. The BOE and community have an interest in moving away from standardized testing as the marker of high quality schools to a more holistic view. As it relates to academics, we would like to see a relevant, diverse curriculum, increasing teacher cultural responsiveness and professionalism, and increased

student ownership of their learning. The definition of equity should move away from a culture and practice of competition to cooperation –and leveling the playing field in resources and opportunities for all students. An example includes the Black Excellence Resolution which leverages targeted universalism to identify specific structural challenges, solutions, and desired outcomes.

4. Superintendent and Board Relationship

Weighted Average - 3.14

The Board of Education (BOE) appreciates Susana’s collaborative nature, strengths in listening, and providing information through weekly reports. Publicly, Susana is very graceful and professional in tense and chaotic circumstances. The BOE identifies **internal and external communication** as the biggest area for growth as there are inconsistencies. Some board members experience regular updates and engagement while others have found out about critical information with too short a time frame, impeding the ability to make meaningful decisions. In particular, governance matters related to our family of schools and the budget are critical to our success. The Superintendent and Senior Leadership Team should better balance the timeline for making decisions with the Board.

Conclusion:

The Board of Education (BoE) has identified the crisis priorities for the pandemic focus of the 2020-2021 school year. However, we must move on from 2020 with new community driven and district supported priorities, and a new vision. We believe we need a stake in the ground around where we have found consensus in our educational community. It will be imperative for the Governance Team (Superintendent and Board of Education) to be both responsive to needs that arise from the pandemic as well as leverage opportunity-areas. Amidst polarities, having a strong vision, inclusive organizational culture, reciprocal relationship with the broader community, and highly communicative relationship with the Board of Education will be key indicators for success. Future evaluations should include goals based on the Crisis Priorities and the indicators identified in the evaluation above. A few of the values consistent across diverse community stakeholders, and the Board of Education include:

- Cooperation* (versus competition)
- Communication
- Community engagement
- Cultural relevance
- Equity to pursue Equality
- Growth over performance
- District Transparency
- Whole Child Supports

Key Opportunity-Areas Include:

- Given our new financial climate and priority shifts (as outlined above) the Superintendent may need to evaluate (and perhaps reorganize) our organizational structure
- Pushing talent to and support in schools and from central office
- District level infrastructure for moving beyond diversity, and into inclusion
- Targeted support for talent across the district
- Regional plan and aligned resources for Northeast Denver

As we move forward, we aim to unite our community. We are clear internally and externally that Denver Public Schools is changing course from the old Denver Plan and that we will yield equitable academic and social outcomes for students, teachers, and staff. We know the Denver Public Schools is fortunate to have a Superintendent who is from our community and deeply believes that all children can succeed and deserve excellence. The superintendent will have a partner and constructive friend in the Board of Education if and as she addresses the key opportunity areas. We look forward toward a vision and set of goals that are identified in this evaluation. We are confident the superintendent has the requisite competence and skills to do so. Ultimately, the Board of Education recognizes that we need each other--Board and Superintendent, to successfully lead towards a reality of *“every child succeeds.”*

Notes:

- Evaluation formally delivered to Susana Cordova on August 5, 2020
- Evaluation to be formally discussed with Susana Cordova in the Executive Session of the August 6, 2020 BoE Meeting
- There is no performance-based salary increase associated with this evaluation