

Latinos Lack Confidence in Search for New DPS Superintendent

by Mike Cortés

Denver Public Schools—the state’s largest school district—faces some tough problems. Like most school districts in Colorado, DPS finances are tight. Children returning to the classroom after sheltering at home for months during the COVID-19 pandemic have a lot of catching up to do. And DPS needs new leadership at the top. The previous DPS superintendent resigned last year after less than two years on the job, following a bruising strike organized by an increasingly demanding teachers’ union.

In my view, the most distressing problem facing DPS is its decades-long history of failure to provide equal educational opportunity to all its students. The statistical evidence is conclusive: DPS is less effective at teaching students of color.

Part of the problem is uneven distribution of resources among DPS schools. At over half of DPS schools, at least 90% of students enrolled are either Black or Latino. Those schools typically offer fewer instructional and extra-curricular resources, when compared to schools attended primarily by relatively affluent non-Hispanic whites. A court order in 1973 ending intentional racial segregation by DPS proved to be a temporary solution. After DPS ended bussing of students for integration purposes in 1995, racial and ethnic segregation returned and persists to this day.

Another problem is mismatch of teachers’ knowledge and skills with many students’ educational needs. The majority of DPS students today are Latino. Most Latinos in Colorado speak English. Although some Latino families trace their roots in this part of the country to the 1600s, most Latinos—like most Coloradans—are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. The native language of about one-third of DPS students is not English. When young children try to learn English at the same time they are learning how to read, they tend to struggle if reading instruction is in English. Five decades of research in education finds that children learn to read faster and better when they are taught in their native language.

DPS has failed to hire enough bilingual and culturally competent teachers to meet that need. The previous superintendent understood the problem and began making needed reforms. Unfortunately, she left the job unfinished after being stymied by striking teachers and, as she told the Dallas Morning News, “a board that did not give me the ability to lead as the CEO of the organization.”

Research also shows that if school children cannot meet grade-level reading norms by the end of the third grade, they tend to struggle with other subjects for the remainder of their academic careers. Children must learn to read by the third grade so they can read to learn in the grades that follow. At DPS, too many English language learners fall behind academically.

It’s little wonder that high school graduation rates for Latinos are significantly lower than for other DPS students. Thus, DPS consigns too many Latinos who didn’t graduate to crowded, lower-paying segments of the labor market. Too few Latinos at DPS graduate from high school and continue to college.

Last Sunday, I attended a meeting between Denver’s Latino Education Coalition and two members of the Denver School Board. It included leaders of several Latino community organizations, as well as university professors, other researchers, schoolteachers and administrators, and former public officials.

Several had devoted many years to studying and advocating for improved educational opportunities and outcomes for Latinos attending Denver schools.

During the meeting, participants criticized the School Board's current search for a new superintendent. They pointed out obvious missteps by the Board and the Chicago-based search firm they hired. The search firm had mistakenly posted the DPS job announcement for the small Denver Township of Michigan, instead of Denver, Colorado. The Coalition wanted the Board to try harder to recruit superintendent candidates with experience leading big city school districts in the Southwestern U.S. They wanted the next superintendent to have experience at working collaboratively with the Mexican and Central American immigrant communities and traditional Chicano, 'Manito, and other Latino subcultures rooted in our part of the country. The Coalition faulted the search firm for not having informed the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents about the search.

Coalition members questioned the Board's heavy reliance on the search firm for seeking "input" from Latinos, without Board members themselves talking directly with Latino community leaders with relevant knowledge and experience about problems experienced by Latino children at DPS. Participants urged the Board to renew their search for a new superintendent, looking harder for candidates who understand education needs in Denver's distinctive Latino communities.

I was disappointed we didn't have time to address some basic underlying problems. Beneath all the procedural criticisms and complaints about the superintendent search process lay Latino advocates' profound lack of confidence in the Denver Board of Education. Afterwards, participants concluded that the board was not about to budge. The Board had already narrowed the search to three finalists. We suspected the Board had already decided which of the three to hire.

The two Board members present defended their search process. But they didn't address long-standing, fundamental problems at DPS: segregation, inequitable allocation of resources to schools attended by students of color, disparate high school graduation rates, and lack of linguistically and culturally competent teachers who know how to help young English language learners master reading by the third grade.

Has the Board of Education's flawed search found the right finalists? Latinos at Sunday's meeting don't think so. The Latino Education Coalition wants DPS to hire a superintendent with a strong record of accomplishment at improving education outcomes for Spanish speaking students at large urban school districts in collaboration with Mexican immigrant and Chicano community leaders. Personally, I also would like to see a superintendent with a record of overcoming unionized English monolingual teachers' resistance to change. The Board of Education has failed Latinos yet again.

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