

Responses cannot be edited

Dr. Rachele Espiritu

Community Led School Board

Questionnaire

This questionnaire was put together by a coalition of non-partisan, non-profit organizations seeking to provide the community with an opportunity to meet, engage and learn from all school board candidates. All candidates running for Denver Public School Board and Aurora Public School Board are being sent the questionnaire on the same date with two weeks to submit their responses.

The questionnaire was put together by Inspire Colorado, YAASPA, and Padres y Jóvenes Unidos.

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In a few sentences, describe your vision for the students and families you desire to serve.

My vision for the DPS community is a district in which every student is given a fair shot at success, and we can achieve this by pursuing our priority issues. The issues that I believe are most important to prioritize are closing the opportunity gap, expanding early literacy programs, focusing on the whole child, and making sure that families have their choice of great schools in every neighborhood. I have focused on these issues since my appointment to the board, and I am excited to achieve more progress in pursuit of these priorities in the next four years.

In your opinion, what top two changes should be made on a state and local level regarding public education?

Deepening family and community partnership with DPS schools is a priority for the current members of the board, which is why we included it in the superintendent's performance evaluation and developed a new Family and Community Engagement Plan. I have visited nearly every school in my district, attended countless community meetings, and directed the formation of the Far Northeast Education Commission; but we must do a better job of meeting the community where they are instead of expecting them to come to us. Relationships between the home and school don't just occur by asking families to come to back to schools, they also occur when our educators visit homes—which occurred over 11,000 times last year with the Parent Teacher Home

Visit Program. I support the expansion of this program to strengthen personal contact. Strengthening partnerships with the city, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community groups will help us to ensure that every child succeeds. We also need to eliminate systemic barriers to educational opportunity that widen the achievement gap. By focusing on whole child policy, we can also ensure that kids are ready and able to start each day ready to learn regardless of their situation outside of school. In terms of state policies that need to be changed: nothing has a more negative impact on school funding than TABOR and Gallagher.

If you are elected to the school board, how will you ensure there is progress toward racial equity for students of color?

It is crucial to continuously assess inequities in access, completion, and performance in these opportunities for different groups of students. The district must intervene at all levels to reduce and eliminate opportunity gaps – this includes consideration of policy, allocation of resources, and supports for our schools. At the individual level, this means exploring unintentional bias that exist and may contribute to the opportunity gap. I also believe that we need to hold ourselves accountable and create and strive for benchmarks of success. I would like to see all students in Denver successfully engage in one or more postsecondary opportunities.

What do you think needs to be done to increase access to programs like ASCENT and concurrent enrollment for students of color and lower income students?

Beginning with the Class of 2021, all DPS students must demonstrate their competency in courses that reflect Colorado academic standards. It is crucial for our district to find more pathways from high school to postsecondary opportunities, especially for our students of color. Currently, the District provides opportunities for high school students to prepare for postsecondary education through AP courses, Concurrent Enrollment, and IB programs. As is my approach to other issues, I think that it is important to view these programs through the lens of equity, and find opportunities to intentionally increase the proportion of minority students and students who qualify for FRL enrolled in these opportunities. For students who come from immigrant families and/or where the student might be the first in the family to go to college, these opportunities provide

important academic and financial supports. Students who participate in ASCENT are 23% more likely to enroll in college and 10% less likely to need remediation.

How does your school district need to improve in its process of ensuring all students graduate ready for college/career?

This is an area in which DPS has made huge strides in the past four years. I believe that we need to prepare all students for college, while also recognizing that students may make the decision to pursue a different pathway. Technical offerings for students who are not interested in a traditional four-year college are on the rise. Two years ago, DPS had just over 5,000 kids in these programs; this school year, there are more than 18,000. The bond & mill also puts \$8,000,000 per year towards college and career programs such as apprenticeships, work experience, and dual enrollment classes. Furthermore, the number of DPS graduates who are college-ready has increased by more than 80% in the last four years, based on college-ready benchmarks such as qualifying scores on AP or IB tests, meeting or exceeding the CO Commission on Higher Education benchmark score on the ACT, or earning college credit through dual enrollment courses. Our work is to improve our rates of college-readiness amongst all students as we know that gaps still exist for our students of color, our English Language Learners and our students with disabilities. I believe that expanded offerings of concurrent enrollment to these groups of students as the engagement in these courses seems to have stronger results. Given that ACEConnect and Transitions team has a 94% graduation rate for students with disabilities who have participated in their internships and career readiness program, we need to get more students engaged in these opportunities as well.

How would you determine top budget priorities?

My approach to budget analysis starts by taking a look at the overall categories, the consistency of the numbers, and whether the budget categories accurately support the goals of our Denver 2020 plan. I am intentional about looking at the allocations through a lens of equity to ensure that we are supporting our students and schools with the greatest need. One of my major priorities when examining our budget is finding ways to get more funding to our schools. I also solicit input and seek greater understanding by listening to the needs, interests, and desires of our school leaders, CSCs, Student

Board of Education, and our District Accountability Committee. I also serve as the Board liaison for our Mill Levy Oversight Committee.

How would you advocate for adequate and equitable funding for your district on a state and local level?

I think it is very important that we all work together to increase investment in education. We in Colorado should not be near the bottom nationally in school spending. I am eager to work with our partners and advocates to make a strong case to the public about how effectively we spend their tax dollars and our need to invest more in our kids' and our community's future. When I first joined the board, I was active in the campaign for our bond and mill levy and am grateful to our Denver voters for supporting our students. Finally, as one of the lowest ranking states in our nation for student funding, our long-term efforts need be focused on mitigating the impact of TABOR and the Gallagher amendment on our public schools.

What role do you believe families and students should play in implementing district and school policies?

Partnering with students, families, and youth- and adult-serving organization and advocacy groups is critical to the success of our schools, and ultimately the success of our students. Students and families play a crucial role in implementing district and school policies and should be engaged as partners from the very beginning of policy development, to implementation, to evaluation for continuous improvement. During my time on the Board, I have made it a priority to focus on outreach and engagement with my constituents. I believe that it is important to meet student and family members where they are and not always have constituents come to us. I have reached out individually to family and community leaders, participated in school-based events, conducted listening sessions with high school students when I visit schools, and attended countless community meetings. I always believe that there is room for improvement. We need to ask families and students what authentic engagement looks like for them, instead of the district doing the requests. We are opening a Center for Family Opportunities in the FNE that will implement a multi-generational approach to supporting students, families, and community members with wraparound services based on community needs (e.g., financial literacy, job skills training, legal services, etc.). Having our family and community engagement team based in the community will help build trust and longevity

in our relationships. DPS also has a robust Home Visiting program that can also be leveraged to help share opportunities for students and family members to be engaged in policy implementation. I am encouraged by recent hires the district has made to improve community engagement, and I am hopeful that this results in greater efforts by the district to reach stakeholders where they are.

How would you work with schools to address the school-to-prison pipeline?

The school to prison pipeline refers to the impact that school as institutions, with policies that can disproportionately impact our black and brown students, have on increasing the patterns of student contact with juvenile and adult justice systems. This is a disturbing trend that requires us to look at our school policies from a lens of equity. I was proud to support the collaborative work of the District with Padres Unidos, the DCTA, and others, by supporting a resolution in March that stated our intent to end suspensions and expulsions for students in Early Childhood Education (ECE) through third grades in favor of more thoughtful disciplinary practices. As I stated at our board meeting, “The message that we are sending to our youngest students and families is that we are starting early and we are starting smart. The best place for you to be is in school. And, that’s where we want to see you thriving and being successful.” The resolution states “it is well-established that removal from school through discipline negatively impacts engagement and connection to school in the early years of a student’s life. These earliest exposures to education are intended to develop students’ perceptions and trust of school and teachers, and to instill fundamental social-emotional and academic skills that will become the foundation for success.” Knowing that there are significant racial disparities in discipline (black students 6-7x more likely to get in-school suspension, out of school suspension, or expelled than white students; Latino students 2-3x more likely, and Native American students 4-6x more likely), I support our discipline reform efforts, especially the emphasis on creating supports and strategies to promote positive behavior and prevent problems and use of restorative justice approaches. Suspension and expulsion should only occur in the limited circumstances where the safety of students or staff is threatened. I’ll continue to fight for our students to look at all of our policies and resources from a lens of equity to ensure that we do not continue to systematically punish our most vulnerable students.

What is your position on charter schools?

I believe it is past time to end adult political fights over school model and focus on improving academic outcomes for students at each and every school in DPS regardless of model. One of my children attends DSST and it is a good fit for his interests and personality, my other child attends a traditional public school that meets his needs and interests. I fundamentally believe that these options, and others, should exist for all parents and students in DPS and Colorado. Due to my support for parents and students having the freedom and ability to make scholastic decisions, I am supportive of any public school model; traditional, charter, innovation, magnet, so long as those schools are providing an education that prepares kids for their future.

What steps would you take to ensure that the district curriculum be culturally responsive to the needs of students of color at all grade levels?

I support curriculum that reflects the identities of all students in the district and am interested in exploring a policy that would create an ethnic studies program for our high schools and support culturally responsive curriculum for our elementary and middle school students. For too long, our courses have focused on the achievements of the predominant culture, leaving out the accomplishments and perspectives of different racial and ethnic groups. For example, it would be important for our students to learn about the importance of Denver in the Chicano movement and the history of Africans in America long before Columbus arrived. The opportunity to learn about one's own or another culture's history helps students understand the importance of different cultures and the intersection with power in shaping our past, present and future. Ethnic studies courses would help prepare ALL students, not just students of color, to be successful in our increasingly diverse country and global economy. To be effective in diverse classrooms and schools, we must also support teachers to effectively engage students of diverse backgrounds, understand different norms of behavior and communication, relate the teaching and content, and address the implicit biases that they have. This means a shift in mindset and beliefs, and obtaining new skills and practice. School leaders, teachers and staff must create an inclusive school culture, with high expectations of all students. In addition to training, we must also actively recruit and retain diverse and bilingual teachers and leaders who are representative of our student bodies.

What would you do to hire and retain more teachers of color?

It is critical to attract and retain teacher talent to support student success--and our diverse student population makes it particularly important to improve our systems of attracting and retaining teachers of color. With a national teacher shortage, Denver is not alone in challenges to having great teachers in every classroom. We need to focus on strategies that attract new talent, retain, and keep the most effective teachers in our schools, including:

- Grow our own programs, like our family to para and para to teacher programs (which currently represent more talent diversity) and our CareerResidency program which is encouraging our own Denver students to explore an educator pathway
- Enhanced compensation efforts to provide a meaningful differentiation for teachers in our most impacted schools
- Make Your Mark, a city-wide initiative aimed at increasing the awareness and attractiveness of Denver
- Enhanced university & career fair recruitment, focused on diverse candidates

It is vital that we give teachers the resources and supports they need and help them deal with the heavy workload they face. We should work to improve school leadership training so that leaders support improved practice of our educators, and provide non-academic supports for students so that teachers have help addressing those needs. We should enhance inclusive school cultures to improve the work environment for teachers, so they feel comfortable coming to the classroom every day.

Do you support the establishment of Haven Schools in accordance with the Safe and Welcoming School District Resolution adopted by the School Board?

I fully support the establishment of haven/sanctuary schools, and was very proud to support the Safe and Welcoming School District Resolution. While all immigrant communities--including my own--feel threatened by the actions and rhetoric of the Trump administration, I know that Latinx communities are dealing with greater threats and pressure than any others. When the President was sworn-in in January, I was heartbroken to see kids in tears at school, unsure if their parents would be there when they got home from school, or if they will have been rounded up for deportation by then. Not only is this sort of trauma damaging to a child's emotional health and wellbeing, but it is extremely disruptive to the learning process. To protect our Latinx students from government overreach, the board has already implemented policies that prevent the district from collecting or distributing information about the immigration status of our

students or their families. The board has also directed the district's general counsel to resist actions against our student body by immigration officials, and to fight those actions to the extent that the law allows. While these measures are important, I support further, stronger measures--including the establishment of Haven Schools.