

Responses cannot be edited

Xochitl Gaytan

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 students and families in both southwest Denver and throughout the great city of Denver is a thriving, prosperous community that leads all families into prosperity. I believe that education creates confident, civic-minded leaders who will make a positive impact in their communities. I believe in community and strengthening our neighborhood schools in southwest Denver, and that an equitable public-school education is a right for all. Meaning that children from all communities, backgrounds, and ethnicities should have a strong neighborhood school to attend in their community or neighborhood. Also, teachers should have more growth opportunities, better health care options, and financial support from the administration and the Board of Education. Most importantly, parents and communities should also get involved and support their local, neighborhood schools. Having worked shoulder to shoulder with educators, I know how important it is for them to have support and resources to inspire the next generation of scientists, artists, and thinkers of all types. Students deserve a quality education regardless of what neighborhood they live in. Strong neighborhood schools build stronger communities.

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

The top challenges for Denver Public Schools are mediocre graduation rates, and eliminating the out of state, corporate, dark money that is trying to privatize our schools.

Administration and the Denver School Board must become partners to work diligently on increasing graduation rates throughout all neighborhood schools. The current Denver School Board, including my opponent, is strongly financially supported by the Koch Brothers and other corporate interests who don't put students first. Due to the influence of dark money, the current school board spends millions of dollars a year on ineffective, standardized tests and costly consultants. Teachers spend nearly a third of their year preparing, administering, and reviewing multiple standardized tests. Additionally, students are tested on subjects that they have not been taught, which obviously drags down test results. Redundant standardized tests presently reduce adding curriculum options and course offerings that will challenge students to learn more. My vision for our kids is different in that we should rely less on test scores; and instead create individual learning plans, a rigorous curriculum, more critical thinking skills and a well-rounded education that includes the arts and sciences, music and math, and more exposure to college prep and trade schools. This will in turn increase graduation rates.

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

Denver Public Schools are the most segregated in 40 years. The District should revisit its commitment to magnet programs, which offered kids of all diverse backgrounds to thrive academically. If families and students want real choice, the choices need to be real. The District also needs to do a better job of soliciting input from families and local communities to identify what they believe is needed by stating what is working and not working. Additionally, if elected, I would focus on hiring more teachers of color to inspire students of color with examples of success. Gentrification and rapid growth have also threatened many families with homelessness, which is a huge concern. I will collaborate and partner with other nonprofits and agencies to ensure that students have the stability of a safe home and other caring resources as a foundation from which to learn and grow.

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?

ASCENT - Accelerating Students through Concurrent Enrollment allows high school seniors to remain enrolled for a "5th Year" made up of college courses. To qualify, they must meet all their high school graduation requirements and approved by their parents,

school counselor and principal. Once approved the student can take 12 credit hours of college classes prior to the end of their senior year, and be considered college/career ready. It allows students and their families to reduce the cost of a college education, connects higher education with K-12. However, ASCENT needs to increase the diversity of students qualifying for entering the program prior to their senior year. The ASCENT program should be marketed early to all families and students of color at the end of middle school or their freshman year. This early orientation to parents and students about ASCENT can hopefully incentivize this huge higher learning tool and of course allow the family to believe that college can be attainable and affordable. This early information should instill the goal to finish all their high school credits prior to their junior/senior year. I plan to make this part of my communication to families to increase the number of students of color to take advantage of this program. As well as increasing the knowledge of the ASCENT program, we need more advanced placement (including culturally competent) courses offered in high schools.

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

Culturally competent education will go a long way in ensuring that all students see themselves in college and careers and have access to the same level of college and career preparedness. I will also focus on creating more opportunities to learn skills through trades, the unions, and related organizations so that students who do not attend college have viable career options.

How would you determine top budget priorities?

My first step will be to initiate an external audit of the \$1Billion DPS budget, especially focusing on why the administrative budget is disproportionately high as compared to the part of the budget that touches the classroom. Administrative overhead should be slashed in favor of directing those dollars into the classroom, where they can lower class sizes, increase access to educational programs, nutrition, and wraparound services; improving the lives of students. I will also focus on reducing standardized testing, increasing critical skills exercises, increase cultural competency training for teachers, in addition to and giving them more autonomy to do their job. Finally, I will focus on hiring more career counselors and teachers' assistants to provide career support to our students and to support our teachers.

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

First, I will collaborate with other school board members and state legislators to find solutions to increase state funding so it is equal to or surpassing the national average. Secondly, I will conduct an external audit to better allocate funds to the classroom instead of a top-heavy administration.

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

Lawmakers and policy-implementers have an obligation to listen! This means completely revamping our community engagement process to show people that DPS cares about and even NEEDS community voices. We need more town halls. We need school board meetings held at times of day that working family members can attend. We need school board meetings at times that teachers can attend. It means school board members should not be sitting on a stage higher than everyone else at a meeting, that there is no podium, and no arbitrary time limit for public comment. It means moving meetings and town halls into the communities most affected by the issues addressed in the town halls.

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

Suspension and expulsion, truancy as part of the criminal justice system, and lack of diverse representation in teaching staff all contribute to the pipeline. It is wrong to over-criminalize our children when they misbehave. As DPS pursues new practices of restorative justice, I believe board members must ensure that proper training is provided to teachers, and messaging and communication to parents and community must include education and requirements for their participation.

What is your position on charter schools?

Charter schools function best when they are a genuine community-governed collaboration between teachers, families, and the administration. Charter schools should also have to abide by the same labor and other standards as neighborhood or traditional schools. Charter schools should be a supplement to, not a replacement for, strong neighborhood schools that serve all the students in the neighborhoods around them. The current school board has voted in -- an influx of charter schools in southwest Denver. We must seriously consider a moratorium on charter schools until we can further analyze and provide results in southwest Denver as to their benefits. Finally, charter schools that are working for students and families should be protected from frivolous closure in the name of competition, just like neighborhood schools.

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?

It is vital that the District hire and retain more teachers of color. Additionally, Principals and teachers need to incorporate education best practices that design culturally sensitive and responsive curriculum that both inspires and educates students of color. A key component involves building a safe and supportive community of learners and performers in the K-12 classroom and other relevant settings. Teachers should learn how to create engaging, multicultural, interdisciplinary, and critically reflective learning experiences for the purpose of achieving academic success and constructive identity development. I would also encourage teachers, curriculum and instruction experts to incorporate thought provoking and critical thinking exercises that allow students to explore differences, societal and economic challenges, race relations and other important and engaging topics. Finally, I would encourage more experiential learning exercises, which increase graduation rates.

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

I would first heal the combative relationship that currently exists between teachers and the administration and ensure that the teaching profession is respected, appropriately compensated, and supported. I believe teachers are not miracle workers but professionals that must receive support and respect from Administration and the school board. I would also support equitable programs that recruit teachers of color into student populations that need role models. I am in favor of offering higher salary incentives to teach in schools that have traditionally suffered from high turnover and a teaching population that does not reflect the student population.

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

Absolutely. Every child deserves a safe and productive learning environment.