



ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

GAINING MOMENTUM

Dr. Gabriella Durán Blakey



APS STRONG | 2024-25



LOOKING AHEAD

We've come a long way in one semester.

We've still got a long way to go.

But after five months as the superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools, I can tell you, the Board of Education, and our community as a whole that I've never been more confident in the capacity of our students, teachers and staff. Together, we can and will improve education in Albuquerque.

After visiting dozens of our schools and speaking to thousands of people connected to our schools, I can say with assurance that our best days are ahead. "APS Strong" isn't merely a catchphrase, it's a reality.

I know this because I've visited with first-year principals who are budding into great educational leaders, and longtime teaching veterans who can't wait to get back to work because they embrace the Board of Education's focus on improving student outcomes.

I know this because I've stood at the 50-yard line before a season-opening football game, certain the players on the field have grown both in self-confidence and persistence as they learn to play with discipline and teamwork.

I know this because many of our schools are on the cusp of making significant gains in reading and math, thanks to the employment of high-quality instructional materials and a determination to teach to key standards. Whether the gains are large or small, watching our students improve in interim assessments is a joy.

Finally, I know this because I know our community is yearning for success, and the key pieces – vision, diligence and sweat equity – are in place to make it a reality.

I fully understand 90 days is not an entire school year. It's but a sliver of time in the life of a young, budding mind. But we've had a great start at APS in 2024-25, and I'm excited to push us to great heights.

Yes, we've got a long way to go. But I believe we'll get there.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'MS' followed by a stylized flourish.



Setting the Foundation for Success

When the Board of Education interviewed Dr. Gabriella Blakey for the superintendent position, she presented a comprehensive plan for her first 90 days on the job. This effort outlined a series of aligned actions and changes that dovetail with the APS Strategic Plan – all aimed at fulfilling the community’s vision and values for its children.

Key components of the plan center on the Board’s goals to ensure all students achieve reading proficiency, grasp mathematical concepts and graduate with the necessary readiness for post-secondary success. Dr. Blakey is also dedicated to nurturing the skills, mindsets, and habits that foster achievement.

Dr. Blakey is pleased to report to the Board, the Albuquerque Public Schools community and the state that she has launched many of the promised projects and has made significant progress in achieving her objectives.

The following is a short summary of her first 90 days as superintendent.



IMPLEMENT AND EXECUTE THE STRATEGIC PLAN

As promised, APS leadership has worked to refine the strategic plan, making it more actionable and accountable to ensure it doesn't become a document that sits idle on a shelf. This important work has been completed, and executive leadership is now using the plan to guide its efforts. Team members will begin presenting regular updates to the Board of Education by the end of 2024.

The plan requires the team to clearly define initiatives that will help the district achieve its goals while adhering to established guardrails. Each initiative includes specific tasks with performance measures and indicators of success. The leads for these initiatives will report to a Project Management Oversight Committee on a monthly basis to ensure progress is being made.

ASSESS DISTRICT PROGRAMS

Outside consultants have reviewed and provided guidance for improving several departments and programs, including finance, special education, federal and state programs, leadership development and performance management, Curriculum & Instruction and school scheduling.

All of these assessments have proved critical: They've given us an outsider's look at what we're doing well (or not). They've also helped us reshape our thought processes about the inner workings of APS. We have encouraged our teams to think about the future rather than rely on past practices that may have worked 10 years ago. That doesn't mean we toss out practices that work; rather, it's forced us to look critically at what we do while guided by this north star: How does it help students and schools?



WORK ON IMPROVING HOW WE SERVE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

We've revamped our Special Education Department's organizational structure to better position it to serve students with disabilities and meet our goals.

As part of our effort to better serve students with disabilities, we're being more deliberate with IEPs, clearly outlining support and resources students need rather than simply listing program names. This change will make it easier for staff to focus specifically on individual student needs.

Our Special Education and Teaching & Learning Departments have been collaborating and developing strategies to track data and be more consistent in how we handle Student Assistance Team packets for our gifted students and those with disabilities. We'll use the data to determine the next steps to improve our processes.

Finally, we're committed to serving our students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible. Toward that end, we've been meeting with principals, and they've already set their Year 1 and Year 2 goals for improvement.



EVALUATE FINANCIAL POSITION, OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES, AND ALIGNMENT

In addition to engaging an outside consultant to review the district's financial position and provide recommendations for improvements, Dr. Blakey has taken a significant step forward by collaborating with experts to establish an Office of Federal and State Programs. This new office is a crucial part of the superintendent's strategy to consolidate funding, which represents a major shift in how the district budgets and allocates resources.

The change will lessen the potential for siloed operations, giving district leaders a chance to operate in a coherent fashion. In turn, that will provide more transparency and accountability as we work to make the best use of federal and state funding.

By eliminating a duplication of efforts, we can determine whether the way we're allocating funding is making a difference in student outcomes – and will help us gauge the impact of our financial support to schools.

Beyond that, our Finance Department will hold mid-year budget reviews for departments and schools in December to assess how they're doing in meeting their financial goals and to ensure they're focusing on primary outcomes. The mid-year reviews allow us to better forecast and plan for the remainder of the fiscal year. Most importantly, they help us ensure the money we received this school year is being spent on this year's students.



ASSESS THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND FOSTER POSITIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

The Superintendent regularly meets with local and state leaders, including the governor, mayor, city councilors, county commissioners, the state secretary of education, law enforcement and legislators. She also engages with nonprofits like the United Way and chairs the ABC Community Schools Partnership. She meets with chambers of commerce and tribal leaders and started her own Business Advisory Council, a group of both small and big business leaders. Additionally, she makes herself available to meet with the media to discuss issues affecting schools and has held public events, such as the State of the District, to engage the community and invite its participation in what's happening in schools. These efforts ensure the district is represented, strengthen community involvement and help create a positive presence in the broader community.

ESTABLISH A POSITIVE SUPERINTENDENT-BOARD RELATIONSHIP

The Superintendent is strengthening her relationship with the Board of Education through regular, transparent communication. She meets quarterly with each board member one-on-one, is available by phone at all times and responds promptly to emails. She shares timely updates when incidents occur at schools, provides a weekly summary of her visits and activities, and ensures all board member requests are addressed promptly by the appropriate staff. She agrees to all meeting requests, follows up with additional information as needed and ensures transparency by sharing the same information with all board members equally.

DEVELOP POSITIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF

The Superintendent is focused on building positive working relationships with administrators, teachers and support staff through consistent communication and engagement. She sends a weekly written message, regularly visits schools and recognizes outstanding staff through Employee and Teacher of the Month programs. The Let's Talk platform allows staff to ask questions and receive prompt answers, fostering open communication. She conducts surveys to understand staff needs and holds regular meetings with employee groups, including a newly formed principals' group and a developing teacher group. By emphasizing transparency and honesty, the Superintendent aims to build strong, trust-based relationships with her team.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS

At the direction of Superintendent Blakey, the APS Communications and Engagement Office has shifted its focus from crisis communications and high-level messaging to fostering deeper engagement and understanding of daily school activities. By prioritizing effective communication with families, the office supports principals and schools in sharing their messages and highlighting student achievements. It also is expanding its social media presence to enhance community connections and visibility. A key component of this change involves developing mutually respectful relationships with local media outlets, promoting constructive dialogue and collaboration that benefits both the district and the community. The Superintendent has also created a Family Advisory Board that she will meet with for the first time in October.

Dr. Blakey has also launched Let's Talk, a communications platform that is making us more responsive to our students, families, community, and staff. The online customer service tool makes it easier for our constituents to ask questions, request information, or share feedback about district operations. It tracks how long it takes us to respond—our goal is two business days. And it solicits feedback from those who reach out to us to gauge how we're doing.





RIGHT-SIZING, WITH INNOVATION AT ITS CORE

The Right-Sizing Committee is actively convening to tackle the challenges posed by declining enrollment in the district. As part of its strategic efforts, steps have been taken to expand Coronado Elementary School into a K-8 dual language school in response to community demand for such educational options.

This move aims to better serve families seeking bilingual education while enhancing enrollment prospects. Additionally, APS plans to debut an International High School, specifically designed to accommodate newcomers and provide them with essential services and support. By implementing these changes, the committee aims to create a more inclusive and engaging educational environment that meets the diverse needs of the community while addressing the overarching issue of enrollment decline.

The Superintendent also has met with the governor and the Public Education Department to discuss partnering on a statewide literacy center in Albuquerque, proposing several possible locations.

SCHOOL SCHEDULES

The Superintendent is actively evaluating school schedules to ensure that students have access to a variety of enriching opportunities, including electives, internships, mentorships and initiatives like Genius Hour. This assessment aims to enhance the educational experience by creating additional pathways for students to explore their interests and develop essential skills beyond the traditional curriculum.

In 2024, the New Mexico Legislature passed HB 171, requiring school districts to reimagine graduation requirements with an emphasis on flexible, personalized learning pathways. To guide this important process, an advisory committee has been formed, consisting of teachers, students, community members, principals and district educators. Dr. Blakey also has prioritized flexible use of time and funding, along with financial support for the TOPS program, for the 2025 legislative session, ensuring programs like Genius Hour can be continued and expanded.





SCHOOL VISITS

Within her first 90 days, the Superintendent visited schools and engaged with students and staff. She has visited 50 schools across the district, representing more than 2,500 teachers and staff serving more than 20,000 students. She targeted many early visits to new principals, hoping to discuss successes, challenges and their needs for district support.

She also visited classrooms, spoke with teachers and students, and observed lessons, showing enthusiasm for those using district-approved materials and quality teaching. In addition to providing support through staff, resources, and reorganizations, she celebrated achievements – including a Blue Ribbon School, the expansion of music and art in APS elementary schools and the launch of a mobile health clinic. The Superintendent also sent the entire APS executive leadership team to visit all schools during the first two days of school, documenting issues and debriefing daily to quickly resolve any obstacles to teaching and learning.

WHAT WE HEARD

Within a few days of each school visit, staff was sent a thank you note that included a link to provide feedback. Those results were combined with the results from the Superintendent's Jumpstart Listening Tour in the spring, during which Dr. Blakey visited a dozen schools, and with community responses provided during public events such as the State of the District. Participants were asked to respond to three questions:

- What is APS doing well?
- How can APS improve?
- What's the first problem the new superintendent should address?

WHAT APS IS DOING WELL?

- **Commitment to Student Success:** APS shows genuine concern for student success through efforts to improve attendance, support diverse learners and enhance the educational experience for its 68,000 students.
- **Quality Teaching Staff:** The district benefits from dedicated teachers who provide excellent instruction and support, positively affecting student learning and development.
- **Community Schools Strategy:** APS effectively implements the Community Schools model, supporting students, families, and the broader community for a holistic approach to education.
- **Variety of Educational Resources:** The district offers a wide range of resources and options, including various educational programs, school choices and extracurricular activities that cater to diverse student needs.
- **Focus on Equity and Inclusion:** APS emphasizes equity and inclusion, addressing diverse needs and promoting fairness across the educational landscape.
- **Enhanced Communication and Transparency:** The district emphasizes effective communication with stakeholders through clear improvement plans and regular updates, fostering transparency and engagement.
- **Supportive Programs and Services:** APS provides various support services, including counseling, health services, and special education resources, ensuring students' fundamental needs are met.
- **Security Enhancements:** In an era when safety is an increasingly high priority, APS has made significant improvements in school security, such as installing ALICE gates, implementing the use of Centegix badges and implementing other measures. All contribute to a safer learning environment.
- **Technology Support and Access:** The district provides equitable access to technology and digital resources, integrating technology into instruction and promptly addressing classroom issues.
- **Support for Newcomers:** The newcomer program is well-regarded, providing essential support to help students integrate smoothly into the district.



HOW CAN APS IMPROVE?

- ▶ **Enhance Communication and Transparency:** Improve channels of communication between the district, staff and the community. Ensure that decision-making processes and resource allocations are transparent and easily understandable to foster trust and collaboration.
- ▶ **Address Maintenance and Facilities Issues:** Overhaul the maintenance system to ensure timely repairs and updates, especially focusing on critical systems like HVAC.
- ▶ **Improve Allocation of Resources:** Reallocate funds to better support student needs, increasing the availability of counselors, special education services and equitable distribution of classroom supplies and resources across all schools.
- ▶ **Revamp Elective and Trade Programs:** Reintroduce and expand practical electives and vocational training, such as auto mechanics and welding. This will provide students with valuable skills and career pathways, catering to those who may not pursue college.
- ▶ **Revise Bell Schedules:** Adjust bell schedules to better accommodate students and families, considering the impact of start and end times on working parents and the overall school climate.
- ▶ **Strengthen Special Education and ELD Programs:** Enhance special education and English Language Development curriculums to meet the diverse needs of all students effectively.
- ▶ **Implement Effective Data Tracking and Evaluation:** Develop and utilize systems to accurately track academic progress and behavioral data.
- ▶ **Focus on Student Engagement and Accountability:** Increase student involvement in school activities and sports while implementing strategies to enhance accountability in classroom assignments and overall performance.
- ▶ **Enhance Bilingual Education Programs:** Provide more resources and support for bilingual education, including culturally relevant curriculum and instruction, to better serve students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and support their integration into the school community.
- ▶ **Foster Collaboration with the Community:** Build robust partnerships with community organizations and involve families more in the educational process. Address the needs of families facing challenges and improve overall support systems to enhance student success.

WHAT'S THE FIRST PROBLEM THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT SHOULD ADDRESS?

- ▶ **Teacher Retention and Support:** Focus on improving teacher retention by addressing burnout, increasing compensation, providing adequate support and streamlining the hiring process for second-career professionals.
- ▶ **Student Attendance and Absenteeism:** Develop and implement effective strategies to combat chronic absenteeism and improve overall student attendance, as consistent classroom presence is crucial for learning.
- ▶ **Special Education Services:** Reform special education to ensure services are equitable and effectively meet the needs of all students with disabilities, including addressing staffing issues and ensuring qualified personnel.
- ▶ **Equity Across Schools:** Ensure fair distribution of resources, support and opportunities across all schools, particularly in underserved communities, to address disparities in staffing, transportation and financial resources.
- ▶ **Class Size and Teacher Support:** Reduce class sizes and provide additional support for teachers to enhance instructional quality and effectively manage workloads.
- ▶ **Parental and Community Engagement:** Improve communication and collaboration with parents and the community, taking in feedback so their involvement in decision-making processes is ensured.
- ▶ **Behavioral Issues and Discipline:** Address student behavioral issues and implement clear, consistent discipline policies to maintain a respectful and conducive learning environment, including managing issues such as vaping and drug use.
- ▶ **School Start and End Times:** Review and adjust school hours to better accommodate the needs of families and working individuals, recognizing that current schedules may not be practical for everyone.
- ▶ **Campus Safety:** Enhance security measures to protect students and staff and improve safety protocols, addressing concerns about violence, weapons and general school safety.







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