

Albuquerque Public Schools Questionnaire for Board of Education Candidates

Name: Lorenzo Luis Garcia

Length of Residency in School District: Lifelong resident of Albuquerque

Occupation: Executive Director, Youth Building Better Lives, Inc. (nonprofit); Youth Building Better Lives, Inc. Board of Directors

Do you currently hold other public office:

No

Are you available to attend Board meetings the first and third Wednesday nights of the month at 5 p.m.?

Yes

Additionally, there are four board committees that meet twice a month at 7:30 a.m., 11 :30 a.m. or 5 p.m. Are you available to attend committee meetings?

Yes

Periodically, the Board must meet during daytime hours for Board meetings, budget hearings, and luncheons. Are you available during daytime hours for these activities?

Yes

In addition to regularly scheduled meetings, the Board requires approximately ten hours a week in reading, researching, miscellaneous meetings, school visits, telephone calls and email correspondence. Can your schedule accommodate the extra time involved in serving as a Board member?

Yes

Experience

1. Why do you want to be a board member for Albuquerque Public Schools?

I am a graduate of the Albuquerque Public School system. My children all have attended APS schools. I am a lifelong resident of Albuquerque, born and raised in the South Valley and I now live in the Duranes neighborhood, in the North Valley. Having grown up in Albuquerque I have often thought that serving on this Board would be an important way to give back to our communities through an active leadership role.

This presents a great opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity on critical issues impacting our communities, where our public schools carry an enormous responsibility. This is a time of great opportunity to build upon core American values of collaborative community activism, and leadership with our schools. This will require an infusion of fresh thinking to deal with the challenges we face.

We must establish learning environments that foster the best creativity of our youth; learning environments where teachers and all staff are inspired every day, as we rebuild collaborative efforts to address the long standing challenges we face.

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2. What is your interest in education?

Education is a lifelong process. The process actually reflects our inherent nature as human beings to learn new things, to explore our environment. We are inquisitive, curious about how things work; we even enjoy challenging ourselves when we do better in areas of our lives where we have struggled. For each of us, we must begin to educate ourselves to analyze and understand our experience as members of our current society.

In the best of all worlds, our educational institutions play a positive role in this human process. Students in this situation are respected and thoughtfully challenged; they become role models for all of us. As adults we are encouraged, pleased and hopeful by their values, commitment, and potential. We get excited by what's to come in their future. In the worse case scenarios, Schools can merely be vehicles of socialization, students can be disrespected; students can become frustrated, cynical and apathetic and their inquisitive nature to learn is stifled.

The most harmful result *in either of these situations* can be that all students learn to adapt into a status quo that no longer works. In this case, any student is potentially vulnerable to readymade societal traps. This scenario is one we are all too familiar with; some students are successful, while many others fall by the wayside, or are cast away like un-needed or defective spare parts.

A student's creative intelligence can be nourished. Students can master the scientific method. They must be challenged to grow into becoming the new leaders we so desperately need especially during these very difficult times. The essential formula combines learning basic skills, building upon those "teachable moments" combined with a very intentional process of re-building community and developing leaders.

One set of fundamental challenges are that more is expected of teachers, administrators, and support staff and students with very little, if any, additional infusion of resource or practical help. Schools have been underfunded. We must find the money to make us competitive once more. It is unconscionable to have students leave high school with a 4th grade reading level. Our dropout rate is a significant weakness and directly impacts our communities' economic interest.

At the present time, we are facing the largest World- wide economic crisis ever faced in our lifetimes, and potentially our history. And so many other challenges are intertwined and often they show themselves in our school setting. These are social challenges become a routine part of the "everyday agenda" of our Schools, making the job of our educators that more difficult.

We must rebuild that sense of community among us. This process can start by recognizing that Schools are central to rebuilding our badly tattered social fabric. This will mean organizing to do business differently. Our Schools should be a friendly place for parents, and centers of our neighborhoods. The specific details will need to be worked out, as we build our goals and define the indicators that will get us there.

3. How would you support the mission of the district?

I would work to learn as much as I possibly could about the mission, the core values and the intended results. I would like to clarify our underlying assumptions that were used to establish our organizational intent. We must rigorously examine these assumptions. These need to be communicated to everyone concerned.

I'll establish opportunities to meet with community members, school leaders and the support staff, to learn from them, and listen to their concerns, and most importantly work together to seek out practical solutions. This means we will have to work together to build coalitions of concerted interest as we begin to re-address the issue of the dropout rate.

I strongly believe that regular forums must be established to meet with young people seeking out their feedback, and more importantly to request their help. They are our largest un-tapped constituents. We must be diligent about looking for new information, new solutions, explore what is working elsewhere as we see if these practices can apply locally.

There must be an overarching commitment to insure that structurally we create opportunities to insure all student voices are heard. *Every student* must know by the things that we say and most importantly, that we do: that they are respected, cared about, regardless of what their abilities appear to be. This must be an essential ingredient to our overall mission. After all, they are both the beneficiaries of our successful initiatives, or the potential casualties of failed policies and practices.

4. What is your past and current involvement with Albuquerque Public Schools?

I started out as a student, attending Albuquerque Public Schools for 12 years. I went to school during a time of great societal transformation, and many societal contradictions were being addressed, in particular by the Civil Rights Movement. I enjoyed school, and was very excited to be in an environment that supported my own opportunities for learning, even though generally I was an average student.

1970's

In my first community organizing job as part of the War on Poverty Campaign I was involved to bring school breakfast programs and school lunch programs into our neighborhood schools. Studies had noted that children who had nutritious meals actually did better. They were able to pay attention, and more capable of performing better on tests. We organized Head Start programs. These days, folks are somehow re-discovering the idea that the earlier we work with our children to learn, the better chances they will have.

I worked to organize an effort to get a swimming pool added into the facilities plan for Rio Grande High School. In those days, the only public pool closest to the South Valley was near the Rio Grande Zoo. We got petitions signed, got students involved. We collected over 10,000 signatures.

Thru the mid seventies, I worked as part of a community mental health program with children and families. Our community coalition was able to successfully advocate that Albuquerque Public Schools Board to change its policy of allowing corporal punishment.

In the late 70's, I became involved with the schools as a member and then an official of our Parent Teacher's Association.

1980's

I was active with a group of New Mexico Voting Rights activists. We worked together with the Southwest Voter Registration Project to challenge the State's redistricting process of our legislative districts. This ended the use of the "votes cast formula". We were able to successfully point out that if implemented, it would dilute voting blocks of Hispanic

neighborhoods. My neighborhood had about 18,000 potential voters, where as in other parts of Albuquerque, the legislative districts were half the size. The case is entitled Sanchez vs. King.

I believe this challenge of the early 80's influenced the establishment of actual voting districts for APS School Board members. Prior to that, school board members ran at-large.

5. What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of Albuquerque Public Schools?

There are many things we can be proud of, in terms of accomplishments within our District, and at the same time there are numerous ongoing challenges that must be addressed.

There is a long list of APS alumni who have been incredibly successful, whose lives demonstrate the best of our human capacity, whose contributions have made a critical difference in the day to day lives of many people.

As well, there are numerous Teachers, Educational assistants, Support staff and Administrators and Board members, Community members and Parents who have worked under difficult conditions to carry out the mission of the schools. These are the people who often give out of their own pockets, go in to work early and work late hours insuring that their schools run well. These individual efforts and influences often go unnoticed, so students can make what seem to be incredible gains in their confidence, learning capacity and contributions to our communities.

As a School Board of the 31st largest School District in the nation, we must be clear that we are committed to paying livable wages to all our staff. No one should have to work a second or third job, just to make ends meet. So, once again, we'll need to find the resource.

There are challenges in APS that sometimes can be related to individual job performance; like attitudes of apathy and chronic frustration in having to work under difficult and stressful conditions. These challenges have a direct negative influence on the performance results of students. In the worse case they communicate disrespect towards students and result in the undermining of their interest in learning, while setting in place lifelong counterproductive negative attitudes.

Albuquerque Public Schools has some model facilities. In these settings, schools utilize state of the art technology, and offer incredible learning opportunities for students. These are creative educational environments for all involved with these schools. In contrast, there are facilities that have been in need of repair for years, where students attend schools in portable classrooms, and old facilities that should have been replaced several bond issues ago.

A significant challenge for APS and our communities is addressing the issue of the dropout rate. There are long term consequences due to our not being able to curb this societal trend. A high school dropout faces a very difficult future. They earn \$16,000 less at an annual rate in New Mexico than someone who graduates. If the graduation rates in New Mexico were raised for the Hispanic, Black and Native American communities, the potential earnings could generate almost 5 billion dollars to the States economy over their lifetimes.

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6. What is the role of the Board of Education?

The essential role of the Board of Education is to set policy and provide oversight on behalf of the entire Albuquerque Public School District. The Board reviews recommendations from administrative staff, and makes decisions about plans for future needs, and goals and priorities. The Board should be available to work with communities and school officials to build a collaborative effort to solve problems, and address long standing issues contingent upon available resources.

7. What is the role of individual board members?

Individual board members have several roles that they can play; providing a community perspective, serving as a liaison on critical issues, identifying and raising concerns, developing thoughtful, informed policies, creating coalitions. Individual board members must make themselves available to listen to the concerns of the community, seek out input from staff and administrators, and students, identifying common ground in order to put forward the best possible solutions to the challenges being faced.

8. What should be the relationship between the superintendent and Board of Education?

The Board of Education should have a collaborative relationship with the Superintendent. Any person in this role has a very difficult job to do. Consequently, we should support their work, and their role. At the same time, like everyone even individuals who are CEO's of large businesses are in need of information, and in need of perspectives that don't automatically come to them. A smart leader will seek out as many opinions on an issue as possible. Board members can be a conduit for that process of getting perspectives to the table that are badly needed to shed light on an issue.

Leadership on both sides of the spectrum must both be supported and when necessary challenged to do better. The Board should provide oversight by adopting and initiating functional policies, helping to set the goals, and the overall tone of the organizational culture.

At the same time, the Board has a responsibility to be able to step back and consider issues from multiple perspectives.

9. What unique qualities would you bring to the Board of Education?

As a lifelong resident of Albuquerque, one who has been engaged in the development of community prevention and intervention projects, the criminal justice system, the mental health system, community coalition building, and now programs that impact the social determinants of health, I think I have a wide range of experience, and perspective. I have an ability to work with others, can facilitate discussions in order problem solve, and/or build a clear analysis of issues, establish community-wide coalitions, and address social problems that have a direct impact on our school system.

10. Other school/community volunteer activities related to the community:

I have been active in several community organizations throughout my career:

1. I am the Chairperson for the Rio Grande Community Development Organization, which incorporates the South Valley Economic Development Center, the Southwest Partners for

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Environmental Justice. RGDC works to insure the people's voice in community and economic development.

2. I served as a member of the Coalition for Healthcare access to raise concerns about services to the uninsured in Bernalillo County. I was instrumental in working to advocate for, and assist in the relocation of the Clinica de Salud, (formerly the Topakal Collaborative) who serves the uninsured of Albuquerque and primarily Albuquerque's South Valley.

3. I helped to establish the South Valley Male Involvement Project, when I worked with the Public Health Division, at the New Mexico Department of Health. This project works with young men and encourages them to be responsible in their behaviors, while addressing critical public health concerns for men. As part of this process, we worked initiated a successful touring play that addressed issues of men and boys, dealing with a number of health related issues.

4. In 1994, I became involved with La Compania, a Chicano theater company, and suggested the production of the most profitable play ever written and produced in New Mexico's history, "Estoy en EI Rincon". This play was viewed by over 30 thousand New Mexicans over a period of three seasons, in several locations throughout New Mexico.

11. What are your thoughts about:

a. No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind more often than not has caused a great deal of confusion, grief, and difficulties for students, teachers, parents and administrators. It was an unfunded mandate. On the one hand there was what seemed to be well intended widely publicized outcomes as poor schools, students and parents bore the scapegoat role due to increasing societal challenges, without additional resource required to change performance. The myth that a student's learning ability and education is somehow directly correlated to their ability to perform on Standardized tests is simply not accurate.

b. Closing the achievement gap

We already have critical data that describes the challenges for our students, in particular those who drop out of school. We must work to rebuild an educational system that does a better job to build badly needed wrap around services for students and families.

The New Mexico First town hall report about Albuquerque Public Schools prepared in 2005 captured the achievement gap for racial and ethnic minorities, citing differences of upwards of 43% between the lowest citation and the highest performing group, in reading at the 3rd grade level; and, 36% in proficiency difference in mathematics between the lowest and highest performing group, at the same grade level.

c. Parental involvement and community engagement

Parental involvement and community engagement are critical to any successful schools. The success of our educational system has a direct effect upon our society. The principal challenge is that parents and communities have been under an increasing amount of social pressure. The net effect is that potentially constructive and creative solutions have

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been undermined over the last number of years. This is directly related to living in a society that has seen an increase in the gap between those who have access to resource, and those community members who do not.

First and foremost, we must support parents. This must be systematically organized. The work of parenting has gotten more difficult, and the sense of community that many of us elders experienced when we were young, has been destroyed. Each school should have Parent liaisons, and work to organize parent involvement. So, we must simultaneously rebuild that sense of community, starting at the neighborhood level.