



SUPERINTENDENT DR. ALEX MARRERO'S

Listening and Learning Tour

Executive Summary

Listening and Learning Tour

THE FIRST 100 DAYS

Dr. Marrero began his tenure as superintendent with a deliberate plan to meet with as many family and community members, students and staff as possible in the first 100 days.

During this time, the superintendent:

Visited 68 schools

Held over 100 meetings, virtually and in person, in every region of the city

34 of these meetings were official “Listening and Learning” meetings, in which Dr. Marrero asked three standard questions:



What is going well in Denver Public Schools?



What needs improvement in Denver Public Schools?



What advice do you have for me?

Listening and Learning meetings captured feedback from around 2,000 individual community and family members, students and staff.

In addition, family, students and staff were invited to submit responses to the questions via survey and over 10,000 individuals participated in the Listening and Learning Tour that way.

This report covers the aggregated feedback from both the Listening and Learning meetings and the survey responses.

Meetings by the numbers

OVER 2,000 INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATED IN LISTENING AND LEARNING MEETINGS



34 Listening and Learning meetings

27 have individual summaries
7 had fewer than 10 people, so there are no individual summaries, but feedback is included in this report



76% of Listening and Learning events focused on historically underrepresented demographic groups

21 racial/ethnic groups
9 youth
6 languages
4 lower income
4 LGBTQIA+
3 students/families with disabilities
2 experiencing homelessness, in foster care or the military, including veterans



50% More than half of the events were citywide

16 events were regional, covering the Southwest, Northwest, Central, Northeast and Southeast areas of the city.

SURVEYS BY THE NUMBERS

11,660 RESPONSES



3,724

from students

Survey responses in **seven** different languages

688 elementary school students

1,482 middle school students

1,553 high school students



5,487

from families

Survey responses in **six** languages

Families for **214** schools represented



2,449

from staff

1,218 teachers and specialized service providers (SSPs)

562 central-support staff

218 school-based support staff

200 operational support staff

132 school leaders

119 other staff

SUMMARY

What is going well in DPS?

The top theme that emerged across all stakeholders was a deep appreciation for the hard work and quality of Denver's **teachers** and staff. In surveys, Spanish-speaking and Black families named this more frequently than other families, suggesting that teacher supports are most visible to, effective for, or appreciated by these communities.

Praise for teachers was frequently mentioned in the same sentence with another common theme across all audiences: **non-academic supports**. Families, community members and students were grateful for the focus on students' well-being (addressing physical, mental and/or social-emotional needs). These findings from the Listening and Learning events reinforce the importance that families place on schools attending to the both academic needs of students as well as supporting the whole child. This was also a common theme for school-based educators, who identified these supports as critical for students who have experienced trauma and are still recovering from the pandemic.

Across all audiences, many named DPS' **focus on equity** as something going well in the district. DPS staff, as well as community and family members, expressed support for equity policies or initiatives, while students more commonly pointed to welcoming, inclusive and diverse school communities. Families in all demographic groups were similarly likely to name the equity focus as something going well.

Students, staff and families all named the **COVID precautions** and the ability to be at **school in person** this year as something going well.

Some themes were only common within specific subgroups:

When students were asked what was going well, the most common response was the category "**everything/almost everything**." This suggests that a substantial group of students are generally satisfied with their educational experience.

At the same time, a subset of both staff and students said **nothing** is going well (with staff were more likely than students to say this). Families could typically see something positive from their more removed vantage point; this was not a top ten theme for families.

Students and some families named **learning** as going well, but staff (with expertise in learning and instruction) were notably silent on this theme.

Both staff and students brought up **Student Voice and Engagement** as something going well, but this was not a common theme with families, who might not have as much visibility into this.

SUMMARY

What needs to improve in DPS?

Across all meetings and surveys, the most common broad category for improvements stems from **constrained resources**. For families and students, **school schedules** (dictated by transportation constraints) are a major pain point. Families and students also call for **facilities** improvements, most notably, air conditioning. Staff, on the other hand, most frequently cite **staffing shortages** resulting in unsustainable **workloads** and burnout. **Allocation of resources** is a minor theme in this area. School-based staff call for a narrowed focus and reallocation of central office staff to schools. Families and students cite the need for equitable allocation of funds across schools.

At the Listening and Learning events, **equity**-related improvement areas dominated the conversations. This is not surprising given that engagement efforts targeted subgroups historically marginalized by DPS structures and systems. Additionally, the synergy created by discussions during in-person meetings prompted participants to think about their own experiences and how they felt when they heard someone share a similar traumatic experience. Family, staff and students all mentioned a need for more inclusive curricula. Staff, community and family members see an opportunity to dismantle institutional racism and create a **reflective workforce** through improved **HR policies** and mitigation of **predominant culture**. Students and families see the persisting **segregation** across schools as an area for improvement. Relatedly, they would like to see more **equitable access** to programs and funding.

Although families and students mentioned learning as something going well in DPS, both groups bring up specific areas of **academic success** as areas of improvement. Families and students both ask for improved **course offerings** and **instruction**. In addition, families and students asked for improvement in support of **students with disabilities**.

A fourth general area that surfaced among adults was the need for better **communications**. Families often wanted improved communication with their students' schools and teachers, and staff expressed a desire for better central communication and communication between departments.

From the family and student surveys, it is important to note that one of the most frequent responses to the question about need for improvements was “**nothing/everything is fine/generally content.**” This may be interpreted as evidence that a substantial proportion of families and students responding to the survey are generally satisfied with their current experience in DPS.

SUMMARY

What advice do you have for Dr. Marrero?

The most prevalent response to this question was to continue engaging with students, community and family members and teachers. Dr. Marrero was encouraged to visit schools frequently and actively engage those with opposing viewpoints. Two notable sub-topics were understanding the experiences of teachers of color and understanding all viewpoints on school closure.

All audiences encouraged Dr. Marrero to focus on equity, though the equity emphasis varied by group. Students drew the connection between an equity focus and personal well-being. Families and community members urged Dr. Marrero to challenge White privilege, embrace Culturally Responsive Teaching and fight hate against Asians. Staff were more likely to raise policy and enrollment equity issues created by boundaries, school choice and transportation.

All audiences encouraged Dr. Marrero to keep students centered in his focus and not be distracted by political divisiveness. Specifically, they encouraged him to spend lots of time in schools and put himself in students' shoes as often as possible.

Other notable themes, not raised by all audiences were:

Personnel and structural issues: Family and Community members mentioned problems with the current leadership at all levels of the DPS system. Most of the responses included an individual's experience with a DPS team member, organization, department, or school. Responses mentioned the need to support teachers and address staffing shortages.

Family members and staff advised Dr. Marrero to focus on his personal **communication**.

Students recommend that he work to be a good **role model**.

LISTEN AND LEARNING TOUR

Day 101 and Beyond

After 100 days of listening, Dr. Marrero had collected mountains of data describing needs and opportunities for his superintendency. But he'd also developed an emotional connection with stakeholders who were willing to share their stories and their hopes. This report would be incomplete without his personal reflection on the Listening and Learning Tour.

In his own words

It was an amazing gift to hear from so many voices across Denver, and not just those who know how to navigate the system and get an appointment with me. Those are the voices that are always going to be heard, no matter what. With the Listening and Learning tour, I got to hear in depth from groups who aren't often the loudest voices, like people experiencing homelessness and members of the LGBTQIA+ communities. There are still so many more I'd like to hear from, and I will by no means stop engaging just because the first 100 days are over.

I had some very profound moments during the tour. The things that have stuck most closely with me are things I never expected to hear, like painful stories of Native American students being tokenized- even incited to cut their hair! I heard about LGBTQIA+ educators leaving the district so they can have spousal benefits. These cases made me think "Where is the equity, the tolerance, the acceptance?"

There were things I expected to hear, before I arrived in Denver. I thought I'd hear a lot about charter schools and school choice. I thought I'd hear about school safety. But these things came up in my conversations much less than I expected. The difference between what gets covered in the media and what people actually care about was frankly, quite startling.

LISTEN AND LEARNING TOUR

Day 101 and Beyond

General Response Patterns

In meetings, less time was spent discussing what is working well and more time was spent discussing what can be improved. There's likely a participation bias in which community members who are satisfied or somewhat satisfied with DPS were less motivated to attend the sessions. Survey responses were a little more balanced, with 5-10% more responses to the improvement question from families and staff, and 10% more responses to the "what's going well" question from students.

In that same vein, most in-person responses to the last question on what advice participants have for him were a general request for him to solve the issues identified in the sessions rather than actual advice. Surveys tended to offer more disconnected advice, like general words of encouragement.

Other Notable Takeaways

Many topics that have dominated the political landscape in recent years were conspicuously absent or not rising to the top during this engagement. Some of these:

- Accountability systems at the school or educator level
- School choice
- Autonomous schools and portfolio strategies

Some unexpected topics that came up during the tour included:

- How we fund our schools
- School consolidation and/or closure
- Divisions between school governance types

Transition Team

Now that the Listening and Learning Tour is complete, Superintendent Marrero will begin to collaborate directly with community members and staff to plan for the future of DPS. The second phase of the transition begins with the Superintendent's Transition Advisory Team, which is a diverse group of community members and DPS staff who are charged with creating recommendations that guide the development of our next multi-year strategic plan.

The recommendations from the Transition Team will build the foundation for the next phase of work, the **Superintendent's New Strategic Plan Advisory Team**, which will directly support the development of a new multi-year strategic plan.

Continued Engagement

Dr. Marrero will continue to engage deeply and frequently with the community. He already has many school visits and community meetings on his calendar.