

Katie Rockman, Tatiana Oberkoetter, Arianna Williams, and Maria Connor
Isaacson, Miller

RE: DESE Commissioner Search

January 27, 2025

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I have dedicated my career to fostering equity and accelerating academic excellence as the leader of complex school districts in three states, serving students in urban, suburban, and rural communities alike. Partnering hand-in-hand with families, board members, community partners, and elected leaders has allowed me to lead rapid and sustainable change at a systems level. Now, following two decades in education leadership, I am excited to express my interest in joining the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as your Commissioner.

My experience as a Superintendent spans 12 years, achieving transformational gains for students in Washoe County School District (WCSD), the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). I also served as the Superintendent in Residence for the Nevada Department of Education, supporting district leaders across the state. In my current role as Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), I lead one of the nation's largest and most diverse districts, with over 325,000 students and a \$9.9 billion dollar annual budget. At CPS, I have developed and implemented strategic initiatives that resulted in record academic gains including increasing the district's graduation rates to record highs for three consecutive years (2022-2024), narrowing opportunity gaps, and reducing the need for academic remediation by 25% with more than 50% of our students earning college credits and career credentials. Our graduates in 2024 secured over \$2.1 billion in scholarships. This has resulted in CPS leading the country with 70% of students attending colleges and universities and 73% persisting towards a degree. My initiatives, including the nationally recognized "Tutor Corps" program and the district-wide Skyline curriculum, have advanced literacy and numeracy recovery post-pandemic and dramatically improved outcomes for Black and Latinx students. Knowing the DESE Commissioner will focus on strengthening Literacy outcomes for students across Massachusetts, I will leverage my experience leveraging culturally responsive, research-backed strategy to prepare all districts to see gains.

Massachusetts leads the nation in K-12 education, influencing policy and practice nationwide. I come to you having had significant experience working with bi-partisan leaders and engaging stakeholders at the local and state-level. Previously, as Superintendent of San Antonio Independent School District, I transformed the district's academic standing from an "F" to a "B" and achieved statewide recognition as the fastest-improving large district in Texas. I also led innovative initiatives such as expanding dual-language programs to 61 schools and redesigning underutilized schools into successful magnet and specialty models, aligning with DESE's vision of fostering innovative and equitable educational opportunities. To effectively align resources to SAISD schools to address the density of poverty in neighborhoods, we developed a sophisticated system to examine poverty beyond which our students qualified for free or reduced lunch, using detailed census data to look at factors such as income, home ownership, and household education level. This system was recognized and adopted by the State with significant increases in funding for children living in dense poverty, students with English as a second language, and students with special needs. We closed the gap with more affluent peers

and the overall State in the percentage of students graduating college and career ready and attending colleges and universities. As Commissioner of the DESE, I would employ this same systematic and comprehensive approach to analyze gaps between districts in Massachusetts and ensure resources are allocated equitably and effectively.

I have carefully reviewed the leadership profile for the DESE Commissioner and spoken with several key stakeholders. My leadership approach matches the Board's goals to strengthen impact, accessibility, and quality in Massachusetts public schools. In the DESE, I see a Department with a powerful strategic plan, strong resources, and a deep commitment to boosting academic achievement and closing persistent inequities that impact Black and brown students, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, LGBTQ+ students, and others. I also understand that both the Board and broader community seek a leader who is a collaborative agent for change, with a vision for universal student success and a strategy to drive it forward. My most recent work in Chicago and San Antonio is a testament to my ability to build coalitions, strategically leverage resources, and create transformational change for students across all sub-populations. I would leverage my experience and knowledge of data-driven strategies and accountability measures to ensure high quality educational opportunities for students across Massachusetts.

I am committed to dismantling systemic inequities, as evidenced by my collaborations with community stakeholders and policymakers to secure increased state funding, enhance teacher pipelines, and create pathways for underserved students into high-wage careers. The DESE's commitment to elevating educational opportunities for all students, regardless of background, resonates with me on a professional and personal level. I was a first-generation student who grew up in poverty, the oldest of 12 siblings. Where others saw deficits, my teachers saw potential, thus changing my trajectory. As Commissioner, I will bring strategic leadership, a collaborative approach, and an unwavering dedication to equity and excellence to ensure every student can succeed.

The Commissioner role at DESE represents an extraordinary opportunity to drive transformational change and continue advancing Massachusetts' national leadership in K-12 education. I am confident that my ability to implement data-driven strategies, build collaborative relationships, and maintain a student-first perspective will position the Commonwealth for continued success in preparing every student for a bright future. Having recent, first-hand experience as Superintendent navigating the realities of post-pandemic schooling will also allow me to quickly build credibility with Massachusetts district leaders and educators. I am energized by the prospect of playing such an instrumental role in educating over one million students.

Thank you for considering my application. I welcome the opportunity to discuss how my leadership and experiences can contribute to the mission and vision of DESE.

Sincerely,

Pedro Martinez