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Dr. Rubén D. Olivárez **Professor and Executive Director** **Cooperative Superintendency Program** **The University of Texas at Austin**

By Robert H. Leos

According to *Dr. Rubén Olivárez*, school superintendents today must address a multitude of complex issues that can be daunting. We recognize that superintendents are responsible for defining and delivering the curriculum used throughout the district. What many of us may not recognize, however, are the numerous other diverse systems that demand the time and expertise of the school district's leader. In some of the larger school districts, *Dr. Olivárez* explains that the challenges of planning for and operating and maintaining large transportation systems, food services, facility maintenance and new construction, safety and



Dr. Rubén D. Olivárez

security systems for thousands of students and staff, and financial systems to manage budgets that can exceed annual expenditures of over a billion dollars, equal or surpass those of CEOs in the corporate world. Add to that other systems for which school superintendents are responsible, including developing and managing systems to recruit, compensate, evaluate, and retain a large and diverse workforce, accountability systems used by the state and federal government to evaluate the district, understanding and influencing legislation that affects the district, maintaining effective governance relations with the school board and with public interests and advocacy groups that can sometimes be at odds with each other, we can see how the magnitude of the contemporary school superintendent responsibility becomes more complex. A strong foundation in curriculum, instruction, and management can

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go a long way toward meeting the instructional leadership requirements of a superintendent, but how can school leaders really prepare for the long list of other responsibilities that fall in the business management domain?

Dr. Olivárez is uniquely qualified to answer that question. As Executive Director of the Cooperative Superintendency Program at The University of Texas at Austin, he brings a wealth of knowledge to this nationally recognized program designed to prepare school superintendents for today's urban school districts. His expertise is derived from first-hand, in-depth experience at the classroom and campus level as teacher, principal and central office administrator, at the state level as Executive Deputy Commissioner with the Texas Education Agency, where he played a major role in developing the state's accountability system, as Associate Superintendent with the Dallas Independent School District, and as Superintendent of the San Antonio Independent School District.

Also a professor in the Department of Educational Administration, Dr. Olivárez is the holder of the L.D. Haskew Centennial endowed professorial chair. He was appointed Executive Director of the Cooperative Superintendency Program in August 2006 following his successful six-year tenure as superintendent in San Antonio. He spoke with me in his office on the campus of The University of Texas at Austin about the skills and knowledge today's school executives need to meet the complex challenges of leading an urban school district. *rhl.*

ROBERT LEOS: *Although you were appointed Executive Director of the Cooperative Superintendency Program in 2006, doesn't your association with the program go back a number of years?*

DR. OLIVÁREZ: The program was founded as a cooperative partnership with the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Association of School Boards, and the Texas Association of School Administrators. During my tenure at the Texas Education Agency, a majority of the superintendency doctoral fellows were appointed to a two-year internship under my supervision. This experience provided them opportunities to work with varied school districts across the state. Every biennium, we would allocate funds to support the fellows in their school improvement services assignments at the state agency. During that period I had an adjunct teaching appointment in the department of educational administration and served on the fellows' dissertation committees. Therefore, when I joined the faculty last summer I had familiarity with the program and a built-in commitment to

maintain its quality standards and continue to plan for its future enhancement.

ROBERT LEOS: *What are your plans to improve the program?*

DR. OLIVÁREZ: The program is already a very accomplished program that has had enormous success. The work that had been done by Dr. Nolan Estes, the real world experience and academic preparation have been excellent. The success of the program can be measured from the standpoint of the graduates. We have program graduates all over the country providing educational leadership as principals, assistant superintendents, associate and deputy superintendents and superintendents.

Over the years a strong and rigorous component of courses in research, public school law, organizational theory, policy and economics and finance planning have served as the foundation core for all of our doctoral students in the various programs within the department. Courses in advanced administrative theory, instructional leadership, and school restructuring and

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renewal are being evaluated to ensure the necessary connections to the contemporary nature and demands of the public school superintendency, especially that of the urban centers in our country. In terms of improving the program, there are several initiatives that have to do with the clinical experiences and the quality and amount of exposure our doctoral students have with the realities of school systems. Six years ago, the partnership with the Texas Education Agency was discontinued and with the support of my colleagues on the faculty, and the leadership of our Department Chair and College Dean, Dr. Manny Justiz, we have re-defined the partnership and field internship aspects of the program. Beginning this spring, our second year students will be matched up with one of eight large school district superintendents in the state who will mentor our students in critical leadership and management areas such as governance and business management operations of school systems. These successful superintendents, most of whom are graduates of our program, will be appointed as adjunct faculty and will facilitate our fellows' experiences with board meetings, executive team strategic planning, budget planning and development and other essential and complex operations of urban and large school systems. We also have a significant complement of new faculty in our department and we are in the process of conducting a curriculum audit in our Public School Educational Leadership Program to maximize matching the strengths of the faculty with the needs of the students and the various programs. As part of this effort, we are also working on a long-range initiative to develop a series of sequential coursework that will complement the new cooperative setting with focus on the business and information management operations of larger and more complex operations. We recently received a grant for the creation of an educational research center that will coordinate educational research initiatives targeting instructional

and management effectiveness issues which are at the core of legislative policy in both public schools and higher education. This research center is being coordinated from our superintendency program in collaboration with other colleges of education at sister institutions, including The University of Texas at San Antonio, The University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, and Texas State University. This initiative will further expose our doctoral students to the current key issues in the state's educational arena and will provide a real-world base for doctoral dissertation studies. Our goal is to continue to provide effective educational leadership for the country. We are preparing *superintendents*. This is the distinguishing feature of the program.

ROBERT LEOS: *Are most students in the program already school administrators who are seeking their doctorates?*

DR. OLIVÁREZ: We have been recruiting from assistant principals to practicing superintendents. We select individuals with a broad range of past experiences and administrative responsibilities. This is an area of the program that is being revisited. The ideal would be to bring in individuals who have experienced the principalship and have enough experience on campus to understand some of the basic dynamics and operations of the central office and the total school district. Our principal leadership program in our department is also being reviewed to explore and establish stronger connections with our doctoral superintendent program. We are also interested in expanding the recruitment to non-traditional candidates. We currently have students who were not prepared as educators, but who have demonstrated successful leadership performance in business management and other related and complementary professions.

We have students from different parts of the state that travel to our campus for

their coursework. Because some of our students are already in school district principal assignments and other executive level positions, we have been experimenting with offering some select courses that lend themselves to satellite video-conferencing in order to lessen the burden of the logistics.

ROBERT LEOS: *In addition to having a firm grasp of transportation systems, food services, facilities planning, human resources, finance, curriculum and instruction and all the other responsibilities you described for the introduction to this profile, are there other skills that you believe are absolutely essential to the success of a superintendent?*

DR. OLIVÁREZ: Communication, the ability to create and articulate a vision for an educational institution, and to bring a diverse group of people along and commit to an educational plan is probably one of the most critical and essential skills that effective superintendents must possess. Developing trust, effectively managing the dynamics associated with governance and school boards and all the other public and private local stakeholder entities are immensely important and represent critical skill sets embodied in the responsibilities of superintendents.

Our school districts have become highly complex operations as cities and student populations grow and become more diverse. Superintendents must understand their student and community populations and demonstrate ongoing genuine commitment and passion. They must be able to effectively communicate the totality of the responsibility that a school district has in carrying out its mission, and their individual responsibility in leading the change and ongoing improvement process.

For More Information on the Cooperative Superintendency Program at The University of Texas at Austin, Visit:

<http://edadmin.edb.utexas.edu/prospective/pselp/csp/overview.php>



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