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Next to Lead New York's Schools: An Educator With a Song on His Lips

By **KATE TAYLOR**
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Richard A. Carranza at City Hall on Monday, where he was announced as Mayor Bill de Blasio's pick for schools chancellor. Credit Kevin Hagen for The New York Times

It was not a conventional job interview. At one of his first meetings with Mayor Bill de Blasio and his wife, Chirlane McCray, to discuss the job of New York City schools chancellor, Richard A. Carranza serenaded them with a mariachi song: "Maria Elena."

"If I'm asked to sing, chances are I'm going to sing," Mr. Carranza, 51, said on Monday, at a news conference at City Hall in which Mr. de Blasio announced that [Mr. Carranza](#)

would be the next chancellor. “If I’m asked to play, chances are I’m going to play. And if I’m not asked to sing or play, chances are, I’m going to sing and play.”

It was a telling glimpse of Mr. Carranza, a respected educator who has remained deeply connected to his upbringing in a Spanish-speaking household in Arizona, even as he has risen to lead two major urban school districts and has attracted a wide array of admirers.

“He’s very charismatic, very social, and there’s never a room where he won’t talk to everybody, shake everybody’s hands, want to hear everybody’s issues,” said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation’s largest urban school districts.

While Mr. Carranza may seem to project less political star power than the mayor’s initial pick, the Miami superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho, he has some prominent fans, including Marc Benioff, the billionaire chief executive of Salesforce, who pledged \$27 million to the San Francisco Unified School District after Mr. Carranza became superintendent there in 2012.

“New York is very lucky to get somebody of his caliber,” Mr. Benioff said in an interview on Monday. “This is probably our nation’s finest school leader.”

Mr. Carranza has described himself as coming from a working-class background: His father was a sheet metal worker and his mother a hairdresser. His grandparents immigrated from Mexico. He didn’t learn English until he started elementary school. Music played a major role in his life from early on.

At Monday’s news conference, Mr. Carranza said he had been a mariachi musician since he was about 6 years old. When he wanted to stay up late with his father and his uncles, they said the only people staying up late were people playing instruments — so he learned to play the guitar. He later worked his way through college at the University of Arizona “gigging,” as he put it on Monday.

Afterward, when he became a social studies teacher at his former high school in Tucson, students knew that he played music and asked him to start a mariachi class. He did, and it eventually grew into a program serving 250 students and an award-winning student group, Mariachi Aztlán de Pueblo High School.

Later, Mr. Carranza, who eventually became principal of the school, attributed the school’s improved reputation and performance to the transformative power of music in the students’ lives.

“That’s what mariachi music does — it keeps our kids connected to who they are,” he said in 2016, when he was inducted into the Mariachi Hall of Fame.

At the same ceremony, Mr. Carranza described himself as “really a mariachi masquerading as a superintendent.” (He also met his wife, Monique Garcia Carranza,

through music — she works with her sister, Susie Garcia, who has an all-woman mariachi band in Los Angeles, Las Colibri.)

Mr. Carranza left Tucson in 2004 for the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, where he began his ascent into administration. In 2009, his former mentor in Clark County, Carlos Garcia, by then the superintendent in San Francisco, hired Mr. Carranza as his deputy superintendent of instruction, innovation and social justice. When Mr. Garcia retired in 2012, the district skipped a national search, instead elevating Mr. Carranza as superintendent.

Hydra Mendoza, the president of the Board of Education of the San Francisco Unified School District and deputy chief of staff to the mayor, said that in San Francisco, Mr. Carranza presided over a period of consensus among the school board and improving academic performance. Among his focuses, she said, were reducing the district's suspension rate and pairing schools with outside organizations that would provide social services to students and families — both things that have been part of Mr. de Blasio's agenda

“He's very strong and ambitious and courageous,” Ms. Mendoza said. “He was willing to put some things out there that others were not.”

He also attracted the multimillion-dollar pledge from Mr. Benioff and Salesforce's nonprofit arm. Part of the gift went to create something called the Principal's Innovation Fund, which awards annual grants of \$100,000 to the principal at each of the district's 21 middle and K-8 schools, which they can use for whatever they think is most important.

“Richard was able to stand back and say, ‘No, I'm not going to control that money — I'm going to let you, the principal, make that decision,’” Mr. Benioff said, adding that it is more typical to see district administrators “trying to take control of every last dollar.”

In 2016, Mr. Carranza was courted by the board of the Los Angeles Unified School District, before withdrawing from that search. The same year he was hired by the board of trustees of the Houston Independent School District to run its schools, which serve some 215,000 students, the vast majority of whom are Hispanic or black. In Houston, he faced major challenges, including a board that was often divided, persistent racial and economic achievement gaps, and a funding system in which the district, which has high property values but overwhelmingly serves low-income students, has to send money back to the state to redistribute to other districts.

Not even a year into his tenure, he faced a crisis when Hurricane Harvey struck the city, causing major damage to the schools. But Mr. Carranza was credited with skillfully steering the district through the crisis.

Among other things, he obtained a \$1 million donation from Mr. Benioff that went to provide meals, clothing and other supplies to students and their families. Mr. Benioff said he had “had many choices of where to put that million dollars,” and he knew that if he gave it to Mr. Carranza, “he would make a huge difference with it.”

Mr. Carranza has tried to create greater equity in the funding of the district's schools, but parts of the school board have not been eager to go along, said Jolanda Jones, the first vice president of the district's board of education.

"It takes tremendous courage to push back against people with money," Ms. Jones said. "It takes tremendous courage to push back against people with connections."

She said she was very sad that Mr. Carranza was leaving.

"I'm, like, in tears," she said.