Guilford Superintendent Sharon Contreras departing for new role: ‘I’m a better human being from being an educator’

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For Guilford County Schools Superintendent Sharon Contreras, education isn’t a job. It is the activating spirit of her life.

As a woman of color and a person with a disability (she is functionally deaf with only 1% hearing), her passion is stirred by kids who others overlook. As Contreras prepares to leave Guilford to become the leader of The Innovation Project, she is reflecting back on her time in a traditional education system.

“This has been the joy of my life,” she said. “You know, for some people it’s not easy, but for me, it’s like breathing.”

‘Showing up in very personal ways’

Both before she came to North Carolina and during her tenure in Guilford County, Contreras has regularly visited incarcerated youth, encouraging and helping them continue to learn and work towards graduation.

“It’s the constant reminder of how adults have failed young people,” she said. “And we fail them in many ways. And I can’t own all of this, but I can certainly own the educational piece.”

She apologizes to the incarcerated students.

“I mean, they’re just students who are the most vulnerable in society, and they don’t have money for attorneys and that’s the reason many of them are incarcerated, not so much because their crime was so heinous,” she said.

Since she’s been with Guilford County Schools, the district has graduated 11 incarcerated youth.
Winston McGregor, president of the Guilford Education Alliance and vice chair of the Guilford County Board of Education, said Contreras buys books for incarcerated youth, and talks to them about what they’ve read. When they graduate high school, Contreras dresses in full regalia, hires a small orchestra, and brings in a commencement speaker.

And McGregor said she does things like this largely out of the public eye — like when Contreras called McGregor around Christmas, saying she had bags full of food for needy families and asked McGregor to help deliver them. She also visited students who survived a car wreck where others were killed. She stayed on the bank of a pond with a mother as her deceased child was pulled out of the water.

“Not only was she leading a district, but she was showing up in very personal ways for families and kids, because that’s her passion,” McGregor said.

A path to education

Contreras said she tells people she started teaching 50 years ago, and when they ask what that means, she tells them that she used to teach her dolls. She would line them up and they’d have class. And she says she would drag a table outside in her neighborhood on Saturday mornings, knock on doors, and wake up her neighbors to play school.

She said she feels “blessed” to have spent 30 years in pre-K-12 settings and to have been able to work with families and children.

“I think too often as educators, we think we’re doing something for them. And we don’t think about how children and families contribute to our lives and make us better people,” she said. “But I’m a better human being from being an educator, and from working with children, and they never failed to make me smile and to bring me joy.”

Reflecting on the good and the bad

When she first came to take over Guilford County Schools in 2016, Contreras said she was aware that even though school districts are often very similar, each one also feels unique. So, she said she spent almost a year just listening and learning.
With a transition team of 100 people — most of them from inside the district but about 20% were national experts in specific fields — they took a “deep dive” into Guilford County Schools to learn what needed to be done. Contreras didn’t really start taking action until her second year.

She said she faced some criticism for not hitting the ground running, but she has no regrets.

“I took a lot of time to learn about the culture of the school district and some of the specific strengths and challenges in Guilford County,” she said. “And that really helped because I got to know a lot of the power brokers, a lot of the folks that quietly wielded influence and have helped through some very difficult times in the district. So it was a strategy that really paid off.”

When she thinks back over her time in Guilford County, a few specific accomplishments stick out in her mind, including building support for teachers.

“When I got here, there was not a single dollar allocated in the general fund for teacher development,” she said.

But that’s all changed. There are millions of dollars for teacher and leader support and development, she said. There are three assistant principal development programs, teachers can get coaching in literacy and math, and the district provides all of its employees professional development on sexual assault and abuse.

She said that when she came on board in Guilford, the district hadn’t adopted textbooks in 10 years, something which she moved to change. Now, teachers have textbooks, and the district provides digital devices to students along with their instructional materials.

Contreras also worked to improve the district’s facilities. She said she helped form a joint facilities committee between the Board of County Commissioners and Board of Education, which led to the passage of a $300 million bond to build new school buildings. Another $1.7 billion bond is going before voters in May.
McGregor said that Contreras isn’t one to make excuses. In a conversation about reading curriculum, McGregor remembered Contreras rattling off the number of the district’s third graders who weren’t reading on grade level and saying there wasn’t any time to waste and that adults need to inconvenience themselves in order to get the right outcomes for kids.

“There was a sense of ‘I’m sorry this was hard on the grown ups. It won’t be as hard on anybody as me,’” McGregor recalled Contreras saying.

There are some things Contreras said she won’t remember fondly. One of them, she noted, is what the public thinks a superintendent does and doesn’t do.

“The superintendent is put out front a lot to speak and to explain the board’s vision and to explain the budget, and when something’s going wrong to explain what the crisis is,” she said. “But the board doesn’t speak. The board leadership doesn’t speak. The communications team doesn’t necessarily speak. So the public who doesn’t understand governance believes that the superintendent has outsized power, and so when they’re disappointed, they’re disappointed in the individual, not knowing that the superintendent is not even making these decisions.”

Even things like teacher salaries end up getting blamed on the superintendent, Contreras said, despite the fact that it’s lawmakers at the General Assembly who set the state’s base salary for teachers.

McGregor said that Contreras has always been willing to take the criticism for what’s happening in the district, but Contreras said in retrospect that might not always be the best move.

“I think that the lesson learned is to sometimes sit back,” she said. “Don’t take this all on for everybody else, and make those who are responsible for the decisions get up and explain their decisions.”
Work outside of Guilford

While Contreras will be remembered for her role in North Carolina, she has also worked with national groups like Chiefs for Change and Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS).

Ray Hart, executive director of CGCS, of which Guilford County Schools is a member, said Guilford County is losing a great leader. CGCS is a national organization made up of the largest urban school districts in the country. Contreras has served on its executive committee.

Hart said that Contreras lives by the same principles she applies to her work. Several years ago, Hart said that Contreras shared with CGCS that a number of major banking institutions had invested in private prisons. She encouraged Hart and his team to look into whether where CGCS banked did this as well.

Hart said that resulted in a meeting with their bank that revealed two things: The bank did invest in private prisons, but it was now going to divest.

While Hart said the divestment might not have been specifically because of the inquiry from the CGCSs, the timing was interesting.

“I can tell you that they were particularly keen that a national organization that represented all the largest school districts in the country had inquired about their investments and where they were putting their funds,” he said.

Julia Rafal-Baer, former chief operating officer for Chiefs for Change, an advocacy group of state and district leaders that Contreras is part of, has known Contreras since her time in New York, where Contreras was head of the Syracuse City School District and Rafal-Baer was an assistant commissioner at the New York State Education Department.

Rafal-Baer said that only 11% of district superintendents in the United States are women of color and that this percentage hasn’t changed much in a decade. Because of that, leaders like Contreras are even more important.
“Sharon has been a huge contributor not only to the sponsorship and mentoring of leaders within the work that we do, but also helping to serve as an important role model for next generation leaders,” Rafal-Baer said. “The work that Sharon has done in the 12 or so years that I have known her, it’s just some of the most trailblazing work in the country.”

Rafal-Baer said she works with leaders around the nation and Contreras is one of a kind. She said that Contreras has helped break down barriers and has been an important example not just for people of color, but also for people with disabilities.

“I think one of the things she’s done a good job at is being able to lead as that role model for so many people who don’t get to see leaders every day who look like them and don’t understand the trajectories that they’re on,” Rafal-Baer said. “There just aren’t enough leaders like her in the country.”

Moving on

In August, Contreras will become CEO of The Innovation Project, a nonprofit collaborative of North Carolina public school district superintendents.

Contreras got to know the group as a member and said she found it useful working with other superintendents on common issues. She said that the group believes, as she does, in innovation and racial equity, and that it tries to help create positive life outcomes for students, not just improved test scores. Between her experience and her national contacts, she said she thinks she can contribute to the organization as its leader.

“I feel like I have some resources to bring to bear that I can offer to my colleagues to help with some of the situations that we’re facing in our school districts,” she said.

Contreras said she is a big believer in knowing the basis for anything that is being done in education and her staff has gotten used to her asking for the policy, statute, or rules behind any educational action.

Often, she said, schools are doing things because they think they have to, but when they look, there is sometimes no basis for what they’re doing.
“There are … things that we are just doing to ourselves,” she said. “We’re in a cage and we have to bust out of that cage.”

The Innovation Project tries to help schools “bust out of that cage” in its own way. It was instrumental in the growth of restart schools in North Carolina — continually low-performing schools that are granted charter-like flexibility. They stem from a reform model written into state statute years ago and then forgotten.

It was revived, essentially, because one superintendent remembered it and thought it might be a good way to help low-performing schools. Superintendents working with The Innovation Project were the first to get approval from the State Board of Education to use restart flexibility.

“We are excited that Dr. Contreras will be lending her experience and expertise to The Innovation Project,” said Kim Morrison, chair of The Innovation Project’s board of directors and superintendent of Mt. Airy City Schools, in a press release. “She is a well-known leader throughout the country and has led efforts in innovation and equity in her amazing career. The Innovation Project is a national leader in innovation, and Dr. Contreras will continue to champion work for children through this great superintendent-led organization.”

Contreras will finish out the school year in Guilford County. While she has been in Guilford, academic achievement has increased for all demographic groups, and the achievement gap has narrowed, according to a press release from The Innovation Project.

But when reflecting on her time in traditional education roles, Contreras talked as much about what she gained from her students as what she did for them. And when she thinks about them, she said the future is bright.

“When I look in the classroom and look at those young people — how smart they are, how gifted, how talented, how full of hope they are, how full of joy they are — I know that there is hope for the future, even when it seems that we’re in a difficult place in this country,” she said. “Just look to our young people.”