



Leading a City School District Is Tough. A New Program Aims to Ease the Way

By [Evie Blad](#) — January 25, 2023

Turnover at the top of urban school districts threatens the consistency needed to ensure that struggling schools improve and that students get the best education possible, said Michael Hinojosa, superintendent in-residence at the Council of the Great City Schools. But the challenges unique to the big city superintendent job aren't always apparent until they sit in the hot seat.

Now Hinojosa, the former superintendent of the Dallas school district, will lead a new program to ensure that promising leaders are equipped to lead large school systems.

The CGCS' Michael Casserly Urban Executive Leadership Institute for Aspiring Superintendents—named after the organization's former executive director—will work with an ethnically diverse inaugural cohort of 10 senior level administrators in urban districts.

"We are trying to build their capacity so they have a fighting chance when they get these jobs," Hinojosa said.

The cohort, recommended by leaders around the country, will meet periodically in cities around the country from February to October to learn about various elements of the role. The program, the first superintendent training effort at CGCS, will select new cohorts annually.

Tensions with labor unions, media relations, and the stresses of being a public figure are sometimes new to district leaders who came from suburban districts or lower-profile central office jobs, Hinojosa said.

"We want them to be successful," he said, "and we want them to have staying power."

Superintendent turnover is a big concern for big city districts

Churn at the top has long been a concern for large districts.

Of the CGCS' 77 member superintendents, only 20 have stayed in their current jobs since 2020. The remaining districts have had turnover in the executive seat during that time.

Between Sept. 1, 2018 and Aug. 31, 2020, 28 percent of the country's largest 500 school districts changed superintendents, found a December analysis by ILO Group, an education strategy firm that promotes women in leadership. That turnover accelerated over the next two years, with 38 percent of the 500 biggest districts changing leaders between Sept. 1, 2020, and Sept. 1, 2022.

New superintendents bring new teams and new strategies, but they also need for time to adjust to the role. Such changes can make it difficult for districts to make big decisions and to carry out consistent plans about urgent issues like enrollment declines, school closures, budget priorities, and academic turnaround efforts.

Hinojosa wants the members of the first leadership cohort to one day have long tenures at districts, like that of Cleveland Metropolitan Schools CEO Eric Gordon, who will leave his role at the end of the year after holding the position since 2011.

Among other programming, the cohort will travel to Sacramento to learn about how to foster good relationships with a school board, which fellow district leaders have identified as a strength of Superintendent Jorge Aguilar's. And in a trip to Washington, discussions will focus on how to navigate complicated state and local politics and interact with the media.

"Successful superintendents don't hide from the media and they admit their mistakes," Hinojosa said, adding that good leaders shouldn't dodge calls from reporters.

The group will also hold sessions on working with teachers' and administrators' unions, implementing and monitoring academic programs, finance, and operations.

In April, members will shadow a superintendent with a different leadership style than their current boss.

Members did not apply to the program; they were selected. Some were referred by their current superintendents, who see them as potential successors, Hinojosa said.

Members of the inaugural cohort are:

- Harold Border, the chief strategy officer of the Orange County, Fla., district
- Arcelius Brickhouse, chief of schools at East Baton Rouge Parish Schools in Louisiana
- Jermaine Dawson, the chief academic and accountability officer at the Birmingham, Ala., district
- Ebony Johnson the chief learning officer for the Tulsa, Okla. district
- Brenda Larsen-Mitchell, the deputy superintendent for the Clark County, Nev., district
- Robert Moore, the chief of schools for the Jefferson County, Ky., district
- Michael Ramirez, the chief of staff for the Lee County, Fla., district
- Scott Schneider, chief of schools for the Duval County, Fla. district
- Matias Segura, interim superintendent of the Austin Independent School District in Texas
- David Zaid, assistant superintendent of Human Resource Services of the Long Beach, Calif. district