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What can San Antonio ISD learn from other urban districts as it searches for a new leader?

Superintendent Jaime Aquino announced his retirement last week. He has led San Antonio ISD for more than four years.

By Noah Alcala Bach
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AUSTIN — Just last month, Superintendent Jaime Aquino touted his tenure in San Antonio Independent School District.

“I have four-and-a-half-years, I’m one of the most senior superintendents,” Aquino said, comparing himself to other urban school district leaders, during a February Express-News editorial meeting.

He announced his retirement exactly two weeks later.

Aquino was right that his time in SAISD is notably long — turnover among urban school district superintendents increased after the pandemic.

A study from the D.C.-based coalition of large urban school systems, the Council of the Great City Schools, found that the average urban school superintendent served for just under three years after the pandemic. Prior to 2020, the average was nearly five years on the job.

The urban schools organization hosted a panel on Monday at the South by Southwest EDU conference in Austin focused on how urban superintendents can lead and grow in their roles.

The panel offered possible avenues for Aquino’s successor if they hope to lead the district for as long as, or longer than, he did. Aquino plans to retire in January 2027.

The panel featured superintendents Aleesia Johnson of Indianapolis Public Schools, Roger León of Newark Public Schools and Gabriella Durán Blakey of Albuquerque Public Schools. All three lead districts serving more than 19,000 students. Johnson and León have each been in their roles for more than seven years; Blakey was hired in 2024.

“All three of these superintendents are here on stage because they’re absolutely blowing it away in terms of the achievements that they’re getting for their students and their districts,” said Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

León’s focus on maintaining strong community relationships opened the door for quick, unapologetic decision-making. It helped him remain in the top job in New Jersey’s largest city for the past several years.

“The whole idea is that, as the superintendent, we are the ones who make those final decisions, and so it’s also our responsibility to pump our own brakes and kind of take the opportunity to let everyone know that the decisions that we’re making — while albeit extremely fast — are super crucial,” León said.

During León’s tenure, the district bucked national trends, opening 11 new schools thanks to an increase in enrollment. Both trends came after the state gave control of Newark Public Schools back to local leaders after 22 years. The state initially took over the district because of corruption and poor academic performance.

Despite growth early in León’s term, the number of Newark students decreased last school year, according to Chalkbeat. Indianapolis, which serves around 19,700 students and Albuquerque which serves 63,500 students, have also seen enrollment declines.

In Indiana’s largest school district, officials have celebrated students earning more college credits while in high school under the direction of Johnson, who is the first Black superintendent in the district’s more than century-long history. She credits a good relationship with the district’s elected officials for her longer-than-average tenure.

“As a superintendent, your board matters, whether it’s an elected board or appointed board. Board politics are real,” Johnson said. “Those are oftentimes elected officials; they have particular priorities as well, and so you have to keep a pulse on just the dynamics of your school board.”

In her time at the district, Johnson has worked with four different iterations of a school board. Part of the job is “to always be nurturing those relationships with board members,” she said.

In Blakey’s two years in Albuquerque Public Schools, she has overseen academic gains, including a significant improvement in reading comprehension among elementary school students, rising graduation rates and decreases in chronic absenteeism.

“It always felt like we were just trying to defend ourselves time after time. Our staff always has to defend themselves to the parents and the community,” Blakey said. “So what if we

run offense by having our clear goals and measuring them and making sure that we celebrate them… publicly."

The Albuquerque board extended Blakey's contract through 2028 last year.

In San Antonio, Aquino's retirement announcement tees up a superintendent search for the next leader of the city's oldest school district, which serves around 42,000 students — a number that has declined over the past two decades.

The search for Aquino's replacement will be the district's second superintendent search since the pandemic. Aquino, who previously held high-ranking jobs at New York and Los Angeles' public districts, was selected for the role in 2022 after his predecessor, Pedro Martinez, was tapped to lead Chicago Public Schools.

The challenges SAISD faces are similar to those in other urban districts across the country. San Antonio ISD trustees are weighing the need to close schools to match student enrollment and diminished funding.

Adding pressure to the debate is the potential for a state takeover in the near future, which could mean an appointed superintendent and board of managers in place of locally elected leadership.

"Of course," Aquino said in February when asked about his worries of the Texas Education Agency taking over SAISD due to academic performance. "So we've been working really, really, really, really hard in terms of turning our schools around."

The district has nine campuses — including an elementary school its board recently voted to close — that have scored three consecutive F grades from the state. Five failing grades in a row triggers a forced campus closure or state takeover of the entire district.

The letter grades are largely based on student results on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, exams.

"This is my 40th year in public education," Aquino said. "And this is by far the most challenging year that I face in public education."