

Superintendent Questions from Public Forum  
Candidate George Martin

**1. EDUCATION/LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE**

- What experience have you had with student who have experienced trauma and need to finish high school or obtain their GED?

**2. STUDENTS & FAMILIES**

- What is your experience with families in poverty? Families experiencing trauma? How does that experience effect your professional work?

Answer:

My career has been focused on teaching and leading schools with high numbers of underserved and marginalized students. Within these schools, I've experienced leading in situations where students have had a high rate of trauma. One high school in particular, was located within a behavioral health hospital where student trauma was extreme. Unfortunately, at the time of my arrival the school was failing. After assessing the needs of the school and students, I realized the current learning model was not reaching the students who were the most traumatized. I established a new learning model and retrained teachers allowing them to focus on student needs as well as strengths, thereby creating an environment for these students to learn. The goal then became ensuring all staff was trained in how to serve this student population as well as how to equip students and families with services to help them deal with trauma. Equipping classroom teachers to be able to recognize trauma and establish meaningful ways to help the student learn was my number one priority.

A student who has been through trauma may be overlooked with an assumption that they cannot learn. Trauma does not mean a student cannot learn, it just means these students need more support to address the challenges in their lives and to help build confidence through learning. Not only must we keep in mind the student, but also the family, siblings, etc. Trauma does not just impact the student but the family as well. My professional life extends to my community life. A student's life starts at home and how a student shows up to school is reflective of their home life. During COVID, my current staff and teachers created a food bank where parents and students could pick up bags of food to take home. It's about building not only schools but a community that supports these students to help them learn.

In my current role as a leader, as well as in prior roles, we have built a strong credit recovery program where we take students who are credit deficient – some with zero high school credits, and provide them with the tools they need to earn credits and ultimately, to graduate or pass the GED.

### **3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

- What is the difference between a public preschool and Head Start?

Answer:

Head Start is a federally funded child development program that provides children care for the “whole” child - preschool education, health screenings and examinations, nutritious meals, and opportunities to develop social-emotional skills. Head Start targets low-income families in underserved areas with children that are not prepared (socially, emotionally, and academically) upon entering Kindergarten. There is a great deal of research that shows the benefits and long-term effects on learning. Head Start programs are based on income and need.

There are some public-school pre-k programs that focus solely on academic activities to prepare children for school entry although many are now including socioemotional development. Although this work is critically important and new opportunities are being created to enhance public-school pre-k programs, there has already been great research conducted on the platform and delivery of the Head Start program along with and stories of success. This research has followed children throughout their academic journey and continues to provide evidence of its validity.

As stated earlier in this response, whether it’s in pre-K, Head Start or High School, the job of the superintendent is to care for the “whole” child/student, including all aspects that affect their lives. It’s important to consider their home support system, their community support system, as well as their academic support system. This requires an involved leader who looks past the surface and looks deeper into the student to find their place of motivation, inspiration and their most effective learning mechanism. As we learn in pre-school years, every child is special and has unique attributes to how they learn. Why then would we expect learning to be “one size fits all” when a child enters elementary, junior high and high school? I don’t believe learning is “one size fits all” as I believe it is a disservice to our students.

### **4. STUDENTS & FAMILIES**

- How do you plan to incorporate the students' input in your planning as superintendent? Will it be a one-time input or will you continuously meet with the students you serve?

Answer:

A district like Salt River Schools cannot succeed without listening to the input of its students. The student voice is important, powerful and can be grounding for leaders with lofty ideas and goals. The students voice reminds us why we entered education in the first place. As a student myself, my voice was not heard. I was left to succeed or fail (in many cases, fail) in the back of the classroom without notice or attention. Had I been asked, my voice would've reminded teachers that I didn't learn the same way everyone else did. My voice would've said that the stories and examples used in the curriculum were meaningless to me because they didn't reflect my experience. Based on my experience as a student, I was determined that in my career in education, I would listen to students and learn from them what they needed from their school as opposed to what mainstream educators determined was needed by majority students.

A student's voice when leading a district is one of the most important things to keep as part of your plan. The schools I've led have included determining ways to best hear the students voice. In the past I have incorporated student surveys primarily at the end of each semester to help determine what in the curriculum has worked well and what needed to be tweaked. I also used these surveys to determine whether student services, like career or counseling services, were meeting the needs of students. I've included student town hall discussions with entire student bodies as an open forum to ask questions or share concerns. I have created student committees and worked with student councils to include their voices to lead schools forward.

All voices are needed in schools and often student voices are the ones overlooked. The students' voice and points of view are some of the most important voices to hear in guiding a school. During the pandemic, I had to be creative in how I engaged with students in order to continue to hear their voices. I began holding Facebook live discussions as well as other online platforms to serve their needs especially as they struggled with the difficulties of remote learning and family illness. If selected as superintendent of Salt River Schools, not only will the teachers voice, parents voice, tribal governing voice, be sought, I will always listen to the student voice in developing and leading the district.

## **5. STAFF**

- How you will communicate with all staff?

Answer:

Communication can mean many things – it can almost be used as a generic, all-inclusive description for everything. But when broken down into each of its parts, communication is powerful and can lead to great success in any organization or district. When I think about communication, I think of two very specific elements: listening and feedback.

I believe in building a culture of feedback. Open and regular communication is critical and it's my goal to first listen and then focus on feedback. I will not only be *available* to staff, but I will

also be *approachable*. It means nothing to have an open-door policy if staff don't feel comfortable knocking on it. I will create regular one-on-one meetings with staff where I listen to their ideas and concerns while also learning from them what they need from me. I will schedule regular team meetings where the districts strategic initiatives are reviewed, and action plans are created. It is critical to keep district initiative at the forefront of everything we do.

I believe in a full performance management cycle where performance feedback is a critical element of communication to staff. However, performance feedback cannot just be once a year, it must be a cycle of communication to include goal setting, mid-year performance discussions, and one-on-one discussions. It is important that individual goals align to the district goals. How well we're accomplishing our goals (or sometimes not so well) both at the district level and at the individual level is worthy of continuous communication.

I will also incorporate district newsletters and townhalls. I find these modes of communication excellent resources for reminders, updates, tracking success and recognizing great work accomplished across the district. I enjoy hearing from staff in these modes of communication as well. Encouraging others does not only come from the superintendent or their office, rather from colleagues and the community. This encouragement can come from writing newsletter articles and posting inspiring quotes.

## **6. CULTURE & LANGUAGE**

- Have you improved a school with high (more than 10%) Native American student populations?

Answer:

Yes, in my career I have led many schools where the students were of underserved and marginalized populations. I have led schools where the Native American student population was as low as 2% and as high as over 10%. The school I currently lead fluctuates with the number of Native American students. The first step in improving a school with a high number of underserved and marginalized students is to celebrate the cultures represented in the student body. In order to create an environment where cultures are celebrated means more than just recognizing holidays, rather it's about respecting each student for who they are and their experiences in life. Their ideals and beliefs are important to who they are and so we as educators need to meet them in that space and see them as their own person. The school cannot improve until students feel seen, acknowledged and respected for who they are and where they come from both culturally and experientially. Only then can we as a district celebrate and incorporate the different ways that learning happens.

When leading in a district with so much cultural diversity, learning also needs to be diverse. Improving a school means increasing student achievement. I have had the opportunity, as indicated in prior responses, to assess the needs of individual students, develop learning models that meets students where their needs are, and retrained teachers to be more effective in the learning process. Based on this approach we have seen student achievement scores rise year over year. In addition, we saw successful career plans where, if college wasn't a sought-after next step, trade school entrance or apprenticeships were attained. School improvement, cultural awareness and celebration are building blocks for student success.

## **7. MISCELLANEOUS**

- What question do you wish we had asked you?

Answer:

I wish you would have asked how long I would plan on staying with Salt River School District? I would have replied that my hope would be to provide stability and trust, and that takes time. As I've learned through this interview process, the Salt River School District has seen much change over the years, which can increase uncertainty within the schools and the community. Sometimes it can be difficult to know whether the schools, and most importantly the students will benefit from the changes incorporated. I would want to establish a sense of steadiness, and foundation where deep roots can be planted. Deep roots can bring stability and that's my hope for Salt River Schools.

Being in a position of service as a superintendent takes commitment and true school reform does not start happening until two to three years down the road. If selected as superintendent, I would take great care to enter into the school system and the community, get to know community members, governing board members and district staff, and focus on developing relationships in order to build success. Learning about the district and community, celebrating what has already been accomplished and looking for a way that I can be a part of moving the district forward is time well spent before assuming major changes need to occur. I see myself coming in with the intention of retiring from the district.

My hope would be to share the success of the district with the community and grow leaders from within who may one day take on leadership positions that may lead to future promotional opportunities such as superintendent. It is important to leave a place better than when you found it and in that spirit, I would hope to retire leaving behind a strong bench of leaders who have compassion and love for the schools and the students, and who are ready to take Salt River Schools even further into the future.