



TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

EQUITY CHARACTER EXCELLENCE TEAM JOY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 22, 2023

Letter from Superintendent Dr. Deborah Gist

Dear Team Tulsa,

With a broken heart, but unbreakable commitment, I want to share with you that I am in discussions with our school board to leave my position as superintendent.

I am departing because I believe that doing so offers the best chance for control of our schools to remain where they belong: in Tulsa with our elected Board of Education and aligned with the values of our community. To me, that means a powerful commitment to raising up all of our children, as learners and as people, in a context where everyone belongs and is not just welcome, but is loved and celebrated for their whole and complete selves. These are the values that have brought so many of us together to serve our students and families.

It is no secret that our state superintendent has had an unrelenting focus on our district and specifically on me, and I am confident that my departure will help to keep our democratically-elected leadership and our team in charge of our schools—this week and in the future. So I'm stepping away. What we have built together is larger and stronger than any one of us, and this team will continue to serve our students and make the improvements we know our students need and deserve.

Tulsa is a community on the reservations of the Cherokee, Muscogee, and Osage Nations and is home to descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Our collective history of unrepaired harms is shameful, and depriving Tulsans of their collective voice over their schools would only add insult to injury.

Making the decision to leave Team Tulsa is the hardest thing I have ever done. It has been a dream come true to serve and lead this team in the schools where I grew up, the schools that shaped me into an educator, a leader, a human being. I'm proud of what we've done here, together, in the hometown that I love. My confidence in this team, in our plans and our work, and in the passion that I see throughout our schools, is immeasurable. Even in the most challenging times that we have been through together, I have loved every minute of being part of this extraordinary team.

Team Tulsa is leading impressive work. Together, we've provided every Tulsa family with opportunities for their children to succeed at every stage of their educational journey. We've made high-quality early learning accessible in every elementary school in our city. We have expanded dual language learning and remain the only school district in the State of Oklahoma with public Montessori schools. We've ensured challenging, thought-provoking, real-world learning is available to all students through increases in college courses, career and technical education, and Advanced Placement. Our classroom instruction and school supports for students continue to improve as well. We have much further to go, but our data shows that our young people are seeing the benefits and that proficiency is on the rise again.

There will be a special board meeting on Wednesday evening where the board will consider my separation and the appointment of Dr. Ebony Johnson as interim superintendent. I am enthusiastic about the board's plan to act upon the appointment of our colleague as interim superintendent. As you know, Dr. Johnson is a lifelong Tulsan, a stellar educator, a strong leader, and a remarkable human being. With the leadership of Dr. Johnson, our team will keep the work of our plan on track and will reach even higher.

This surely seems like an unexpected time for me to say this, but serving as a leader in our schools is the most fulfilling professional experience of my life—or at least, the only thing that rivals the joy of teaching. To state the painfully obvious, there is a lot that makes the job tough — tougher than it even should be. Yet, serving in this role has been an unparalleled opportunity to work alongside Team Tulsa to improve the lives of students and families in an incredibly meaningful way. Even in this moment, I believe leadership can be a phenomenally rewarding choice, just as teaching is for so many of us. Wherever you are in your career path, I hope you'll consider the possibility of seeking a formal role in education leadership.

I'll have more to say in a proper good-bye between now and September 15 when I step away. For now, please just know that my gratitude, my faith, and my love for this team are boundless.

Deborah

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Tulsa Public Schools honors the diversity, creativity, and passion of our students, elevating every student to be designers of their destiny. Our students lead through literacy, are empowered through experience, and contribute to their community. Learn more at www.tulsaschools.org.