



STATEMENTS

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE:

11:00 AM, Monday, February 28, 2022

DR. THOMAS AHART, SUPERINTENDENT

For the past decade, I have awakened every morning and traveled to our district office as Superintendent of the Des Moines Public School district with the weight of the hopes and dreams of 31,000 children on my mind.

In a state I treasure, a city I love, and a community that has embraced my vision to provide **equitable** opportunities and **outcomes** for **ALL** children - even during some of the most turbulent moments of our lives. School shootings, wild midwestern weather, budget shortfalls and a period in time I'm sure none of us will ever forget – the insidious COVID-19 pandemic. But soon, that will change.

After deep thought and careful deliberation with my family, I have decided to step down as Superintendent of our beloved school district.

This decision comes after ten transformational years of putting students first and working side by side with some of the most distinguished professionals in education.

Though my heart is **heavy** when I think of my final moments with DMPS, I remain **fully committed** to the work of implementing our collective vision for students.

As I reflect on this very humbling, soul-wrenching work, I feel an **enormous sense of** satisfaction knowing the systems and tools we have put in place will continue to amplify our educational ambition for the most **underserved** students in this district.

Aristotle once said, “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.” Words that serve as a great reminder that nothing of great importance is ever accomplished without hard work and dedication. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I could not have done this work alone. I am forever indebted to the supportive teachers who rolled up their sleeves, resilient principals who burned the midnight oil and our collaborative district leadership and support staff who invested their time, heart and energy to ensure the next generation is ready for our global future. And, they **are** ready.

I will **always** hold gratitude in my heart for this community. Des Moines is where I have truly grown as an educator. Des Moines is where I have raised my family. Des Moines will always be home.

And, this work has been tough.

Des Moines is different than other school districts in Iowa. As big cities go, Des Moines is a small one, but being an urban center in a traditionally rural state brings with it unique challenges and unique rewards. But, with each obstacle we've faced, we forged ahead.

With over 31,000 students, we are nearly double the size of Cedar Rapids, Iowa's second-largest school district. We educate more children than the public school districts of Kansas City, Indianapolis, Minneapolis; Pittsburgh; San Jose, and St. Louis. DMPS has one-tenth the enrollment of Chicago Public Schools yet has a greater proportion of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunch—76 percent, compared to their 69 percent. Add to this, our proportion of students identified as English-Language Learners is on par with theirs. Something not many would believe, but it's true and we've met every challenge with a viable solution for our students.

Indeed, Des Moines is **truly** an international city. DMPS students speak 83 languages and hail from 109 nations.

These factors bring challenges with them. However, without challenges, there would be no accomplishments, and I could not be prouder of what we have achieved.

The driving force of my administration has always been leaning heavily into providing **equitable opportunities** for our students, faculty and staff. This has been an absolute non-negotiable for me.

We implemented standards-based grading, redrew district boundaries, made every school a school of choice, increased enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, and **dramatically** shifted the composition of the student body attending Central Campus **and** Central Academy.

We built a state-of-the-art early childhood center in our urban core, created a Center for New Americans, developed an urban leadership program, and we have better **empowered** student voice.

We've been busy.

THIS HAS BEEN MY LIFE'S WORK. Equity isn't a buzz word for me. It's at the core, at the very heart of my work and has been since the start of my tenure. The BLUE contract – with its accompanying Master of Science in Culturally Responsive Leadership – continues to transform

our teaching staff, allowing us to retain 90 percent of our new teachers in a field where nearly half leave the profession within their first five years.

Our pipeline work in partnership with the Wallace Foundation has increased our percentage of building leaders of color. This makes me **proud!**

And while equity in academics has been my focus, I have also worked to ensure students learn in the best classrooms possible. Ten years ago, our district had 40 portable classrooms. Today, those have been eliminated, and **all** our students – regardless of zip code or program - learn in air-conditioned, brick-and-mortar buildings, including two newly constructed schools. In addition, we have won accolades for our energy-efficient buildings, which are better for the environment **and** allow us to drive millions more general fund dollars into instruction.

That brings me to another major focus of my administration—fiscal responsibility and stewardship. For ten strong, **consecutive** years, we’ve maintained a healthy fund balance and spending authority balance, despite the last ten years being the **worst** in the state’s history for school funding. And two years ago, we passed the district’s first maximum voter-approved, Physical Plant and Equipment Levy, providing an additional \$6.5 million annually to support student technology while at the same time lowering the tax burden for our community. DMPS is fiscally sound, producing more college-ready graduates, with fewer resources than many districts across this nation. I am proud.

And finally, as I bid Des Moines farewell, I can’t help but reflect on our 2019 record-high graduation rate. A major accomplishment that was only achieved through true collaboration and the hard work of our students – many who had been counted out. In the glory of that moment, I thought of the profound words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a civil rights icon, “Intelligence plus character, **that** is the goal of true education.”

Goodbye Des Moines! Through **tears, sweat**, laughs, civil unrest and even a global pandemic—our great American city, in the heart of our beautiful nation, proves our educational system is resilient, and although we may face the impossible, **together** we are still capable of producing leaders for the world stage of tomorrow.

Thank you for your time this afternoon, your support and allowing me to serve you all for a decade of challenges and triumphs. I am truly grateful!

DWANA BRADLEY, SCHOOL BOARD CHAIR

As chair of the Des Moines School Board, I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Ahart for not only the dedication and commitment he has given to DMPS over the past 15 years – as both superintendent as well as a principal – but also for the time and attention he gave to me and my Board colleagues.

The job of a school district superintendent is difficult on many levels, including the fact that they have seven “bosses” ... those of us elected to serve on the School Board. The public doesn’t always see the time and effort that a superintendent puts into this job, working with Board members, administrators and principals, parents, and the community at large. It is a 24-7 commitment.

In working with Dr. Ahart over the past three years, I have found him to be accessible, candid, and sincere in his approach to his work. His commitment to DMPS is evidenced by the opportunities he took to advance our district and the role and importance of public education and the multiple ways he showed up for our staff and our students. Whether lobbying at the State Capitol or cheering in the stands of an athletic event – Dr. Ahart has always operated with the interests of our community, our district, and our students in mind.

On behalf of the entire board, I would like to share my thanks and gratitude with Dr. Ahart. He moved into the role following Dr Nancy Sebring and at a time when funding challenges, demographic shifts and related academic achievement gaps were widening.

Dr. Ahart’s mastery of the states complicated education funding formula coupled with his strong understanding of education issues at the state and national levels is to be commended.

As a member of the Council of Great City Schools Board of Directors, Dr. Ahart has used that position to advance the work of the district while also using it to stay current on federal education policy and trends. He has also played a pivotal role in leading Iowa’s Urban Education Network, a consortium of Iowa's largest public-school districts formed to represent the unique interests of urban public schools.

Dr. Ahart has managed through some of this district’s most challenging times ranging from the global pandemic to the more recent work done to develop the Iowa Alliance Conference comprised of Iowa’s 11 largest high schools who will begin competition in the 2022-23 seasons and everything in between.

During his 15 years with the district, Dr. Ahart has never shied away from the challenges and opportunities that come with leading Iowa’s largest school district. He has met every challenge while seeking out new opportunities for our students, staff and families and for this, I simply want to say THANK YOU.

Dr. Ahart’s resignation, if accepted by the School Board tomorrow, will take effect on June 30. In the weeks ahead we will appoint an interim superintendent for the 2022-23 school year.

Finally, we will be conducting a national search for a new superintendent to be in place by the start of the 2023-24 school year. This will be an extensive process designed to find the best possible person to lead DMPS. In the weeks ahead the School Board will be developing our search plan and have much more to share at a future date.