

September 10, 2024

Ms. Tida Garcia, Governing Board President
& Governing Board Members
Tolleson Elementary School District No. 17

RE: RETIREMENT LETTER

Dear Ms. Garcia and Members of the Governing Board:

It is with a heart full of both gratitude and bittersweet reflection that I write this letter to let you know of my retirement as of December 31, 2024.

The past sixteen (16) years, with thirteen (13+) of those years as your Superintendent, have been the most rewarding and transformative in my professional life. Serving this extraordinary community of students, teachers, administrators and staff while working alongside an award-winning Governing Board has been a profound honor and a privilege beyond words. I am deeply humbled by the trust that was placed in me, and grateful for the incredible milestones that were achieved together.

This journey has been illuminated by a collective belief system, determination, creativity, hard work and dedication. I look back with immense pride on the many successes we've shared, and I want to highlight a few that stand out as testaments to our shared work:

- **Academic Excellence:** All the district's Preschool-8 grade schools received "A" and "B" letter grades from the Arizona Department of Education. The district has been recognized for "significant student growth" which is a true reflection on its efforts to elevate each student's potential, thanks to ALL the teachers, administrators and staff.
- **Strategic Vision:** the school district crafted and implemented a District 5-Year Strategic Plan anchored in its core belief that All Children are Capable of Success: NO EXCEPTIONS! This vision has guided the district's work and fueled its progress.
- **Community Engagement:** the school district turned the tide on declining student enrollment, drawing families in from both within and outside our district boundaries. An impressive 25% of our students now come from beyond the district's limits, a testament to the trust and value placed in the schools.
- **Excellence in Early Education:** the district's 5 STAR Preschool Programs have set a new standard by placing the school district in the top 10% statewide and demonstrating its commitment to the youngest members of its community. I am committed to continuing the advocacy for funding early childhood!
- **Innovative Support:** The launch of the Welcome Center has brought invaluable resources to families, including a *free* a health community clinic in partnership with Banner Health for uninsured children. This initiative embodies the district's commitment to holistic support for its community.
- **Competitive Salaries:** the school district significantly increased teacher salaries now starting at \$52,500 plus \$3,000 in performance-based compensation. This has positioned the school district

as one of the highest-paying elementary school districts in the West Valley and Arizona, reflecting its deep respect for educators. The increases in salaries by the Governing Board in the last fourteen (14) years have been quite significant.

- **Financial Strength:** the school district's strong financial position ensures that it is well-equipped to continue its mission and support the students and staff effectively.

Thanks to the inspiring work and support of this incredible community, I was deeply honored to receive the Arizona Superintendent of the Year award in 2023 representing our school district and the state nationally. I was the first Latina to have received this recognition in Arizona. It was a moment of personal gratitude and humility.

In addition, I had the privilege of becoming the first Latina to serve as President of the School Administrators Association (ASA) in Arizona. In this role, I was fortunate to support over 1,200 administrators from across our state as we worked together to advance the mission in providing the highest quality public education for ALL students.

As you know, these accomplishments are not mine alone, but they are a testament to the dedication and hard work of every member in our community. I am grateful for your support which made these milestones possible.

Now, this journey has not been without its challenges; none more impactful than the global pandemic. It tested our resiliency and adaptability. Yet, it is in these trials that a collective strength shone brightest. The way our district came together, problem-solved, and supported one another with dignity and respect through those tough times has been nothing short of inspiring.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for giving me the privilege to serve as your superintendent. Your true commitment, dedication, resiliency, and passion have been the driving force behind our district's many successes. I am so grateful for your support and the joy of working alongside such an extraordinary group of individuals.

I leave with absolute confidence in the leadership team the district has in place. They will continue to advance the goals outlined in the district's Strategic Plan with the same passion, dedication, and commitment that has defined our work together. I stand ready to support in this transition in any way I can.

As I step into this new chapter in my life, I carry with me the cherished memories and sense of fulfillment that comes from knowing we have made a real difference in the lives of our students, the school district's treasures.

Wishing the Tolleson ESD community continued success, joy, and fulfillment in the years to come.

With heartfelt gratitude and warmest regards,



Dr. Lupita Ley Hightower
Treasure Hunter & Superintendent
Tolleson Elementary School District