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~ PAGE 3



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THE LARGEST BLACK NEWSPAPER IN THE WEST



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# New LAUSD superintendent rolls up his sleeves

By DARLENE DONLOE  
Contributing Writer

When Alberto M. Carvalho took over the reins as superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest school district, he did so amid high expectations that he would successfully elevate the quality of education.

His reputation, built during a successful 14-year stint as the superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the fourth-largest school district in the United States, had preceded him.

And while some might feel pressure to repeat or replicate their previous successes, Carvalho, who is about as laidback and cool as they come, admittedly, doesn't feel it.

He attributes that to the tough skin he developed while growing up in poverty with his parents and five siblings in Portugal.

He's no stranger to challenges, and he's not easily rattled. It's almost impossible to unnerve someone who, even though he grew up poor, managed to pull himself up without any bootstraps.

In February Carvalho signed a four-year contract with the district, succeeding Austin Beutner, who stepped down after three years.

His goal, Carvalho said, is to "elevate LAUSD" to the premier spot in American urban education.

I recently caught up with the always dapper Superintendent Carvalho (AC), to talk about why he took on the behemoth job of turning around LAUSD and how he plans to do it.

**DD:** Why did you want this job?

**AC:** I was looking for a different challenge. L.A. came calling. They had called on me three or four other times. This time around, it felt like all the conditions were right. It's a big challenge. I'm impressed by the potential and the possibilities. This was the right opportunity at the right time. I felt I could no longer pass up the opportunity. People used to bet against Miami and they bet against L.A. People aren't comfortable with what

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New Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho pays a visit to a classroom at Ninth Street Elementary School in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. Carvalho formerly led the Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida.

Courtesy photo

they don't understand. I want to prove them wrong. I can elevate its game.

**DD:** Tell me some things about you that people don't know.

**AC:** I have a 30-year-old daughter who is doing well. I grew up in poverty. At 17, I was washing dishes. I came to this country alone. My parents had no more than a third-grade education. I had five siblings. I lived that immigrant experience. At 18, I was homeless.

I see myself in the eyes of the kids we serve. If I made it, there is no reason why they can't as well. I want to lead the system and be part of this great community.

**DD:** When you were hired, I'm sure the ... Board of Education had a lot of questions for you. What questions did you have for the board?

**AC:** Good question. I remember asking if they knew who I was. I do have a strong personality. I have specific theories or actions. I have little care for the nonsense that surrounds the work. I'm impatient and driven, sometimes, despite what the board wants. Do you know me well enough to want me? I'm easily understood and decoded once you know me. The other question is will I have the flexibility and space to do the work untethered? That was important to me. I believe in stability of leadership.

Movement happens with good trouble and good noise. I was brought here to elevate the quality of education.

**DD:** You recently decided to temporarily deploy non-classroom credentialed employees back into teaching assignments to address a staffing crisis.

**AC:** The vacancies are more prevalent in predominantly Black and brown schools. Fifty percent of the vacancies are in those schools. That is a breach and violation of equity that we so eloquently speak about. I want to bring about the change, not speak about the change. We still have teacher vacancies. We are basically deploying teachers and individuals in the classroom as teachers — back to the classrooms. This is a stop-gap measure. It's a crisis solution for a crisis measure. We don't have males of color at the elementary level. Are we recruiting at HBCUs and deploying resources to attract those individuals? Are we able to provide incentives for individuals interested in teaching in fragile, difficult schools in districts and better working conditions and health guarantees?

**DD:** Why don't teachers want to come back?

**AC:** The bigger challenge is — some of these schools are not well-resourced or have the level of support, supplies and elective programs. That is discouraging to potential teachers. Then, there are the social gaps and the fact that parents may not be as involved. They are working two or three jobs. That creates a fear factor in the minds of teachers. This is a school district that deals with challenges, but I have certainty that resources are there and that the support is there.

**DD:** What have you learned about the district in your first months that will help you guide the district?

**AC:** Despite the perspective of some, there is incredible potential in students. We are improving the quality of education. I have not met any broken kids in L.A., but I have met some broken adults.

**DD:** You have a 100-day plan that centers around four key tasks: learn, assess, communicate and act. The 100-day date is coming quickly. Are you on target?

**AC:** It's a bold, big ambitious plan but we are on target. This is a plan that I monitor and participate in and have discussions about. I have met with the faith-based community, businesses, advocacy groups and unions. I've attended town hall meetings. It's shared responsibility and accountability. This is a plan that has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of education and the community. I'm not leading from the rear. I'm leading from the front, alongside my colleagues.

**DD:** How do you approach pressure?

**AC:** I don't feel it like other people or at least I don't show it. I have thick skin. My early life, in challenging conditions, has trained me for a different threshold of pain, sacrifice and challenge. I try to establish a healthy balance. I'm clear about what matters. I don't focus on non-essential pressure that doesn't do anything for a kid's education.

**DD:** Can minority students

in the district ever catch up with their peers following the pandemic?

**AC:** Before COVID they were in crisis. It made it unavoidably evident. Let's not fool ourselves, they were in crisis prior to COVID. Now there is a deeper level of the crisis. Will they bounce back? They will to the extent that we do right by them. We have to create ramps for their ascent.

**DD:** You have been the Los Angeles Unified School District superintendent since February. What grade would you give yourself and why?

**AC:** Incomplete. It's a work in progress. I'm living up to the promise I made. I will give 100% every day — even on evenings and weekends. It's crazy to believe in the possibility and not complain about the impossibility we will win.

**DD:** What kind of student were you in school?

**AC:** I needed glasses. I had childhood bronchitis and asthma. There was no running water. We lived in a one-room apartment in Portugal with no electricity. I was not a healthy kid. I couldn't see the board. But, around sixth-seventh grade, I was number one in the class. That's when I got glasses. I could not believe it. It was like seeing high-def TV. I had a case of hepatitis that almost killed me. Through a tutor, I learned the poetry of mathematics. I was also an athlete. I graduated early, then I worked for eight months to come to this country. I cleaned and scrubbed decks so that I could earn \$800.

**DD:** What about your parents?

**AC:** My mother was a seamstress. My father was a janitor. He worked for a printing house in the evening. He would bring books home. I read them all. My early education was driven by the books my father brought me to read. I remember reading "Ivanhoe," "Robinson Crusoe," Hemingway and Shakespeare. I

devoured those books. My first intro to Langston Hughes was at 11 years old. I don't think I ever had the chance to thank my father for bringing the books to our house.

**DD:** Everyone is excited about you being in Los Angeles. How are you going to make sure you shine bright in Tinseltown?

**AC:** I think the brightness I'm seeking is this constellation of success. I'm thinking about the light bulbs across hundreds of kids across the system that we will create. I think about the thousands of stars our kids represent. That's what I'm interested in. I'm elevating our kids to stardom.

**DD:** Describe your day.

**AC:** I drink espresso coffee by the gallon. I don't sleep well. I wake up at 5 a.m. I usually shut my eyes around 12:30-1 a.m. I'm good if I get four hours. Five is a luxury. I exercise in the morning. I get it out of the way in the morning because the day is long and the night is committed. I have 12-hour days that begin before I leave my place. I digest emails at 5 a.m. I have a light breakfast and then I hit the road. Then it's fast paced. There are lots of meetings. The real deal is trying to balance the office work and meetings.

**DD:** How do you let your hair down?

**AC:** I love listening to music. I like eclectic. My favorite is American jazz, modern jazz and the blues. I will listen to almost anything. There is nothing like a great live performance. I also like to run, and I like paddle boarding. I like different foods. Nothing is better than a great meal, great conversation, great music, great book, a hike and great friends.

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