



National Association of
School Superintendents
United in Common Purpose: Each Other's Success

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Sonia Llamas is a distinguished educational leader with over 25 years of experience in California's school districts and county office. Her visionary leadership has improved student outcomes, elevated culturally responsive practices, and expanded access to wellness and academic opportunities for the communities that she has served. Her leadership has resulted in measurable system-wide impact, including sharp reductions in suspensions and expulsions, gains in graduation and college readiness rates, expanded mental health access, and award-winning school climate improvements. A nationally recognized reformer and licensed clinical social worker, Dr. Llamas has led efforts spanning whole child systems change, AI integration, and cross-sector collaboration. Her leadership has addressed chronic absenteeism, college and career readiness, youth mental health, and equitable access to expanded learning opportunities.

Her career has spanned complex roles in student services, wellness systems, school culture, data systems, and academic strategy, allowing her to approach systemic challenges with both innovation and empathy. Her comprehensive experience across multiple leadership domains has uniquely positioned her to lead at the intersection of equity, policy, and practice. Her trajectory, from early roles in youth development and school-based mental health to leadership at the county and state level, demonstrates her ability to lead from every layer of the system. She understands the importance of every individual within the educational system for student achievement to take root. She also serves as a regional director and chapter president of the fastest growing membership within CALSA (California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators), where she mentors aspiring leaders and advances equity-focused leadership development across the state.

Education

Dr. Sonia Llamas earned her Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Southern California (USC), where she developed expertise in systems transformation, equity-centered leadership, and strategic governance. She holds a Master of Social Work (MSW) from California State University, Long Beach, with a concentration in children, youth and families, school social work, and community mental health. She also earned her Pupil Personnel Services Credential (PPSC) from CSU Long Beach, supporting her early work in school-based clinical settings and a whole child ecological framework. Her undergraduate studies culminated in a Bachelor of Arts in Social Welfare from the University of California, Berkeley, laying the

foundation for her lifelong commitment to advocacy and social impact. Dr. Llamas is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and holds a Clear Administrative Services Credential. She has also completed advanced training and certifications through leading institutions and organizations, including:

- **Next Generation Superintendent Academy**, Azusa Pacific University
- **School Business University**, California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO)
- **Aspiring Superintendent Academy for Female Leaders**, Association of School Administrators (AASA)
- **Masters in Governance**, California School Boards Association (CSBA)
- **Executive Development Program**, National Institute for School Leadership (NISL)
- **Family Engagement in Education**, Harvard Graduate School of Education

This robust academic and professional training portfolio reflects her integrative approach to leadership, merging instructional excellence, operational expertise, and holistic well-being.

Experience

Dr. Llamas has held various leadership roles in some of California's largest school systems, including Los Angeles Unified, Pasadena Unified, Santa Ana Unified, and the Orange County Department of Education. She has overseen portfolios spanning curriculum and instruction, career and postsecondary readiness, multilingual education, school climate, continuous improvement, and integrated student supports.

Her career trajectory reflects a deep and expansive understanding of student needs and system-level leadership. Dr. Llamas began her career supporting historically underserved youth through afterschool programs and school-based counseling. She entered certificated service as a middle school counselor in Title I schools and later worked in elementary and high school settings, where her strengths in social-emotional development, mental health, and student-centered program design took root. Transitioning into central office roles, she advanced as a District Administrator overseeing all of student discipline for Los Angeles Unified, then as a Director, Assistant Superintendent in Santa Ana USD, and most recently served as Chief Academic Officer and Associate Superintendent at the county level. Each position built upon her foundational values of equity, innovation, and learner-centered leadership.

At Pasadena USD, she led one of the most significant short-term dropout reductions in district history—cutting the rate from 33% to 16% in just three years, a 51.5% decrease. Her work included launching flexible credit recovery pathways, targeted student re-engagement strategies, and innovative program redesigns that helped reclaim opportunity for thousands of students.

Her leadership style is marked by strategic coherence, inclusive collaboration, and relentless advocacy for equity, mental health, and access. She works to improve outcomes for all learners in the system and ensures that conditions are in place for students to become the best versions of themselves.

She has developed a deep understanding of school operations through years of direct site coaching, instructional walk-throughs, leadership team development, and multi-site program implementation. She has supported and coached principals, facilitated data-driven improvement cycles, and led professional learning aligned to site-based goals. Her proximity to schools and

site leaders has equipped her to navigate complex school-based dynamics with both credibility and compassion.

Outstanding Achievement(s)

Scope of Leadership:

Dr. Llamas has served in executive roles across California's largest and most complex school systems, impacting over 500,000 students across 29 local educational agencies (LEAs) and more than 600 schools. At Santa Ana Unified School District—the sixth-largest district in the state, serving over 56,000 students—she led systemic initiatives across all 56 schools and had oversight of 1,288 staff members, including management, certificated, and classified team members. At the Orange County Department of Education, she supported 29 LEAs (including OCDE as its own LEA) and provided leadership to a team of 230 staff members, spanning multiple divisions and roles.

Developing high-performing, mission-driven teams is her go-to leadership approach. Dr. Llamas believes that sustainable systems are built on a foundation of shared purpose, clarity, and relational trust. Whether navigating districtwide transformation or cross-county collaboration, she brings coherence to complexity—aligning structures, resources, and talent around equity and student-centered outcomes.

Transformative Systems Leadership: Achieved a 91% reduction in expulsions and an 87% reduction in suspensions in SAUSD, while raising attendance to 97% through implementation of restorative practices, districtwide MTSS, and a comprehensive Wellness Coordinated Care Plan across departments. In addition, she expanded learning programs which resulted in increased youth engagement, particularly for historically underserved students.

Academic and College Readiness: Increased A-G completion and dual enrollment participation by over 40%; expanded career technical education certifications; and launched the district's first scorecard tracking college persistence, A-G completion, course completion and D and F rates contributing to a 92% graduation rate and a 51.5% reduction in dropout rates. Led high quality professional development for counselors and administrators utilizing ASCA model, improving transcript analysis, course selection and course catalog cleanup leading to first SAUSD RAMP schools and improved system to improve graduation rates and target students who are shy of A-G requirements as well of those necessitating intervention.

Mental Health Access and Whole-Child Supports: Tripled access to school-based wellness centers and institutionalized the “We Care. Get Help.” campaign, now a City of Santa Ana recognized citywide event. Guided over \$130 million in mental and behavioral health grants across 29 LEAs, helping establish whole child infrastructures countywide and critical supports and professional development to institute mental health revenue generation and high quality supports to students K-12.

Digital Equity and Future-Readiness: Designed and launched OC AI Forward, California's only countywide AI initiative inclusive of all levels of education and incorporated a student-led AI ambassadorship, reaching students countywide and resulting in a student led AI Convening. She further convened education, workforce, and higher ed partners to align future-ready teaching and learning priorities.

School Culture and Climate: SAUSD achieved its lowest chronic absenteeism rate and highest sense of belonging as measured by CHKS under her leadership. She led districtwide PBIS implementation, with 53 of 56 schools earning Gold or Platinum recognition in the program's first year.

Fiscal Strategy and Governance: Oversaw the alignment of a \$1 billion LCAP to student outcomes; conducted multilingual budget town halls and led outcomes-based contracting for expanded learning contracts aligning funding to actual outcomes delivered. Partnered with boards of education to align strategic priorities with equity-focused outcomes.

Interagency Collaboration and Policy Leadership: Founded and chaired the OC Interagency Collaborative, which brought together eight major agencies (Behavioral Health, Public Health, Probation, First 5 OC (0-5), Regional Center, Social Services, Juvenile Courts and OCDE) to build integrated supports for families and align resources, professional development and supports cross agency. Led the shift in countywide language to "Youth in Care," ensuring dignified, strengths-based framing for vulnerable youth.

Recognition: Honored as Woman of the Year in Education from Congressman Lou Correa (2025 & 2021), Woman of Distinction from CA Senator Tom Umberg, recipient of the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) Region XVII Valuing Diversity Award and ACSA Administrator of the Year, Region XVII and XV, Catalyst of Hope Award, Counselor Advocate of the Year (CASC), and OC Probation Chief's Award. She serves as Region 6 Director and Orange County Chapter President for CALSA, where she leads mentorship, professional learning, and equity-driven leadership development to uplift Latino/a/x leaders and communities across California.

AN INTERVIEW

Tell us about how you see today's superintendent.

Today's superintendent must embody the roles of systems integrator, community bridge-builder, and instructional visionary. This position is no longer confined to compliance oversight—it is about igniting possibility across every layer of the system. The superintendent must navigate complex political and policy shifts while keeping students at the center and building coherence across instruction, wellness, operations, and governance. Leadership today requires both bold vision and deep listening. I believe superintendents must create the conditions for equity to thrive—not only by setting the vision, but by aligning structures, budgets, and talent to actualize that vision. In my leadership journey, this has meant elevating student and family voice, building trust across stakeholders, mentorship and using metrics to both measure progress and drive continuous improvement.

What new understandings did you acquire after two or three years on the job?

One of the most profound lessons I've learned over my past 8 years in an executive leadership role is that proximity to the work matters. While I haven't served as a traditional site principal or assistant principal, my consistent presence in schools—coaching leaders, walking classrooms, and supporting improvement plans—has given me an in-depth understanding of site leadership. I've co-constructed pilots with principals, served as an interim leader during vacancies, and ensured that support is accessible, timely, and tailored to their realities. This level of

engagement builds mutual trust and bridges understanding between school sites and system leaders, aligning leadership from the classroom to the cabinet.

I've also learned that transformational change only takes root when you care for the people in the system. Whether guiding 230 staff members at a county office or over 1,200 in an urban school district, I've led with the belief that clarity, compassion, and coherence drive outcomes. Especially in today's shifting educational climate—marked by competing demands, polarized discourse, and policy volatility—our ability to lead with integrity and stay student-centered is critical. And when we lead alongside, rather than from above, we build organizations that are not only effective—but enduring and sustaining.

[Share an idea to use or something you've learned with your colleagues.](#)

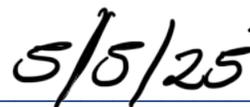
Start with the system, not the initiative. Too often, leaders launch programs without ensuring the structure, culture, and capacity are in place to sustain them. Aligning resources to district values, engaging multi-level stakeholders early (students, families, teachers, support staff, site leaders, community partners, board members), and designing for ongoing feedback are essential practices. Systems transformation is not about perfection; it's about responsiveness, reflection, and recalibration.

Equity is not a strategy, it is a stance.

It must be present in every hiring decision, every budget allocation, every learning space, and every policy we adopt because this impacts every child, family and community we serve. Looking ahead, Dr. Llamas is focused on co-creating the future of public education—one that is learner-centered, equity-driven, and grounded in collective leadership. She believes the next chapter in education demands bold systems thinking, deep collaboration, and a commitment to student voice as the catalyst for lasting transformation. Behind every data point is a student with a story—and it is in understanding those stories that we build the trust, systems, and supports needed to create the conditions where every learner thrives.

Submitted by:


Name/Signature


Date