

## First-Time L.A. School Board Member Combines Teaching, Policy Skills

When Kelly Gonez was running for a position on the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education last year, she was endorsed by the *Los Angeles Times*, which called her “a collaborative presence who might help cut through some of the endless debate with calm, informed reason.”

Being a collaborative presence is exactly what the 29-year-old Gonez has tried to do since taking office in July as a school board member in the nation’s second largest school district. “I met with everyone during the campaign whether or not they agreed with me, and I’m continuing that same tactic as a school board member,” said Gonez in an interview with the *Urban Educator*. “We face large challenges as a district and we need to bring people together in order to confront those challenges in a thoughtful way.”

For Gonez, those challenges include providing equitable opportunities across racial and socioeconomic lines and ensuring the district’s highest needs students get access to the same high quality education as all other students.

She represents 145 schools and plans to visit every school before her term ends in 2022. So far, she has visited 90.

“Sitting on the board of an urban school district, you represent a large number of students who have high needs, but I don’t think you understand the full scope of it until you really see it on the ground,” said Gonez. “Visiting so many of my schools has allowed me to get to know their needs up close.”

As the first in her family to attend college, she notes that among her priorities is ensuring every child who comes through the Los Angeles school district graduates college and career ready. In October, she introduced her first resolution, which passed unanimously, calling for the school system to track how many students enroll and graduate from college as well as earn vocational certificates, complete apprenticeships and obtain employment after high school.

Even though she is a first-time school



Los Angeles school board member Kelly Gonez, third from left, talks with students during a visit to Richard E. Byrd Middle School.

board member, Gonez is no stranger to the field of education. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, she became a geometry teacher at a high school in the Los Angeles school system.

“I grew up in the East San Fernando Valley in a working immigrant family and had decided to become a teacher to help support greater opportunities for more kids and families like mine,” said Gonez.

### Supporting High Standards

In 2014, she was appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as an education policy advisor during the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

“I knew from my experience as a teacher that the *No Child Left Behind Act* was really flawed and this was a huge opportunity, the first time in 15 years to rewrite the nation’s foundational education law,” said Gonez. She believes that the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, signed into law in 2015, was able to strike a good balance between providing more flexibility for states and districts, while also maintaining critical guardrails to ensure greater equity for students.

She is particularly proud of her work on the measure regarding English Language Learners (ELL) and that she was able to successfully push for ELLs to be included under the federal accountability system in Title I.

In 2016, Gonez moved back to Los Angeles, where she taught 7th grade science at a district charter school. But when a position to serve on the school board became available, she threw her hat into the ring.

“I really felt like being on the school board would be a chance to take my policy knowledge and knowledge as a teacher and use it to help positively impact more kids and be a voice for my community,” said Gonez.

Her 2017 race, combined with a race for a second seat on the board, was the most expensive in the nation’s history, with more than \$14 million being spent in an election that was often viewed as pitting charter school advocates against teacher unions. Yet Gonez believes that as a school board member, it’s her job to work with and learn from the charter schools that have really strong results, while holding those charter schools accountable that are not meeting students needs.

“That’s my perspective, the quality of charter schools vary like the quality of all other schools, and it’s our job to ensure high standards for all students,” said Gonez.

She serves on the Board of Directors for the Council of the Great City Schools and in her spare time likes to exercise with her husband Manuel. And she is working on preparing to be a parent; the couple is expecting their first child in July.

When her five and a half year term on the board is over, she would like to be known not only as being an advocate for the schools, educators and students she represents, but as someone who helped change the tone of educational politics.

“I really do think the divisiveness is harmful to finding real solutions,” said Gonez. “I try to be somebody who can bring people together. And after five years, I hope that I would’ve been able to make somewhat of a difference.”