

An Interview with Jesus Jara

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Jesus Jara, Superintendent of Clark County School District, and was conducted on 9/27/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

## **Interview with Jesus Jara**

**Date: 9-27-2022**

**SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Jesus Jara, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio**

**Magdalena Martinez [00:03]**

All right. We are here today, Tuesday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, with Dr. Jesus Jara, from CCSD. And before we get started, I just want to confirm that you're okay that I recorded this conversation.

**Jesus Jara [00:12]**

Yes.

**Magdalena Martinez [00:14]**

And that you're okay that I attribute your name to any quotes, moving forward after you review the transcript.

**Jesus Jara [00:20]**

Yes.

**Magdalena Martinez [00:21]**

All right. Thank you so much. So let's start off by talking about – if you can describe your role throughout the pandemic, and the role of CCSD as you saw it.

**Jesus Jara [00:31]**

Sure. Thank you for the question. So my role – well, obviously, as a superintendent, through the pandemic, from beginning to end – it doesn't seem like it's ended yet – it's still ongoing, but not so much into a pandemic as a school district.

So really, at the beginning was – the process was, right, is learning about the virus as you're trying to keep an entire school community safe. And not knowing what to expect, it was – so that's number one. The stress that we had really is just, what do we do? How do we make sure that we protect our families and our students?

But then it was what I will just tell you my thinking. It was more of a triage, right? Just get the kids home and feed them. That was it. That was the first two to three weeks. And not thinking that, as you go through it, in my mind was, learning was secondary. It was feeding them. So many of our kids eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with us. So that's number one.

And then, as it prolonged into the month, I remember vividly, okay, if I could just get through spring break, we can come back face-to-face, right? So that's why it was really the food, right? The food part. Not learning. But then, the longer that the kids stayed home, and you started seeing what the impact academically was going to be, and not having the systems as a school system, right, to provide a high-quality distance education program was frustrating. And not because we didn't want to, we weren't prepared.

I left a school system in Orlando that, in 2012, and we started moving into online learning and distance education. And when I left, and in my conversation with that superintendent, she said, "Well, your hard work as deputy – when they went home, they just took every high school and middle school student in Orlando, 200,000 kids, they had their laptops to go home with." So they were ready, right, but it had started in 2012. We were trying to do something over a weekend that we weren't ready for.

And distance ed is not for everybody. Online education is not for everybody to learn that way and for teachers to teach. So that was the frustrating part. And as you go through it in your mind, then you – if I could bring them back after spring break, well, for summer school. Then, I was trying to find every way possible to open school face-to-face. And to open – never, as a superintendent – it was the hardest thing in my 25-year career to go through because we weren't ready. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst didn't prepare me – I was getting my doctorate, right? I'm sure you guys will now (laughs) because you have the playbook, right, at least, of what we thought was a playbook.

So, all of that, looking at every day, the COVID numbers. If you recall, as a community, we were all focused on "What's the positivity rate today?" If we get to 10%? If we get to 5%, right, you could open face-to-face. That's what the focus was. Can I continue? Because this is like, I don't know if you have any more questions. But I think when you think through this, right? I remember, it was in the fall – but before I go there – I remember, two, in my mind, like it was yesterday.

I remember, Sunday, before the first day of school, I had no idea how this was going to go. I had never been at a first day of school through virtual, never. I didn't know what to expect; were the systems and the LMS going to work? Were the Canvas going to work, right? I couldn't relax, so I had to go for a walk. And I live close to Red Rock, and I just climbed, and I walked – and I got up on a mountain, on a boulder, and just asked for wisdom. Asked for a prayer – I prayed. I said, "Well, hopefully, all of this works," right? But we had a cyberattack for ransom. So then you're dealing with that, right? Nobody in our schools was at the – but that's what you're dealing with. Then you're fighting a different thing.

So then I remember, it was in the fall, late September-early October, two years ago, and we had lost a kid to suicide. And I said to the team, "How many have we lost already?" Some, but you're paying attention to these things. And I asked the team, "How many did we lose a year ago, to this year?" And when we did the comparison, we had lost as many – it was about 12 – since COVID, from March to September-October, as many as we lost a year ago, right? I'm not blaming COVID. I'm just saying what we had.

So then I said to the team, "Our COVID numbers, that's everything we're paying attention to." So the NWA pulls out a report on the COVID slide. And so I met with the governor. I called the governor and I said – and then the Department of Health. And I said to the Department of Health, "Yes; granted, we need to look at positivity rates. I don't disagree with you. But we need to look at learning [??07:38] We need to look at mental health. We need to look at our suicide numbers, and we need to look at – you know, the other thing that was down was child abuse. Yeah, the

main data reporters are[n't] at school, they're at home. So we can't just look at one data set to see what the predictor [is] to come back to school.

I got criticized for politicizing suicide, and I said, "No, we need to get our eyeballs on our kids. And we need to do what we need to do to get them in school, to keep them safe so that we could start to accelerate the learning." All of that, right, and you're still feeding families, and trying to stay away from everybody as you're feeding. So that's kind of the thought process. Became superintendent to become an expert in all these other things that we were never taught.

**Magdalena Martinez** [08:38]

Dr. Jara, I really appreciate your reflecting on that. And I think that few issues have been as contentious, or organizations have been as contentious as K-12 and the leadership in the K-12 district. So I really appreciate you being as authentic and as transparent – and, of course, the story has been sliced in a million different ways.

And my second question, actually, you started to address. You started to go through this timeline of sorts. And what we're getting from interviewees is that, in many ways, they've not had that opportunity or really reflected on the overall timeline, and really look back and think about, what were the key incidents? What were the key turning points? And so, you started to do that. I really appreciate that. And so, you talked about that first – I think it was the fall of 2020, right, or fall of 2021. Is that right?

**Jesus Jara** [09:41]

No, it was the fall of 2020.

**Magdalena Martinez** [09:43]

Oh, 2020. Okay. Yeah, fall of 2020. So, in thinking about that timeline – and, of course, it doesn't have to be exact. But what has stood out to you, in addition to what you've already shared?

**Jesus Jara** [09:57]

Yeah, no. Thank you, Magdalena. I'm going to tell you that it was – so, as a community, we were meeting weekly with accounting and with the health officials, and this community came together for our entire community. So the timelines when we closed – and I kind of gave you a little bit, right? We closed, and within a week, I think the casinos closed – because it was just the workforce time to be home. And I said, "God, the casinos have never been closed." To where we are – a pivotal point that stands in my hand is when I lost that nine-year-old. The nine-year-old who committed suicide. And I called the governor and I said, "We need to open our schools. We need to find a way to open our schools. I can't lose another kid."

And then I called the unions: the teachers union, all my unions, the five unions. And if you'll recall, nationally, Chicago's teacher's unions were fighting the district about opening schools. I was probably one of the only urban districts that opened with all of our unions side-by-side. Because they said, "Protect our teachers. Protect our employees. But we need to be in school." So they all rallied around our employees, the 40,000-plus, with their bargaining units, opened up, and knew the importance, for the most part, of how – what school needed to – we needed to put

systems [in place] to protect them to be safe. But to come back and be in our classrooms, and we did that in January. It was because of my bargaining partners.

**Magdalena Martinez** [11:55]

So the schools started to open up – got phased in. That was – was it spring, '21?

**Jesus Jara** [12:02]

A year later. March 1<sup>st</sup> was where we did – March 1<sup>st</sup>. So it was a year that we opened up elementary, K – we opened up our K – our elementary schools hybrid.

**Magdalena Martinez** [12:19]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [12:20]

Because we had a cohort here – keep this cohort for contact tracing. You don't remember all the (laughs) – yeah, so we opened up a year later.

**Magdalena Martinez** [12:30]

And I remember the different scenarios presented for public input, for deliberation. As you think about that, what are some things that stood out? What worked? What didn't work?

**Jesus Jara** [12:51]

Well, what didn't work – from the public input – I think everybody – what I learned is that everybody's an expert, and everybody wanted to tell us how to do this, but nobody had a plan, right? And we were all doing the same thing as school systems. I would sit on national calls once a week and share our plans and try to figure this out as superintendent. Having conversations with health officials, learning about ventilation, communicable disease, and all of that. But they were coming in to help.

What I can tell you is, the hybrid didn't work academically. It was hard. It was hard for educators.

**Magdalena Martinez** [13:40]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [13:41]

But it was finding a way to connect our students to our adults. And I think when you look at some other states – because other superintendents, that I would sit with nationally, that they went face-to-face right away, it was kids feeling connected to their school.

**Magdalena Martinez** [14:15]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [14:16]

That was the answer, right? And at least, where instruction was going on, there felt some type of

normalcy, and I think those kids may be a little bit better off academically than ours. But now, it's just accelerating the work.

**Magdalena Martinez** [14:34]

Mm-hmm. And you started to get at some of this too, in terms of the hardest groups hit by the pandemic. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

**Jesus Jara** [14:44]

Yeah. Our high FRL students because they didn't have the resources at home.

**Magdalena Martinez** [14:54]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [14:56]

They were disconnected. Mom and dad had to work, so they were alone. This is where we have seen some of the largest gaps and the largest drops academically, socially, and emotionally.

**Magdalena Martinez** [15:09]

Mm-hmm. And along those lines, is there anything you wish the government, at any level, whether it was federal, state, or local, could have done differently or could do differently in response to a crisis like this?

**Jesus Jara** [15:26]

No. I'll be honest. I think – I mean, you can criticize the governor. You can criticize the federal government. You could criticize me. This was new, right? I think we did the best we could. I think Governor Sisolak, closing the city, and the state, you can criticize it, but I think it saved lives. And at that point, you're just trying to make the best decisions that you have. I sat with him when he closed the schools up, and it was the right thing to do.

**Magdalena Martinez** [15:57]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [15:58]

I think there's no criticism there. We did what we could, with the information that we had, and we were all committed as one.

**Magdalena Martinez** [16:09]

So, in addition to that, I mean there were different types of interventions. There was information or there wasn't information. Just in terms of thinking about the overall experience, what could have – again, any level of government – what could they have done a little bit differently to help out?

**Jesus Jara** [16:30]

Yeah, no. Thank you. So what I'll tell you is this. I think what we – maybe the impact or the greater impact negatively – I would say from K-12 is the lack of investment that this state has had in K-12 education for so many years that it just exacerbated the inequities.

**Magdalena Martinez** [17:03]

Mm-hmm.

**Jesus Jara** [17:04]

Right? And you can see it loud and clear. I gave you an example of where I left off, to what we have here. It was so prevalent because of the lack of investment that we have put in K-12. So then you look at that. Then you look at healthcare. The lack of investment in healthcare in this state, right? Mental health. So it's exacerbated because of where we have not been at the highest.

**Magdalena Martinez** [17:37]

Mm-hmm. Now, a lot of activity happened in the legislature in terms of the new formula funding. And that was actually moved up, right? It was supposed to be phased in, but with additional monies from the federal government. And that's a complicated issue unto itself. But do you have any thoughts around that, in terms of if it will help, or if it has helped?

**Jesus Jara** [18:12]

Well, they haven't funded it yet. (laughs) They need to. And I think the funding formula passing, I think they were able to move some money. But because the formula, in the past, the Nevada Plan, they weren't able to move money out that they were able to do legislatively. Now they just have – through the system there is now, they just have to fund it.

**Magdalena Martinez** [18:36]

Right. So the state has not funded it, but they have been able to fund it through external funds.

**Jesus Jara** [18:42]

Yeah. They've been able to fund somewhat, right? In the last session, they were able to add some money. But if you really look at the report – that it calls out for a billion dollars that need to be added, and they're talking about, "Well, we're going to add 200 million a year for 10 years." I'm like, "Well, so I heard second-graders, by the time they graduate, will be at a national average."

**Magdalena Martinez** [19:04]

Yeah, yeah. I'm going to turn it over to Carmen now, so she can take over the next couple of questions.

**Jesus Jara** [19:11]

Thank you.

**Magdalena Martinez** [19:13]

Thank you.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [19:14]

I've been taking rigorous notes, thank you. And I just want to take this moment to thank you, because I have a 14-year-old sister who struggled. Really, she struggled a lot, primarily with her mental health. So we kept a really close eye on her, but at the end of the day, all she wanted was to go to school. That's it. (laughs) And now that she is in school – she's at Desert Pines – she's doing much better. I mean, you can see it on her face.



**Jesus Jara** [19:38]  
Absolutely.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [19:40]  
Knowing this, what can we learn from the COVID crisis that you think could be lessons for future crises, different types of crises?

**Jesus Jara** [19:49]  
Oh, boy. What could we learn? Hmm, that's a good question, Carmen. Well, we've documented everything that we've done, and now we have systems. We're putting systems in place. We've had them – now, since COVID, right? What can we learn from COVID? I think we learned a lot, actually. That's where we started the grading policy, that it started during the pandemic. I mean some principals were doing it. And I don't want to say that we took advantage of a crisis to make the changes that we did. But we were realizing that kids were not connected to the school, because they didn't sign on or log on, but then they were doing well on the assessments, right?

So then we took it upon ourselves, as we were talking about coming back, and then we changed the grading policy. We took advantage of that, and then made a policy change at the board table – because it was, how do we measure – all I want, as a superintendent, and as a principal, and as an educator is that kids demonstrate that they know that material. Not that you have to do all of these "x through z" to get your grade, right? So we made some policy changes that were more equitable across the board for kids.

And so, taking advantage of always thinking as you're processing what can improve in K-12 as we're going through what we're doing and what we're learning. To then make sure, when you come out on the other end, you're improving the outcomes.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [21:44]  
So, it sounds like the crisis was an opportunity to come back to the more holistic learning model, right?

**Jesus Jara** [21:53]  
Yeah.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [21:54]  
Not regurgitation and memorization but really making sure that you internalize it.

**Jesus Jara** [21:59]  
Yeah, and we did. And I'll tell you, we just opened up a school that is a CTA. So the kids are coming for the technical hands-on at the school – very flexible – and they're doing the content at home distance ed. So giving that more flexible model and our goal is to see if we can expand it, so then it becomes a choice. If you're – like your sister that's 14 that needs that face-to-face interaction. But then we have so many kids that may not want that. And so, it's how we, as a system, are a little bit more flexible and nimble for our kids.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [22:46]

And what is the name of that school?

**Jesus Jara** [22:47]

It's a career technical academy. It just opened in August. The CTA – the Central Technical Academy.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [23:02]

Thank you. We will look into that.

So, along the same lines, what do you think have been the most innovative ways the school districts have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession? So, not just health concerns but economic concerns as well. These can be examples of your collaborations. For instance, you talked about the unions – the programs that you implemented, or anything else that comes to mind. Something that you're most proud of.

**Jesus Jara** [23:27]

I think I'm the most proud of the collaboration with the unions. That we all came together as one for our kids, which is unlike – in urban schools, right? The unions, in some cases, stand firm. And I think that it was a political capital that I had with them, and they saw the need for them to be back in school. I think that's one.

I think some of this work that we're doing now, as we're coming out of the pandemic, right? And taking advantage of an accountability system, holding leaders accountable, and supporting them as well, to do things differently. Like I said, we have – then we also have 17 schools in a pilot that are doing a lot of project-space learning and investing there with the federal dollars. So I think the federal dollars – somebody last week was saying, we thought, when President Obama was in office, with four billion dollars, we were in a race to the top if you recall that. That was four billion.

We have an opportunity, with 122 billion dollars in K-12 education, the single largest investment, up in K-12 funding by this administration. So we have a lot of responsibility to make sure that we invest it in kids.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [24:59]

Actually, that answered my next question, which was, were there any specific policies, at the state or the federal government, implemented that you noticed impacted people, whether that be negatively or positively? And so, for example, we have the CARES Act and the ARPA Act. Would you like to add any to that list?

**Jesus Jara** [25:16]

No – yeah. I think it's the ESR dollars, the investment that they've made.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [25:21]

Yeah.

**Jesus Jara** [25:22]

Now, the challenge, right – what I would just say is, how is that state – because I've had conversations with The Secretary of Education, and his comment was, "We've invested, and now it's up to the states to stand up."

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [25:36]

Do you think that we are finally forming a plan on how to spend that money? Because one thing is to have it injected, right? And another is-

**Jesus Jara** [25:44]

Well, we have our plan. It's on our website. You can look at it. You can send me an email. We could send it to you. Because everything is accounted for.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [25:51]

That's great.

**Jesus Jara** [25:54]

We spent the first two, right, because they came with ESR-1, and ESR-2, and we are 30% spent on ESR-3. The rest is spent encumbered, right? It's public and it's on our website.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [26:11]

The last question, Dr. Jara, are you hopeful? And I'm looking at you, and you sound hopeful right now.

**Jesus Jara** [26:18]

Absolutely.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [26:19]

Yeah.

**Jesus Jara** [26:20]

I'm excited.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [26:20]

So what are you hopeful for? What are you hopeful about?

**Jesus Jara** [26:23]

I'm excited. So we just released our student outcomes. We've recovered about half in third-grade reading. We've dropped 15 points, and we've recovered close to eight percentage points in one year. So now, we're hopeful, and our team is very engaged. We were able to invest a lot of our resources in things that the state should be investing in – but that's a different research study – from the federal government. So I'm excited about the direction, and we're rebounding nicely. And we took an opportunity with COVID, as we were building systems, and building things to come back, that didn't exist in the way that – it's kind of putting together a school system, which is exciting. They've got a great team. And we're going to come out on the other end. I think we're

going to be faster than others. We have a ways to go. But we're investing in our educators, we're investing in professional learning and supporting them. So, yeah. I am excited.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [27:27]

I really like what you said just now about building systems, right, when you're working as part of one. I think we should quote that, Dr. Martinez. (laughs)

**Jesus Jara** [27:34]

Yeah.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [27:35]

Do you have any more questions?

**Magdalena Martinez** [27:36]

Yes. Just – finally, Dr. Jara, who can we reach out to for any kind of reports or documents? I'm sure there are plenty out there that are circulating. Is there anyone in particular that we should reach out to, to learn more, for instance, about the 17 schools that are project-based? The new Central Academy – Technology Academy. And I know that a lot of deliberation has gone around how to spend the monies, right? And so, I'm sure there are reports, surveys, things like that.

**Jesus Jara** [28:11]

Yeah. Her name is – Kelly Ballard is her maiden name. But Kelly Paul. Carmen can get you her name. It's Kelly. She's my chief strategy officer.

**Magdalena Martinez** [28:26]

Oh, okay. We can look her up.

**Jesus Jara** [28:29]

She's got all of that information.

**Magdalena Martinez** [28:33]

That would be great. We want to make sure we provide context for any kind of work that we do, whether it's policy briefs, academic white papers, or anything like that.

**Jesus Jara** [28:49]

She's managing all of my ESR dollars, aligning them to our strategic plan, so that's also good. And she can get her hands on the Central Technical Academy, and she can give you all the information on the 17 pilot schools and everything else we're doing.

**Magdalena Martinez** [29:05]

Excellent. Thank you so much, Dr. Jara. We really appreciate your time.

**Jesus Jara** [29:08]

Thank you. Absolutely. Thank you so much. I appreciate you.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [29:12]  
Thank you. It was a real pleasure.

**End of audio: 29:13**