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Dr. Sharon L. Contreras Named CEO of The Innovation Project

RALEIGH, NC (January 14, 2022) – The Innovation Project (TIP), a nonprofit collaborative working group of innovative North Carolina school district superintendents and their teams, announced today that Sharon L. Contreras will lead the organization as its next Chief Executive Officer.

A transformational leader and a passionate advocate for children, Dr. Contreras understands the role of district and school innovation in improving educational equity and in preparing every student to graduate college and career ready.

“We CAN build brighter futures for our children. While the pandemic has exacerbated long entrenched challenges and inequities, it has also called on us to harness our creativity and will to innovate. Building on the extraordinary legacy of The Innovation Project, my vision is to use its significant human, social, and political capital to galvanize adults and children to think, act and work in new ways to achieve outsized gains in student outcomes and eradicate racial achievement gaps that ultimately hold us all back from realizing our individual and collective potential.”

Dr. Contreras started her career as a high school English teacher before serving as a principal and district leader in Rockford, Illinois, and then as the Chief Academic Officer in school districts in Georgia and Rhode Island, and she remains a teacher at heart. Dr. Contreras made history as the first woman of color to lead one of New York state’s largest districts, serving as superintendent of the Syracuse City School District from 2011-2016. She then became the first woman, first person of Latina heritage, and first superintendent with a disability to lead Guilford County Schools, where she has served since July 2016.

Under Dr. Contreras’s leadership, Guilford County Schools has become a leader in district innovation, restructuring central administration to better support teaching and learning and to strengthen principal and instructional supervision in partnership with some of the nation’s most innovative and credible district reform organizations. Dr. Contreras and her team have led pioneering initiatives to expand broadband connectivity to students without internet access; provide comprehensive tutoring to underperforming students; strengthen the principal pipeline for males of color; increase the number of middle school students enrolled in computer science

courses; develop youth leadership for systemic change in the areas of racial equity and social justice; provide pathways for students to move toward in-demand career fields through signature career academies; and provide comprehensive staff training to prevent sexual assault and protect children from abuse.

During Dr. Contreras's tenure, Guilford County Schools has increased academic achievement in all tested subject areas at all levels and for all demographic groups (2019), and successfully narrowed black-white and Hispanic-white achievement gaps. The district has dramatically increased student participation in tuition-free dual enrollment programs, achieved a graduation rate of 91.5%, and set a district record with seniors earning more than \$193 million in college scholarships and grants.

Deena Hayes-Greene, chair of Guilford County Schools' Board of Education, praised Contreras. "Dr. Contreras has provided extraordinary leadership in these dynamic times. Even prior to the pandemic she was relentless in keeping us focused on what we can and must do to improve outcomes for students. She is creative, courageous and brilliant. We will miss her but remain grateful for all the ways her contributions here will be felt for years to come."

In the Syracuse City Schools, Dr. Contreras led transformative projects including the creation of an Innovation Zone comprised of low-performing schools implementing turnaround strategies; development of teacher and building leader career pathways to extend the reach of excellent educators through the Opportunity Culture Initiative; opening new, innovative schools as part of a portfolio system; and expanding CTE and STEM programs in areas including Cybersecurity, Forensic Science/Crime Scene Investigation, and Geospatial Technology.

A lifelong warrior for equity and an educational leader for excellence, Dr. Contreras's commitments outside school and district leadership have extended to projects with state and national education organizations including the Council for Great City Schools, Howard University's Urban Superintendent's Academy, the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents, and Chiefs for Change.

"We are excited that Dr. Contreras will be lending her experience and expertise to The Innovation Project," said Dr. Kim Morrison, Chair of TIP's Board of Directors and Superintendent of Mt. Airy City Schools. "She is a well-known leader throughout the country and has led efforts in innovation and equity in her amazing career. The Innovation Project is a national leader in innovation, and Dr. Contreras will continue to champion work for children through this great superintendent-led organization."

Co-founders Gerry Hancock and Ann McColl created The Innovation Project in 2015 to provide a space for forward-thinking superintendents to address complex challenges in public education through innovation and collaboration. Throughout its seven-year history, TIP has helped district leaders "see around corners," working together to design a more equitable, learner-centered future for public school students.

TIP currently has 17 district members and a small, nimble team of employees and contractors with expertise in educational leadership, policy, and program development. TIP is governed by a nonprofit Board of Directors made up of member districts' superintendents. TIP's work is driven by the themes of rethinking, reimagining, and redesigning public education.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, TIP has focused on supporting districts in moving from the COVID-19 crisis to lasting transformation through bold and courageous leadership.

Dr. Contreras earned a doctorate in educational leadership and policy analysis and a master's in educational administration from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and a master's in English literature and English education and a bachelors in English literature from the State University of New York at Binghamton. She has earned numerous awards for her educational leadership and civic work. In November, AASA, The School Superintendents Association, named Dr. Contreras a finalist for its 2022 Women in School Leadership Award.

Dr. Contreras will continue to lead Guilford County Schools through the end of the academic year and will start with The Innovation Project in August 2022.

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About The Innovation Project

The Innovation Project (TIP) brings together forward-thinking North Carolina school district superintendents to find and implement innovative and transformative practices in public education so that students and their communities can thrive. We build networks across our member school districts and communities that accelerate and sustain innovation.

TIP seeks superintendents who want to be a part of a close, dynamic community of leaders to rethink, reimagine, and redesign public education. Equity is a foundation for TIP—every child, every community. We design initiatives with an awareness of issues of access, and we aim to remove structural, systemic barriers for students and their communities related to race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and economic resources. We seek to engage in work that enables educators, leaders, and students alike to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, to prepare them for the challenges of learning and leading in the 21st century.