Pedro Rivera, SDL’s former superintendent, hopes to be an agent of change as Gov. Wolf’s education secretary

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HARRISBURG — Newly elected Gov. Tom Wolf has promised to make education a main priority — and he has enlisted the help of a Lancaster County administrator to help change policy.

The governor last month nominated Pedro Rivera, superintendent of the School District of Lancaster, to be the state’s top education official.

As secretary of education, the 42-year-old Rivera will have a wide-ranging role in helping to oversee and create education policy affecting students in kindergarten through college.

Rivera, who has been learning the layout of the Capitol as he makes the rounds to meet with each senator, discussed with LNP the importance of his new position, the biggest problems facing the public education system, what he hopes to accomplish and what he thinks about joining the ranks of state government.

What was your reaction to being named secretary of education? Did you have reservations about leaving SDL?

To be asked to lead the department at this time is an amazing opportunity. I was floored. And, more importantly, being asked to take on this position under Gov. Wolf’s leadership — when education is first and foremost on his agenda — was an opportunity of a lifetime.

It is humbling and, quite frankly, a little scary because it is at the forefront.

The School District of Lancaster had become home to me. I was happy being superintendent and loved my community. But I became secretary of education because I believe we need change. When the governor

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OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME

Pedro Rivera, former superintendent of School District of Lancaster, is Gov. Tom Wolf’s pick to lead the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
Pedro Rivera talks about what he hopes to do as the secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Rivera: Wolf's pick

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offered me the job, he told me that he wanted me to do what I've been advocating for. How could I say no?

What are your top three priorities? And which is the most immediately achievable?

First is to really invest the time needed to bring support for more school funding. I will be working with the governor and the Legislature to work on a new funding formula, and provide the narrative that helps people understand how that funding can best support kids.

Second is expanding learning opportunities for kids. From providing our youngest kids with early learning programs to giving our high school students the skills and information they need to prepare them for life after graduation.

Third is building confidence in our public school system. As secretary of education, it is important for me to bring the discussion of education back to what it's really about — our kids. It shouldn't be all about punitive measures, assessments and resources. Education is about teaching kids. Some increase to funding is the first sign of success I think we're going to see. As you've noticed, our governor has been very aggres-
sive and masterful working across the aisle to engage multiple stakeholders.

How do you plan to get your initiatives through a politically divided government? What happened in Lancaster is a perfect example of this. I worked closely with local lawmakers like Rep. Sturla, a Democrat, and Sen. Smucker, a Republican, on a regular basis.

In many cases — when it came to education — there was agreement in terms of investment and in terms of being responsible. Both stakeholders, whether they were conservative or liberal, agreed we need strong schools. The journey there is where there is a difference of views.

My job is to connect the dots and work in a way that we don't allow the journey to that goal end because we get lost in that fight. It will be hard, but we can get there.

What goals do you have for education funding and how much do you anticipate it might increase over last year? We'd definitely see more. Folks may disagree how much, but we know every district in the Commonwealth has seen cuts. But those cuts have been disproportionate. Our neediest kids, in many cases, received the biggest cuts.

I can't say my goal is a specific dollar amount, but our goal is to bring back funding to districts across the board. And I think the will to do that's out there.

How will your leadership style differ from previous secretaries? Being an educator, I know the importance of listening. I'm taking the time to listen and observe and will make decisions based on the needs of our organizations and constituents.

The great aspect is that everyone wants to be involved in the discussion, so it feels like I'm meeting with everyone and anyone. Every opportunity I have I use it to talk about education.

The further up in education leadership you go, the further removed you get from students. How will you stay connected to the classroom?

I've always made a point of taking time to visit classes and that isn't going to change now. It's good to remind ourselves as to what our jobs are and who we serve.

When the governor and I spoke about taking this position on, I shared with him that I wanted to be as visible as I possibly could in communities. And he said that he would expect nothing less.

Will you commute from Lancaster or are you moving to Harrisburg? I'm staying in Lancaster. It's an easy drive in and out. I'm able to stay in the office, which is not often, I can take the train in. I'll also be able to stay connected to the district. My son attends fifth grade in the Lancaster city schools and I have a 4-year-old who will begin school next year, so I will get to be active as a parent.

You have a reputation as an advocate not afraid to challenge state lawmakers. How do you plan to change the system now that you have the power to do so?

I started as an activist, participating in picket lines over conditions in Philadelphia schools and supporting fair funding. And I remember being conflicted when I was offered my first administrator job. Then a mentor of mine told me that we need advocates to take what the activists are saying and make it part of the system.

So my values have not changed at all. I have always believed education is the one true equalizer and can change the quality of life for communities. I know it because I lived it.

But this is new. There is a line between educator and politician. I still don't view myself as a politician but the beauty of it is that I get to push for something I really believe in. And I would not have taken on this opportunity for anyone other than the current governor because he ran for all the right reasons.

When do you expect to be confirmed as secretary, and do you anticipate any issues with the process? I have no clue when I might be confirmed. At this point, I've probably met with a dozen or more lawmakers about education. The advocacy is not about getting me into this seat, the advocacy is about getting folks to support public education. So far, it has been going well.