

The Lift Every Voice series spotlights the individual voices in our alliance who guide us to wrestle with entrenched inequities and structural racism as we all learn, listen and develop strategies for change.

“ I grew up in rural Guatemala, where schooling looked very different. There wasn't high-speed internet, access to technology, or many of the things that we equip our schools with. I didn't even have access to a computer until I was 11. My mother immigrated to the United States when I was seven months old, and in 2011, I joined her. I was in the middle of high school, didn't speak English, and was behind academically. I went to Doris Henderson Newcomer's School, and many students from other countries were more academically advanced, especially in math and science. I thought I would be able to learn English in six months, but it was more difficult than I anticipated, so I spent a full year there. I had a lot of catching up to do. I am grateful to the educators that changed my life. ”



José Oliva is the youngest and first Latino to serve as a chief of staff of a large school district in North Carolina. Former Superintendent Mo Green met him not long after he immigrated to the United States while Oliva was a high school student at the Newcomers School. Green became a mentor and hired him as a fellow at the Z Smith Reynolds Foundation. Oliva then worked for Replacements, Ltd., leading the company's philanthropic investments and advocacy. Former GCS Superintendent Dr. Sharon Contreras hired him as deputy chief of staff to manage various strategic initiatives, including the 2022 school bond information campaign, where he had the opportunity to work closely with current Superintendent Dr. Whitney Oakley. In the fall of 2022, Dr. Oakley selected Oliva to lead her transition as superintendent and the district's organizational alignment to improve student achievement at scale.

Julia Osborne, a retired educator and active GEA ambassador, sat down with Oliva to understand more of his dynamic story.

Did you see yourself reflected in administration or teachers when you were in school?

I went to the Greensboro College Middle College. There were no Latinos. There was not even anybody who spoke English as a second language. I wanted to go there because they offered free college classes! I had a group of mentors around me, people from church and from the community who were looking after me, who told me to apply for this scholarship, or who took me on a college tour. As community members, we should want the best for the people in our community because when they do well, our community does well. Who doesn't want to live in a community that has pride in its schools? Schools are the core of this country.

What motivates you to do this work?

I truly believe in the power of voting and building democracies. Not many people around the world get to vote. Here in the US, when we vote, we say this is our choice of what we want to do. Because of the people who voted, we are going to rebuild dozens of schools. That is a clear impact of voting. The students in those new schools are going to have the tools they need to compete in the world and achieve their dreams. If no one bothered voting for the bond, we couldn't do that.

What are your hopes for the community?

I'm very excited about the future of Guilford County. This is a community we get to build together. We are going to build world-class schools, attract and retain world-class teachers, and attract businesses, which will bring good, high-paying jobs.

What are your hopes for children who are sitting in desks right now in this community?

I'm excited because I think this is the generation that will really change the world. My hope is that we are providing them with the tools to address the challenges so that no matter what comes their way, they can think critically, prioritize collaboration, and have a commitment to give back. If we support their success, I think that they can accomplish anything they want.



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