

# READER

## What's next for CPS?

*New leadership and looming budget problems are on the horizon for Chicago Public Schools.*

by [Maureen Kelleher](#) June 26, 2025

June 18 was the last day on the job for Pedro Martinez, the long-embattled chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools. Only a week before he left, the Chicago Board of Education narrowly voted to appoint Mayor Brandon Johnson's senior director of education policy, Dr. Macqueline King, as interim CEO.

The leadership change comes after months of strife over power and money between Martinez and the mayor. Johnson wanted Martinez to support borrowing \$300 million to make a pension payment for nonteaching CPS staff and fund the new Chicago Teachers Union contract. Martinez refused.

Some parents see this moment as a refreshing change from all the drama of the past year. "I'm looking forward to a clean slate," said Corina Pedraza, a CPS parent and community organizer who works at the Back of the Yards public library. "There's a partially elected school board now. We have a new person coming in to replace Pedro. And for the first time in a long time—not ever, but in a super-long time—we have a progressive mayor. I'm excited to see what could happen now that those three are aligning."

Others are more skeptical. "I'm not optimistic about the interim CEO. I believe she has been placed there to do Mayor Brandon Johnson's bidding," said CPS parent Natasha Dunn, a longtime activist in South Shore. "The board is not addressing the literacy crisis. They are not addressing the schools that are half empty. That needs to happen, and I think it's not going to happen."

For months, rumors swirled that the mayor's choice for interim leader of CPS would be his chief of staff, former state senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas. CPS parent Mark Smithivas, who volunteered on her first campaign for the Illinois state senate, said, "I would have loved to have [her] be the interim CEO. I found her very thoughtful about education policies. She has experience as an elected official and a chief of staff."

But in March, the school board unanimously voted to require both the interim and the final hire to hold a superintendent's license. Pacione-Zayas does not have that credential, but

King does. She will serve as interim until the currently underway search for a permanent superintendent is complete.

### **Task number one: fixing finances**

King's first task will be to find a way to close the school district's estimated \$529 million budget deficit. In mid-June, the Civic Federation, a fiscal watchdog of the Chicago and Illinois governments, warned that [the estimate is based on questionable assumptions](#). Among these assumptions are that CPS will not see any cuts to federal funding and that the city will make a massive contribution to school district finances through tax increment financing (TIF) funds. The Civic Federation also noted that the budgets sent to schools in May were based on an even lower estimate of the budget shortfall.

Additionally, Mayor Johnson wants CPS to contribute \$175 million to a city pension fund that includes non-teaching staff in the school district. The city, not the school district, is legally obligated to pay into the pension fund. Under Mayor Lori Lightfoot, CPS began contributing to the fund to more clearly separate school district finances from the city. But this year, the school board did not contribute.

"I definitely don't perceive that this will be easy," King told the Chicago [Sun-Times](#) earlier this month.

### **Who Is Macqueline King?**

Previously an award-winning CPS principal, King's record was tarnished by investigations into negligence of student safety protocols during her years as principal of Uptown's Courtenay Language Arts Center. She never received more than a warning for her actions, and recently told the [Sun-Times](#) she takes full responsibility for what happened in the incidents that were investigated.

Back in the early 2000s, aspiring teacher Monica Sims Lewis met King, who worked as a mentor teacher at the Chicago Academy elementary school. There, the Academy for Urban School Leadership trains aspiring teachers through a yearlong residency under the supervision of experienced mentor teachers. Though King didn't mentor her directly, Lewis said, "I saw how great she was with students. She was one of those teachers a lot of us young teachers looked up to and admired." In fact, King inspired Lewis to earn National Board Certification, an advanced credential for outstanding teachers. Today, Lewis is a senior managing director with Teach for America Detroit.

A CPS [press release announcing](#) King's appointment noted her recent experience working across city agencies to enroll migrant students and expand access to early childhood programs. "Identifying an interim candidate who understands the services, components,

concerns, and politics that go along with this role—and how to balance them—was paramount,” said Sean Harden, board president.

Board members have said they hope to make a permanent hire by the fall, but [a brief from the Council of the Great City Schools](#), a nonprofit that supports the country’s largest city school districts, suggests a realistic timeline could be as long as nine months.