

Chicago Public Schools [Brandon Johnson](#)

Chicago is kicking off the search for its next schools chief

By [Mila Koumpilova](#) | March 3, 2025, 5:19pm EST

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Chicago Public Schools headquarters on Jan. 15, 2025 in Chicago, Illinois. The district is launching a search for its next top leader. (Laura McDermott for Chalkbeat)

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Chicago's school board is kicking off its search for the district's next top leader — one of its most consequential decisions, coming on the heels of unprecedented leadership turmoil in the district.

The board is enlisting Alma Advisory Group to run a national search for a replacement for Chicago Public Schools CEO Pedro Martinez. The previous school board [fired Martinez without cause](#) in December, which, under his contract, allowed him to remain at the district's helm until late June. Martinez makes about \$360,000 a year and will receive \$130,000 in severance pay.

Now, the current board — made up of 11 members appointed by Mayor Brandon Johnson and 10 elected members — will need to agree on a job description with a clear set of expectations for the new leader, a task experts say is key to a successful search.

The mayor, whose predecessors have traditionally made the call on whom to hire as district CEO, could also push for someone he favors as mayoral control winds down. Or he might take a more hands-off role in recognition of the city's transition to a fully-elected school board.

A number of other factors could complicate the efforts. Several other large urban districts are in the middle of their own superintendent searches, potentially setting up some competition for what experts say is a relatively limited pool of candidates with the experience and leadership chops to run a district with an almost [\\$10 billion budget](#) and 45,000 employees.

Months of upheaval at the school district and battles with the mayor's office, which led to the dramatic ouster of Martinez, could turn off some strong contenders. A fairly tight timeline until his June exit could also require the board to find an interim CEO.

Will this CEO search break with the past?

On paper, the school board has long been tasked with finding and appointing district CEOs by a majority vote.

But in practice, during the past three decades of mayoral control of CPS, mayors have generally installed their CEO choices in the position — often close allies without much prior experience in education. The school board, which used to be fully appointed by the mayor, voted in line with the mayor's wishes.

In 2021, former Mayor Lori Lightfoot charged her board with conducting a national search to replace CEO Janice Jackson after she stepped down. But ultimately, Lightfoot interviewed the top contenders and signed off on Martinez' hiring.

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In districts with elected school boards, their members are squarely in charge of hiring the district's top leader. Amid the city's transition to a fully elected board, Johnson could take a more hands-off role. Still, it's clear that he could wield significant influence over the board's pick thanks to his appointees and CTU-aligned elected members.

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The new board's rules say an incumbent CEO cannot be precluded from joining the candidate pool.

Sean Harden, the board president, said the search to fill one of the most consequential jobs in Chicago is a top priority. But he said it would be premature to discuss it as the board seeks to rally around a profile of the ideal candidate and other next steps.

"You want to make sure it's a thoughtful approach," he said. "We only have one chance to make a first impression."

Is it a good time to hire a new CEO?

Chicago could have some competition for talent as it sets out to fill its top education job. San Diego, Memphis, and New Orleans are all searching for permanent leaders, according to the Council of the Great City Schools. Separately, Clark County, Nevada, the fifth largest school district in the country, which includes Las Vegas, is in the final stages of interviews. (Martinez was on a short list for the Clark County top job, but was not selected to be one of four finalists.)

Ray Hart, the Council's executive director, said there are not quite as many districts looking for new leaders as there were right after the pandemic. Still, he likens the job of lining up the next leader of the country's fourth largest district to "finding that needle in a haystack."

"There are only a handful of individuals across the country that have the expertise to run a large urban district such as Chicago," he said.

The district's new CEO would be stepping in months after his predecessor was fired without cause at the urging of the district's teachers union in the midst of contentious contract negotiations. Those recent power struggles could affect the search, Hart said, but might not turn off all interested candidates.

"In most of our districts, complicated politics are par for the course," he said. Still, he added, "The board is being interviewed just as much as the candidate. It's a mutual process."

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Chicago board member Carlos Rivas said he worries that the recent turmoil could affect the district's applicant pool — and districts that might compete with CPS for talent are further along in their own searches.

"What if this amazing, once-in-a-lifetime leader is interviewing for Memphis Public Schools right now?" he said.

Martinez continues to fight his dismissal in court, arguing that a board of six Johnson appointees inappropriately fired him in a hastily called meeting days before Christmas.

But Martinez, who served as superintendent of the San Antonio Independent School District before being picked to lead CPS, is also looking for a new job.

Some elected school board members joined the new partly-elected Chicago school board in January feeling hopeful that there might be a way to reverse Martinez' firing. But they have largely accepted that's likely not possible.

"I think at this point his fate is sealed," said Rivas. "He's an amazing leader, and I am sad we're losing him, but I think it's best that he look for his next job."

Will Chicago residents get a say?

Earlier this year, the district solicited bids from executive search firms that can manage the quest for a new CPS CEO. Out of four finalists, board members gravitated toward Alma Advisory Group.

Alma is a known entity to CPS, having handled previous administrator searches, and drew support for its Chicago roots. They've also worked with several urban districts on recent superintendent searches.

CPS did not respond to questions this week about how much the company would be paid for the search. Other details, such as the timeline for the search, are also still to be determined.

It's not clear if CPS or the school board will seek direct input from communities. But the CEO search will give the 10 newly elected school board members their first chance to represent their communities. Rivas said Alma representatives will begin meeting one-on-one with them in the coming week to gauge what they'd like to see in the next CPS leader.

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Board member Che "Rhymefest" Smith proposed a resolution to require that the next CPS top administrator hold a superintendent's license, [as reported earlier by WBEZ](#). Superintendents often have an advanced degree in education and additional training.

Smith and other members have argued that the district should seek someone with education experience to take the helm, but others have voiced concerns about ensuring a larger pool of candidates. The status of that resolution is not clear, and Smith did not respond to a request for comment.

Sendhil Revuluri, who served as board vice president during the roughly five-month 2021 search that [brought Martinez to CPS](#), said it's crucial that the board begin [by setting clear goals](#) for the school district with community input — then look for candidates whose experience and skills best position them to meet these goals.

Revuluri also said he would strongly encourage the board to spell out a clear and perhaps more public process for evaluating its next CEO, with concrete criteria and a plan to regularly monitor measurable outcomes. He said not including such a process in Martinez' contract was a "massive missed opportunity." That year, CPS' search drew 20 applicants, but Revuluri felt few had the large district experience that made them a fit for the Chicago job.

"You need to know exactly what it is you are looking for before you can go find it," he said.