Opinion

Opinion: How do you decide who gets your vote for the new elected school board?

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Gift Article



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An elected school board for Chicago is one of those ideas that sounds a lot better than it likely is going to be.

Even Mayor Brandon Johnson, who ran on a promise to get this done, had second thoughts as the deadline for electing the full 21-member board approached. Johnson worked with allies in Springfield to slow the roll a bit. Now we are poised to vote for only 10 board members; Johnson will appoint 11, including the president. We'll have a fully elected board in 2027.

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Ever since Chicago's mayor was given control over the board in 1995, I've been in favor of the accountability it promises voters. Now, if Johnson's decision to play musical chairs with his handpicked board doesn't bring stability to our schools, voters will surely hold him accountable. When the music stops, Johnson could be the one without a seat.

But a 21-member board? Anyone who has managed a board for a nonprofit or corporation will know this is a red flag.

And Chicago Public Schools-watchers know it, too. In the early 1990s, when the so-called "United Nations board" numbered only 15, they would grandstand at every meeting on behalf of their (narrow) constituency. Latinx members focused on overcrowded Northwest Side schools. A Muslim member took every opportunity to argue that pork shouldn't be served in school cafeterias. Black board members fought for the equity that still alludes many of their communities.

All were critical issues to address. But with board members often making their case as tangents to unrelated agenda items, they only decreased their effectiveness.

So how will our newly elected and appointed board members work together as a team focused on stabilizing finances and improving outcomes for all students? I'd say it's up to us, the voters, but that's not exactly how these races are shaping up.

Crain's columnist Greg Hinz and other local media are providing extensive information about candidates and their positions. This coverage suggests the best way to choose who gets your vote is to follow the money.

In nearly all districts, our choices are warped by money dropping on two kinds of candidates. On the one hand, we have the Our Schools Coalition, working for Chicago Teachers Union-backed candidates pledging to support fully funded, sustainable schools. On the other, we have the conservative-driven movement to replace public schools with charters, led by the Illinois Policy Institute and the Illinois Network of Charter Schools' super PAC, funded by billionaires and others who don't live here, including Palos Heights resident Paul Vallas, who lost the mayoral race to Johnson. They back candidates with a commitment to using public school dollars to support private schools by expanding charters and using a voucher system repeatedly proven to destabilize public schools. If you're nonetheless tempted by their arguments, consider the charter network Acero's abrupt announcement of plans to close seven schools in June, taking by surprise more than 2,000 students in such underserved communities as Pilsen and South Lawndale.

Flirting with a third candidate? Proceed cautiously. Just as in the current presidential race, if you reject candidates drawing big money on either side, throwing your support behind a third candidate might well be a wasted vote. Better to pick a lane.

For my part, I'm strongly opposed to the charter school lobby as an effort to serve private school families and not communities. I will cast my vote to oppose their efforts to control this board.

While I'm uncomfortable with the CTU's current hold on the mayor's office, I'm not using a broad brush to disqualify CTU-backed candidates. Teachers are front-line workers, and my gut says to trust them. As a parent of CPS graduates, wife of a retired CPS teacher, mother of a current CPS teacher and a longtime public-school activist, I am banking on teachers who best understand how to improve schools in all neighborhoods. Research backs their push for more social services to support school communities. Despite the clumsy appeal for these changes advanced by both the