



IN THE KNOW: WHO'S IN CHARGE OF THE PHILLY SCHOOLS?

Arlene Ackerman is gone. Who is making decisions about what comes next?

Although the city schools are legally controlled by the state, the answer is far more complicated. The truth is that lots of people have a hand in the operation of the Philly schools.

Choosing the next superintendent is just one of many obstacles facing the schools. There's the \$629 million budget deficit (now a little less thanks to a \$53 million bailout, including a big chunk from tax hikes on city property owners). There's the state investigation after a buried 2009 report revealed suspected cheating on standardized tests at 28 district schools and seven charters. There are layoffs across the district – not just teachers, but bilingual counselors and others.

Then there's the refusal of the union representing teachers to talk to the school district, which is seeking \$75 million in concessions from its five unions. Will talks start with Ackerman gone?

This **IN THE KNOW** provides a “Who's Who” guide to help you – and us – figure out where the buck stops in making big decisions about the schools.

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Isn't it obvious that the person in charge of the schools is whoever the superintendent is?

Not really. The superintendent has a big say in how the district is run. And, with Ackerman, this included everything from the academic direction of the schools to the awarding of contracts to install surveillance cameras. But, at least in theory, there's a higher authority than the superintendent.

What is this “higher authority?”

It's something called the School Reform Commission. The SRC was created in 2001 when state government took over the city schools.

Isn't this the same state government that just took away \$272 million in funding for the schools?

Yes. But, as we'll tell you, the state has one more appointee to the SRC than the city. So the balance of power isn't tilted completely towards state government.

Why did the state take over the schools?

Because, in 2001, the school district faced a budget deficit of over \$200 million and years of poor student performance on standardized tests. In 2000, the state put Philadelphia on a list of 11 school districts that would be taken over if test scores didn't improve. They didn't.



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Tell me about more about the SRC.

The SRC has five members: three appointed by the Governor of Pennsylvania, two by the Mayor of Philadelphia. The Governor's appointees (actually they were appointed by former Governor Rendell) – Denise McGregor Armbrister and Joseph Dworetzky – serve five year terms. Mayor Nutter's appointees – SRC Chairman Robert Archie, Jr. and Johnny Irizarry – serve for four years. You can read about them at <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/s/src/>.

Can't you count? That's four members, not five.

There's a vacancy on the SRC. In June, Governor Tom Corbett appointed Philadelphia lawyer Pedro Ramos – a member of the former Board of Education (we'll tell you what that was in a minute) – to fill the vacancy. But Ramos needs to be confirmed by the state Senate before joining the SRC.

Did the SRC fire Ackerman?

According to today's press release, the SRC and Ackerman mutually agreed that she should step down. But, as recently as Friday, Ackerman said she was staying. Maybe that statement was real or maybe it was part of a negotiating ploy.

Would the SRC get rid of Ackerman if Governor Corbett and Mayor Nutter wanted her to stay?

Highly doubtful.

Has the SRC been at war with Ackerman?

Actually, no. One of the criticisms of the SRC – which is legally responsible for the operation, management and academic direction of the school district – has been that it pretty much let Ackerman have her way since she arrived in June 2008. In March, the SRC extended Ackerman's contract to 2014.

What happened between March and today?

The magnitude of the school district's budget deficit (\$629 million) and the buried report on alleged cheating on the standardized tests (which called into question the school district's reports of academic gains) piled onto a growing anti-Ackerman outcry. Ackerman's my-way-or-the-highway personality didn't help. In recent weeks, Chairman Archie (whose own leadership has been questioned because of potential conflicts-of-interest) said "Dr. Ackerman is and continues to be the superintendent of this school district." Reading between the lines though, this wasn't exactly an enthusiastic endorsement of her leadership.

What has Mayor Nutter said about Arlene Ackerman?

Publically, the mayor said that he doesn't discuss personnel matters that belong to non-city agencies. Given an issue of such importance, it would be very unusual if the mayor didn't have private conversations about Ackerman's tenure, especially with Chairman Robert Archie, his appointee to the SRC. (The mayor wasn't too happy when the superintendent saved full-day kindergarten without



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telling him after he pushed for a hefty property tax increase – during an election year no less – to help the schools.)

If the state controls the schools, does the mayor’s opinion really matter?

Remember that the mayor appoints two of the five SRC members. And he has been talking more and more about wanting greater accountability from the schools. He has even said he plans to be the “Education Mayor” during his expected second term.

Is that just talk or is there any action behind it?

Actually, in the wake of this year’s property tax hike, an Education Accountability Agreement among the School District (signed by SRC Chair Archie), the city (signed by Mayor Nutter) and state government (signed by Education Secretary Ron Tomalis) provides for a closer working relationship and more information-sharing about the school district’s finances, operations, personnel, programs, facilities and contracts. You can read the full Agreement at:

http://www.phila.gov/pdfs/Memorandum_Understanding.pdf.

Has the information-sharing started?

Yes – and one of the documents may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back: what appeared to be a contract negotiation from Ackerman’s lawyers seeking increased pay for staying on the job and health care for life. The negotiations went nowhere, but the fact that Ackerman was seeking this on top of her \$348,140 base salary and a potential for a \$.1.5 million severance package if forced to leave without cause infuriated the public.

Where is Governor Corbett in this mess?

No comment from the Governor. But, as with the mayor, you can be sure his administration is talking to its SRC appointees.

Does Philadelphia City Council play a role in the schools?

The School District has to present its budget to City Council every year. And it was City Council that had to give the go-ahead to the property tax increase to bail out the schools. Also, and this is important, city taxpayers support approximately 1/3 of the school district’s budget – or around \$900 million – each year. If and when taxpayers are unhappy about this, you can be sure City Council members will hear from them.

Are members of the General Assembly saying anything?

When the state budget negotiations were happening this spring, most of the Philadelphia delegation put up a fight to stop the massive cuts (around \$272 million) to the city schools. Now that this fight is over (at least for the time being), the focus of the local representatives in Harrisburg has switched to another issue: Whether it’s time to end the SRC’s control of the schools.



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Are they right: Is it time to end state control of the schools?

Back when he was running for mayor in 2007, candidate Nutter seemed to be in favor of returning the schools to local control. As Mayor, he has receded from that position. But there are at least two bills in the state House to abolish the SRC. One bill, sponsored by Philadelphia Democrat Louise Bishop, calls for the creation of an elected School Board. Another, this one sponsored by Philadelphia Representative Angel Cruz, urges a ballot referendum that asks the voters whether they want the SRC or an elected School Board.

Don't most counties have elected school boards?

Yes, Philadelphia is the only exception in Pennsylvania. Although Philadelphia had a school board before the SRC, the board's members were appointed by the mayor – not elected.

So there really two issues on the table: replacing Ackerman and possibly replacing the SRC?

First things first. Replacing Arlene Ackerman is today's issue. The SRC has named Deputy Superintendent/Deputy Chief Executive Leroy Nunery as the Acting Superintendent. The SRC also said that a search to recruit a permanent superintendent would be launched "as expeditiously as possible."

Will there be any fallout from Ackerman's departure?

Although Ackerman approved the separation deal, she has plenty of supporters who feel she has been treated badly. One of them is Philadelphia state Senator Tony Williams, who has accused the SRC of pushing the superintendent out the door by making decisions without her and issuing directives to her staff without her consent. There have been pro-Ackerman rallies too, including at an SRC meeting that Ackerman didn't attend. You can expect some of this hostility to continue.

Why would anyone want to be superintendent in this town?

Great question. Serving as a big city superintendent is hard anywhere in the country. The salary and perks are great, but the politics are very tough. There are bound to be several hats in the ring though.

Will one of the hats be Nunery's?

Definitely. He was a finalist in the superintendent search that brought Ackerman here and he has already said that he wants the job permanently.

Back to the original question: where does the buck stop?

The short answer is that the buck doesn't stop with any one person. There are many people in state and local government, not to mention on the SRC, whose opinions count when it comes to governance of the public schools. The next school year will be pivotal in how everything shakes out.

*We hope this helps you understand more about the public schools. If you have any questions, or have thoughts about other topics for our **IN THE KNOW** series, please contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org.*