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Philly's new school board: We should be careful what we wish for | Opinion

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1200x800.jpg&source=006&title=AGENDA07-A&caption=Miles Wilson, the President/CEO of EducationWorks, with kindergarten kids in the after school program at Grover Cleveland Mastery Charter School.) Buy Photo

 TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Miles Wilson, the President/CEO of EducationWorks, with kindergarten kids in the after school program at Grover Cleveland Mastery Charter School.

by **Miles Wilson**, For Philly.com

We have waited a long time for local control of Philly schools, and the decision to abolish the School Reform Commission (<http://www.philly.com/philly/education/in-a-historic-vote-a-divided-src-moves-to-abolish-itself-20171116.html>) was a great first step in that process.

But when it comes to creating Philly’s new school board, we should remember the old adage: “Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.”

Local control of our public schools is the right thing to do, and Mayor Kenney should be commended for his courage in holding himself accountable for the future of public education (<http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/editorials/jim-kenney-philadelphia-school-reform-20171103.html>) in Philadelphia.

But if the new school board is stocked with the “usual suspects” (<http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/philadelphia-school-district-mayor-kenney-src-school-board-20171113.html>) of the politically connected, or those who may have the passion but don’t have the right skills to lead the district, then in terms of leadership, we’ll be back in the same situation that led to the state takeover in the first place.

It begins with selecting candidates who have the right skill set to oversee a large urban district that is teeming with the problems wrought by grinding poverty and willful financial neglect on the part of the state.

It takes a special leader to serve on a big city school board, especially in Philadelphia, where chronic funding shortages have created a “zero sum” approach on virtually every issue. It is hard to have collaboration and thoughtful policy when the public discussion most often disintegrates into bitter debate over who wins and loses on any issue.

The debate over the future of charter schools is just one example. Today, education advocates on both sides, flanked by zealous armies of “true believers” who insist that compromise is tantamount to defeat, continue to be locked in a bitter battle over whether charters should be expanded or eliminated. Yet both sides miss the real point: We need all the good schools we can get, and we must help these schools thrive whether they are charter or traditional district public schools.

The new school board should be made up of diverse and disciplined leaders who value understanding and clarity ahead of advancing an agenda. Most important, given the desperate need for creative new ways to address the chronic problems we face, the new board must be open to new approaches and ideas, and must work to build relationships and alliances to bring their ideas to life.

The new school board needs at least a few “outsiders,” too – people who are not already part of the Philadelphia educational scene. Clearly, the mayor and Council will look for people who are aligned when it comes to the importance of improving our schools.

But the city will be better served by having leaders who aren’t beholden to special interest groups (or anyone else for that matter), so that they have the flexibility to make the hard decisions the job will demand.

An ideal new board member should also be someone who is well-versed on educational issues and has a practical base of experience. The board needs at least some subject matter experts, people who have educational credentials and are skilled at navigating the twists and turns of a big city school bureaucracy. Moreover, we need leaders who can listen to all sides on an issue while also having the discipline to recognize when discussion is over and decisions must be made.

Finally, the new board must operate with clear lines of responsibility and accountability for the performance of our schools. Without it, the new system will be little more than rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, and any hope for the future of public education in Philadelphia will sink below the waves.

Selecting a new board is no easy task, but we can get it right, and when we do it will be a huge step forward for our schools and our children. Let's all work together to make it happen.

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