

There's a new, pro-charter school board in L.A. Here's what we expect from it

The Times Editorial Board



Five years ago, the [Los Angeles Unified](#) school board overrode the recommendations of its top staff and renewed the contract of a particularly low-performing charter school in El Sereno. Monica Garcia led the charge on the board, saying that the school should be allowed to remain open because parents liked sending their children there, and that the decision should be theirs.

Wrong. Schools should be judged on how good a job they're doing of educating — that's what the public is paying for — not on popularity contests.

Why bring this up now? Because Garcia has been reelected to the board, and for the first time in several years, she will be part of a strongly pro-charter majority. One of the new members of that majority, Nick Melvoin, recently expressed a similar sentiment, saying that rather than limiting charter growth in any way, he would depend on the market forces of parent choice.

Melvoin won The Times' endorsement, as did Kelly Gonez, a charter school teacher. The previous board's negative take on charter schools, under Chairman Steve Zimmer, was problematic. Melvoin appealed to us because he expressed support for charters — but also said he thought they should receive strong oversight and truly be open to all students. He needs to stick by that thinking.

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When the new board members take their seats Thursday, it's a good time to outline hopes and expectations on several important fronts:

Charter schools

No, public education is not a free-market system, nor should it be. It is paid for by taxpayers with the specific goal of producing knowledgeable, thoughtful graduates well-prepared for further schooling or for the workforce. Charter schools should be helping to achieve that goal by providing a clearly superior education to what families would find at the district-run schools their children otherwise would be required to attend.

The new board should immediately vote to roll back a recent decision that left charter schools out of the new “unified enrollment system” for schools. The system is intended to streamline the complicated and frustrating system by

which students find and apply to magnet and pilot schools. That's a great goal, but the board voted to keep charter schools out in hopes that the new system would keep more families in district-run schools, thus keeping the state funding for those students flowing to the district. The unified enrollment system should exist for the benefit of students, not for the benefit of the district.

What shouldn't be changed is the board's recent emphasis on tighter oversight of charter schools. If charter schools aren't accepting their full share of students with learning disabilities, or aren't providing an obviously better education than nearby neighborhood schools, they shouldn't be allowed to stay in business. Further, when it comes to sharing campuses, district schools should not be squashed into cramped spaces to make room for charters.

Budget

Charters have stirred up most of the controversy, but budget planning is by far the bigger area where the new board majority needs to step in. The district is expected to face serious shortfalls within a couple of years, and kicking the can down the road, as it's been doing, is not an acceptable strategy. If the district wants to retain students, it needs the money to offer reasonable class sizes and enticing programs.

The district needs to cut the size of its administration, and already is in the process of doing so. But the big-ticket item looming over its head is the ever-increasing bubble of teacher retirement benefits. This isn't an easy one to fix: Schools need to attract talented teachers, not turn them off. And teachers can't be stripped of benefits they already were promised. But the district will need to be somewhat less generous to newly hired teachers, and it can't afford to wait five or 10 more years to make those changes while its pension obligations build.

Board meetings

The board's infamously long meetings need to be streamlined so that members are focused on the important business to be accomplished. As obvious as that sounds, the board has long wasted time on lengthy and detailed discussions of issues that don't require its attention, such as where the food services department is sourcing the ingredients for its school lunches. There are too many symbolic resolutions that don't affect the education of students. Board members should be encouraged to express themselves succinctly; there are too many rambling speeches that feel more targeted to the video cameras than to the creation of strong policies. The board isn't just wasting its own time. Highly paid staff members sit in attendance, and parents and other interested parties take precious time away from their jobs to attend.

Clear direction

One of the most depressing moments of the past year was when the board was (justifiably) dissatisfied with the strategic plan proposed by Supt. Michelle King but would neither adopt it nor reject it. This was an embarrassing failure. The board's most important job is to set the direction for the superintendent to do her job. That means forming a clear picture of what it wants to achieve for the next two years and making up its mind on a strategic plan to bring about those achievements.

A related problem is that the board has agreed to too many ambitious new policies without figuring out how to accomplish them. That's how the iPads-for-all initiative quickly fell apart, and it's how the district came to rely on too-easy online courses to bring up graduation rates. The board had decided years ago to require college-prep courses for graduation without figuring out how the district would accomplish that or checking in once in a while to see

whether the district was on schedule. (It wasn't.) No more grand goals without a plan for getting there.

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