

Amidst cuts to special education and school closure protests

Chicago Public Schools appoints new CEO

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On January 24, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Board of Education appointed Janice Jackson as its new CEO after the previous school chief, Forrest Claypool, resigned in the midst of an ethics probe and charges of a cover-up. The change in leadership takes place as CPS faces public opposition over revelations about secretive cuts to special education as well as protests against school closures in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.

Claypool—a close political ally of Chicago Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and a former member of Barack Obama's presidential media campaign team in 2008—resigned on December 8 before Jackson, his widely anticipated heir, took over as interim CEO. Claypool was forced to step aside after CPS Inspector General Nicholas Schuler published a report showing that he violated CPS's Code of Ethics. Schuler also made clear that Claypool orchestrated a “full-blown cover-up,” in response to the investigation.

According to the report, Claypool hired his longtime friend and political ally Ronald Marmer in 2016 to manage a \$250,000 contract with his former employer, the law firm Jenner & Block. Marmer received severance pay from his former employer totaling \$1 million as he worked for CPS as its general counsel. The firm had been hired by Marmer ostensibly to sue the state of Illinois over holding back education funds during the Illinois state budget impasse, which threatened vital public services, schools and universities. However, the suit was never filed as the state approved a paltry stopgap budget.

Schuler opened an investigation after the *Chicago Sun-Times* published an article on July 28, 2016 uncovering a relationship between Marmer and the law firm. The district's official ethics code states that there can be no “business relationship” between employees of CPS and other parties they are in negotiation with. The issue for Schuler was not simply that Claypool hired Marmer but that he intentionally tried to work around the ethics code

to get Marmer the position. Additionally, Claypool lied repeatedly in an attempt to throw off the Inspector General's investigation.

The flagrant corruption unveiled by the CPS Inspector General proved to be too damaging to the political establishment. On top of the corruption scandal, Claypool's persistent attacks on public education had begun to focus wide criticism on CPS and Mayor Emanuel's administration. Emanuel closed nearly 50 schools in Chicago in 2013, laid off thousands of teachers and has been at the forefront of the Democratic Party's assault on public education. Claypool's resignation was an attempt to draw anger away from the deeply unpopular Emanuel administration and the Democratic Party as they prepare for reelection.

Janice Jackson, the incoming CEO who previously worked under Claypool, will be the fourth to assume the position since Emanuel took office in 2011. Claypool's predecessor, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, resigned in 2015 after an federal investigation uncovered she received financial kickbacks from a principal training company in return for providing a \$20.5 million no-bid contract from the school district. Byrd-Bennett is currently serving a four-and-a-half-year prison term for accepting bribes.

With the backing of Emanuel, Jackson has been groomed to be the new face in the attacks against public education. She will be paid a hefty annual salary of \$260,000 for her services, an increase of \$10,000 over her widely hated predecessor. While a chorus of figures in the political establishment has sung Jackson's praises for her background in education—as a former teacher and principal in CPS—she rose in the ranks with the help of former CPS head Arne Duncan. In 2009, Duncan, then the US Secretary of Education, led the Obama administration's assault on teachers and public education nationwide.

Far from changing course from her predecessor, Jackson's administration will entail a further assault on

public education. A little more than a month before Claypool stepped down, an investigative report by WBEZ revealed that CPS has been secretly cutting funds for special education programs across the school district. Jackson worked closely with Claypool in crafting special education policies, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. The WBEZ investigation focused on the 2016 special education overhaul by CPS and found that “officials relied on a set of guidelines, developed behind closed doors and initially kept secret, that resulted in limiting services for special education students, services like busing, one-on-one aides, and summer school.” The report added, “this overhaul was orchestrated by outside auditors with deep ties to CPS CEO Forrest Claypool. They had no expertise in special education.”

The gutting of special education services has been an assault on the most vulnerable sections of working-class children. Already severely burdened, working-class families have had to work through an ever more complex bureaucracy just to find that their children will not receive the assistance they need to participate at grade level.

While CPS has since tried to stem the damage of the report by hiring new special education teachers, it remains a drop in the bucket after the cuts it has made over the years. A lawsuit seeking class-action status has been opened by non-English-speaking parents of special ed students. CPS repeatedly failed to provide non-English communication to the parents of special education students, estimated to number nearly 21,000.

Additionally, there have been growing protests over CPS plans to close four high schools in the impoverished working-class neighborhood of Englewood. Having underfunded these schools and starved them of resources for years, CPS has cynically stated that enrollment is too low to justify keeping the schools open and proposes to build a new school to service the entire area. The new building is not scheduled to be completed until 2019 and almost 400 displaced students will be forced to find schools outside their neighborhood until it is completed.

Englewood residents have attended public meetings held by CPS to fight for their community schools, but their angry pleas have fallen on deaf ears. CPS has no intention of keeping the schools open. Police were deployed by CPS at one of these meetings on January 10 to keep the parents’ outrage from getting out of their control.

Jackson has stated her intention “to make tough decisions” about “under-enrolled” schools, such as in Englewood. Even though she has ostensibly ruled out

another round of mass school closures, Jackson stated school closures will be part of a “neighborhood by neighborhood decision,” according to an interview she gave to the *Tribune*. While officially condemning the school closings, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) can be expected to follow the same path it did in the wake of previous school closings around Chicago, i.e., to do nothing to protect teachers, students and parents. The betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike by the CTU, which accepted a sell-out contract on Emanuel’s terms, paved the way for teacher layoffs and the mass school closures of 2013.

The CTU has consistently sabotaged the growing opposition of teachers while keeping workers tied to the Democratic Party and its program of austerity and school privatization.

Jesse Sharkey, the vice president of the CTU, and a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), has promoted illusions in Jackson, who is seen as having a closer relationship to the CTU. Last December, when she became the interim CEO, Sharkey proclaimed that the CTU is “glad to see an interim CEO chosen from the ranks of CPS educators.” In the previous contract negotiations in 2016, Jackson worked closely with Sharkey in imposing concessions on teachers, including the creation of a two-tier pension scheme, cuts to health care, and the elimination of protections against layoffs. The 2016 deal also paved the way for further school closures.

To combat the policies being pushed by CPS and Emanuel, teachers and parents must form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the CTU, and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class against the attacks of both big-business parties.



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