Education

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Philly school board member Joyce Wilkerson was named the nation’s top urban educator

The prize comes at a curious time for Wilkerson - her very membership on the school board has been challenged. She's the longest-serving school board member in Philadelphia.



Joyce Wilkerson, Philadelphia's longest-serving school board member, received the 2025 Urban Educator of the Year award from the Council of Great City Schools, a national organization whose annual conference is being held in Philadelphia this year. Here,

Wilkerson (center) is shown with Superintendent Tony B. Watlington Sr. and school board president Reginald Streater.

by Kristen A. Graham

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Joyce Wilkerson, Philadelphia's longest-serving school board member, was named 2025 Urban Educator of the Year on Thursday night.

The Council of Great City Schools — in town for its annual conference — selected Wilkerson for "the nation's highest honor in urban education leadership." The award is presented in alternate years to either an outstanding school superintendent or school board member from 81 of the largest urban public-school systems in the country.

The prize comes at a curious time for Wilkerson — when her very membership on the school board has been legally questioned, after a public battle with some members of City Council on her re-appointment by Mayor Cherelle L. Parker to the board.

People for People Charter School filed a lawsuit in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court in September calling Wilkerson an "illegally and unlawfully seated member of the BOE" and asking for her ouster.

Wilkerson is not an educator by profession — she's a lawyer who served as former Mayor John Street's chief of staff. But she was named to the former School Reform Commission in 2016 and became the inaugural school board president in 2018, when the district returned to local control after nearly two decades of state oversight.

Wilkerson, who also serves as a Council for Great City Schools board member, was hailed by the organization for steady leadership that helped end the Philadelphia School District's state takeover, and for work that led the board to refocus its efforts on student outcomes. Ray Hart, who leads the Council, called those efforts "a national model."

Wilkerson, Hart said in a statement, "has reshaped the educational landscape in Philadelphia through her unwavering advocacy for students, along with her commitment to equity and excellence. Wilkerson's dedication to strengthening public education has made her one of the most effective school board members in the nation."

As part of the prize, Wilkerson receives a $10,000 college scholarship to award to a district student.



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The People for People case — which came after the board voted to nonrenew the school's charter over academic concerns — is still pending.

It stems from a 2024 public fight over Wilkerson's reappointment to the board. Several key Council members, including Council President Kenyatta Johnson and education committee chair Isaiah Thomas, took issue with Wilkerson.

Her stance on charters in particular — no new charters were approved during Wilkerson's school board presidency — rankled some on City Council.

Council ultimately approved eight of Parker's nine nominees, but did not act on Wilkerson's candidacy. The mayor, though, did an end run, asking Wilkerson to serve on the board — essentially filling the seat Council denied her — until she named a successor.

Parker ‘s administration argues the city charter allows Wilkerson to fully serve as a board member until her replacement is named, and it’s clear that the mayor is in no hurry to pick someone to replace her.

The Parker administration, when the People for People suit was filed, said Wilkerson remains a full school board member, and said she still has the mayor’s support.