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New Chicago schools chief's contract makes it easier for district and CEO to part ways

By Mila Koumpilova

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The new contract for Chicago Public Schools CEO Macquline King makes it easier for the district to part ways with her after the protracted and controversial departure of her predecessor, Pedro Martinez.

And unlike Martinez's agreement, King's contract includes a nod to the importance of the district's relationship with the city's mayor.

The changes would come as no surprise to those who followed the lengthy standoff between Martinez and Mayor Brandon Johnson, whose handpicked board fired the CEO without cause in December 2024. A provision inserted in Martinez's contract by a previous board allowed him to stay on the job another six months and to continue pushing back against contract demands by the mayor's allies at the Chicago Teachers Union.

A new, partly elected board granted King the three-year contract after she served in an interim capacity since last summer. The new contract reviewed by Chalkbeat Chicago requires only a 60-day notice if King is terminated without cause — or possibly even less if she is offered a payout in addition to the severance of 20 weeks pay stipulated in both her and Martinez's contracts. On the flipside, King must give 90 days notice if she chooses to resign, compared to 30 days under Martinez's contract.

As previously announced, King will make $380,000 a year — almost $20,000 more than her predecessor was making most recently — under her new contract, which goes into effect July 1.

Notably, a section about the relationship between the board and the CEO in King's contract adds new language about "the expectation of maintaining productive and professional relationships with critical stakeholders, including the Mayor of Chicago" — a nod by a school board where a majority remains aligned with Johnson at a time of transition away from mayoral control. Martinez's contract made no mention of the mayor, who appointed all members of the board and exerted significant control over the district back when that contract was signed.

Martinez negotiated the changes to his contract in late 2022 on the eve of the city's most recent mayoral election. Those amendments appeared to be a bid to claim some additional job security for a role in which top leaders have long largely served at the mayor's pleasure.

The uncertainty hasn't gone away: In the runup to King's appointment, some advocates voiced concern that a new, fully elected school board taking over in January could eventually opt to replace the top leader chosen by the current board, on which 10 members are elected and 11 are appointed by Johnson.

The lengthy notice to the CEO under Martinez's contract was more of an outlier, said Robert Bruno, a professor at the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

"These changes to King's contract strike me as a return to something more standard," he said.

Bruno noted that higher turnover and a higher-pressure, more politicized environment have been driving up superintendent salaries nationally. The most recent data from the Council of the Great City Schools shows average salary for superintendents in districts serving more than 100,000 students was $338,650 in 2023, an 8% increase over 2019.

But it's possible that in Chicago, the CEO and board agreed on a higher salary as a tradeoff for less job security.

"A contract is this hydraulic system where everything is interrelated, where if you push down in one area, you have to give in another," he said.

King's benefits are in line with those in Martinez's contract: The district will also provide a pension contribution equal to 7% of her salary and chip in an amount equal to 10% of her salary to a supplemental savings account. Like Martinez, the district is also providing a driver, a bank of 20 days of paid vacation, and four weeks of paid vacation per year.

King's contract does away with a detailed timeline for evaluating the CEO in Martinez's contract, instead simply requiring that she be evaluated by the board each year.

To Bruno, a notable aspect of both King's and Martinez's contracts is that they require the leaders to submit performance goals some months into their tenure — rather than including measurable goals as part of the contract itself. Particularly in the case of King, who has spent time leading the district as interim, she and the board could have presumably rallied around a set of goals, said Bruno, who has negotiated contracts with performance goals built in as the board president of a suburban Illinois school district.

Both King's and Martinez's agreements called for annual raises of up to 3% following a positive evaluation. But King's deal does away with an amendment to Martinez's contract that gave the board president more of a leading role in rallying the rest of the board around such raises. It goes back to previous language that just says that the board is authorized to offer the salary increases after evaluating the CEO.

King signed her new contract on March 27, the board voted nearly unanimously to hire her on March 30, and board President Sean Harden signed the document on behalf of the district on April 2.

Mila Koumpilova is Chalkbeat Chicago's senior reporter covering Chicago Public Schools. Contact Mila at mkoumpilova@chalkbeat.org.