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August 16, 1990

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Thankless task: how the mayor misused the School Board Nominating Commission

By Ben Joravsky @joravben

If all goes according to plan, Mayor Daley will call a press conference in a week or two and announce his nominees for the new school board. Then the City Council will approve them, and the press will extol them and credit Daley with acting in the best interest of the city's 400,000 public school children.

But most members of the School Board Nominating Commission won't be so pleased. That's the volunteer board, composed of 23 local-school-council members and 5 mayoral appointees, that has supplied Daley with 69 potential school board nominees, from whom the mayor has to choose 15.

The commission began work nine months ago. In May, Daley rejected all but seven of their first batch of nominees. It's been almost a month since they delivered a second list.

By law Daley has 30 days--until August 30--to make up his mind, though he has broken several state-imposed deadlines on this matter in the past. Meanwhile, the school system is run by a Daley-appointed interim board, despite the 1988 state law that created the commission and prohibits the interim board from approving contracts past the 1989-90 school year.

"Many commissioners feel unappreciated," says Lafayette Ford, who, as chairman of the commission, tries to choose his words carefully. "We put in hundreds of volunteer hours and all we get are delays. Many commissioners feel betrayed."

Other commissioners are more blunt.

"Daley doesn't give a damn about the schools. All he cares about is keeping the interim board in charge so he can control the allocation of school contracts," says commission member James Deanes. "My kids go to public schools; I want a permanent board so they can start making long-range plans that will improve the schools."

Mayoral aides say Deanes misunderstands the mayor.

"Mayor Daley is taking his time because this is an important decision," says Leroy Whiting, the mayoral assistant who acts as a liaison to the commission. "He has been very careful to maintain an appropriate distance from the commission because he doesn't want to look as though he's exerting inappropriate influence over their work. Some members may have interpreted that careful approach as indifference. That's not so. The mayor has always thanked them for their efforts. I would estimate the city spent \$9,000 on in-kind services, like printing and legal counseling, for the commission."

The law that created the commission also established local councils of parents, teachers, and residents in each of the system's more than 600 schools. The councils have authority over budget and curriculum in their schools; overall policy, including union contracts, is handled by the school board.

Members of the board at the time of the new law were ordered to step down, and the mayor appointed an interim board that was to govern until May 15. After that, a permanent school board was to be selected by the mayor and approved by the City Council from a pool of candidates nominated by the commission.

"The commission personifies democracy," says Ford. "Except for the mayoral appointees, all of us are members of our local school councils. Our local councils elected us to our district councils. From there we were elected to represent the district on the nominating commission. We don't get paid for doing this. If you make it this far, you really must believe in reform."

The commission's first meeting was on a cold and dreary Saturday afternoon in December 1989.

"We met in the library of Jones Commercial [Evening] School," Ford recalls. "The heat wasn't working, and it was cold. Our supplies consisted of some three-by-five note cards and pencils."

They had no budget or bylaws. For the most part, they've gotten by on contributions from the First National Bank of Chicago, the Joyce Foundation, and the Board of Education.

The first round drew 178 applicants, who filled out questionnaires asking about their attitudes toward education. The commission caucused for several weeks, meeting on Saturday mornings, before deciding to interview 112 applicants.

"All of our interview sessions were open to the public," says Ford.

"Each commissioner graded the applicants; we wanted the best candidates."

There were also ethnic considerations, as state law says the school board should roughly reflect the public school makeup. The current student population is about 58 percent black, 27 percent Hispanic, 12 percent white, and 3 percent Asian. That translates into a school board of eight blacks, four Hispanics, two whites, and one Asian.

"The law requires us to present our choices to Daley in 15 slates of three," says Ford. "The mayor has to pick one person from each slate. We wanted to make sure he had a wide selection from all neighborhoods, districts, and races."

But it got complicated, particularly when mayoral appointees Lourdes Monteagudo and Danny Solis tried to explain to their colleagues just who is and isn't Hispanic.

"Danny and Lourdes didn't think that one applicant, a woman who came from Spain, was Hispanic," says Ford. "They said she was Iberian. Then there was a nominee whose mother was Mexican and father was Polish, or maybe it was the other way around. Someone said she's not Hispanic.

"We asked nominees straight up what they considered themselves. With the Arabs we asked them, 'Are you northern African or southern European?' They said, 'Neither, we're Arab.' The Pakistanis identified themselves as Asian. We had no preference. We just wanted to do things right."

On March 23 they presented their first choice of 45 nominees to Daley.

"It was a cordial meeting," says commissioner Roosevelt Thomas. "Daley served coffee and cake. We figured we gave him enough time to make his selections within 30 days so the interim could step down by May 15, like the law says."

Six weeks went by without a word. Then the Sun-Times ran an article, based on city documents leaked from unidentified sources, that said Daley would select up to six nominees and reject the others "on grounds that include arrest records, suburban residency, and political activism."

Five nominees had arrest records for things like traffic offenses, the ensuing article reported. Several others had been allies of the late Mayor Washington.

"That article was a total smear job that tried to throw our credibility into doubt," says Deanes. "We don't have the resources to check the backgrounds, the mayor does. And he didn't have to wait six weeks

to do that. All he had to do is call Police Superintendent LeRoy Martin."

By then the matter had been complicated by protesters who demanded that Daley appoint at least ten blacks to the board. The commission was called to City Hall on May 11, the day Daley officially announced his nominees. This time their meeting was not cordial.

"Daley told us he had made up his mind on who he would select, but that he wasn't going to tell us, and that we would have to wait until his press conference, like everyone else," says Thomas. "Someone asked, 'How many names from the list will you select?' and the mayor said, 'Some.' Someone said, 'Is it between 1 and 15?' and Daley said yes. I got angry because he was treating us like children and wasn't showing us respect.

"So I said, 'Mr. Daley, are you delaying because you don't care about the schools, because your children aren't in the school system?' He lost his temper and got red and started shouting. But I felt my question was appropriate. I have a child in the public schools; he doesn't. I have a sense of urgency. My kids depend on those schools. His don't."

Some commissioners disapproved of Thomas's technique.

"I was frustrated by the mayor's delays and I don't think he treated us with respect, but I don't think Mr. Thomas's approach was appropriate," says commissioner Cynthia Hernandez-Kolski. "Two wrongs don't make a right."

Whiting says the commission misunderstood the mayor's stance. "The mayor said that he wasn't releasing the names because he wanted to preserve the integrity of his announcement," says Whiting. "Some of the commissioners might have told reporters about the nominees, and the mayor didn't want to be preempted by leaks."

As for the news stories on the nominees' backgrounds, Whiting says, "Reporters are very creative. We told them that we were investigating the backgrounds of the nominees, and the reporters wrote about their criminal records. We had nothing to do with those stories."

Eventually Daley announced his seven nominees, and the commission returned to the drawing board. This time, they had to select eight slates of three nominees so the mayor could choose eight more school board members. "It wasn't easy to start all over again," says Ford. "A lot of us felt frustrated and used."

During the second go-around, relations with the mayor's office were clearly strained. Monteagudo, the mayor's chief educational aide (who did not return phone calls for comment), did not regularly attend meetings. When the final list of nominees was selected, only

four commissioners were invited to City Hall to present them to the mayor.

"That meeting was a joke," says Deanes. "Lafayette explained how we had made our decision, but I don't think Daley was listening. The whole experience was like a slap in the face."

Whiting says the mayor hopes to make his choices before the end of August. "The mayor sees this as a unique opportunity to appoint a first-rate board of education," says Whiting. "He wants a board that will make residents say, 'Wow, that's a great board!' He understands there's a lot of enthusiasm for this process. But he must act responsibly and give his decision the time it deserves."

In the meantime the interim board remains in charge.

"I would honestly say that the way the law was written, our commission was set up to fail," says Ford. "But we have done whatever we can to make it work. We gave Daley 69 excellent choices. You can't ask too much more than that."

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Mike Tappin.

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