Mayor unveils interim CPS chief

Tim Hadac

'Thrilled beyond measure' with Torres

By Tim Hadac

Weeks after the top three Chicago Public Schools leaders announced, separately, they are leaving CPS, Mayor Lori Lightfoot staged a press conference at a West Lawn school to announce her pick for interim CEO.

Dr. José M. Torres will take over the reins temporarily from CEO Dr. Janice K. Jackson, who ends her tenure this month, the mayor announced Monday from a second-floor gymnasium at Richardson Middle School, 6018 S. Karlov.



With Dr. José Torres behind her, Mayor Lori Lightfoot calls her new interim CEO pick a dedicated educator committed to equity. –Greater Southwest News-Herald photo by Mary Hadac

Torres' appointment is subject to approval by the Chicago Board of Education, though that is seen as a formality since members are mayoral appointees. A vote is expected on June 23.

Officials did not say what Torres will be paid, but it is expected to be comparable to the $5,000 a week Jackson currently receives.

Torres, 61, began his career as a teacher and most recently served as president of Illinois Math and Science Academy. Through the years, Torres has held a variety of leadership positions including superintendent of the Elgin School District, and regional superintendent at Chicago Public Schools for Englewood, West Englewood, Chatham, Grand Crossing and Auburn Gresham.

Earlier in his career, he served in executive positions in public school districts in Maryland and California.

Torres is expected to work well into August, when his successor will take over. Lightfoot said a national search is currently underway for a permanent CPS CEO, and that Torres is not a candidate.

It was unclear why the mayor—an infrequent visitor to the Midway area—chose Richardson as the site of the announcement.

The selection of Torres was welcomed by 23rd Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares. In remarks made at the outset of the press conference, she said Southwest Side neighborhoods "are the fastest growing and most dynamic in the city, and people are choosing to come here to buy their first homes and raise their families.

"It is encouraging that our new interim CEO is Latino, and I am hoping that Latinos continue to have leadership roles in public schools," Tabares added. "Having strong leadership at CPS is vital to communities like those in my ward, because strong schools lead to strong communities."

Lightfoot said she is "thrilled beyond measure" that Torres agreed to accept the short-term post. "We are grateful and lucky to have someone with his depth of experience to be serving as interim CEO."



Twenty-third Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares (left) talks with Richardson Middle School Principal Marie Clouston, moments before stepping to the press conference microphone and calling her "one of the hardest working principals on the entire Southwest Side."
–Greater Southwest News-Herald photo by Mary Hadac

"At nearly every stage of his career, Dr. Torres has demonstrated his dedication to serving black, brown and underserved students and their families," the mayor added.

It is expected that Torres will focus on the challenge of re-opening all CPS schools to in-person learning—transitioning away from pandemic-driven remote learning that saw as many as 1 in 10 CPS students fail to attend class at all.

Torres said one thing that convinced him to accept the position was Lightfoot's dedication to equity in education—addressing learning and achievement gaps between various racial and ethnic groups.

In addition to announcing the interim CEO appointment, the mayor also announced that Dr. Maurice Swinney will serve as the interim Chief Education Officer and Lindy McGuire will serve as interim Chief Operating Officer. Dr. Swinney will transition into his new role following the departure of Dr. LaTanya D. McDade at the end of this week, and Ms. McGuire is currently serving in her new role, following the departure of Arnie Rivera in recent weeks.

Local reaction mixed

Outside Pete's Fresh Market near 58th and Pulaski, reaction to the announcement was mixed.

"I'm glad the mayor chose a Latino to fill the job, but why only for eight weeks?" asked Madelid Yanez. "Why not just make him the permanent guy, if the mayor likes him so much?"

Fernando Muñoz said that whoever takes over at CPS "will have a kind of mission impossible. You've had a whole school year of so many kids doing little to nothing—not even logging onto the laptops they were given. They acted like it was a year's vacation, which for some it was. Does anyone wonder why these [CPS] kids are so far behind?"

Concepción Padilla said she wishes "the mayor would be as concerned for the police as she is for the teachers. My sister's husband is a police officer, and they have been working without a contract for how many years now? And now they have their vacation time canceled and must work 12-hour shifts?"

Joe Korniewicz said he feels bad "for all the kids who are trapped in these public schools in the city. My grandson went to Catholic high school, and