



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



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**MAYOR BRANDON JOHNSON ANNOUNCES NEW CANDIDATES FOR
APPOINTMENT TO THE CHICAGO BOARD OF EDUCATION**

CHICAGO – Mayor Brandon Johnson today announced new candidates for appointment to the Chicago Board of Education. The candidates are Olga Bautista, Michilla Blaise, Mary Gardner, the Rev. Mitchell L. Ikenna Johnson, Deborah Pope and Frank Niles Thomas.

Today's candidates are part of a plan that includes all members of the current Board of Education transitioning from service on the Board later this month. With the shift to a hybrid elected and appointed Board forthcoming, current Board members and Mayor Johnson understand that laying a strong foundation for the shift is necessary to serve the best interests of students and families in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

The names announced today are among the last candidates for mayoral appointment before the transition to an elected representative school board that begins in 2025. Mayor Johnson will submit, as is his duty, additional candidates for appointment, including individuals who will be appointed based on the outcome of the November 5, 2024, election and winning candidates' subdistricts.

"I am confident that these individuals and their experience in education, community, faith, business and elsewhere will continue our work to transform Chicago Public Schools into a world class school district for students and families," said **Mayor Brandon Johnson**. "As a CPS parent, I want the same thing for other CPS parents that I want for my own children, which is every class, every activity and every resource that will help build bright futures and bold leaders. I know these individuals will fight for our children to receive the investments they deserve, and will work with my administration and the district to put the needs of our students and families first."

"The candidates for appointment that we are introducing today are deeply rooted in their communities, have experiences that will serve our students, and are highly motivated to invest in our schools to ensure continued progress and improvement,"



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said **Deputy Mayor for Education, Youth and Human Services Jen Johnson**. “We thank and welcome these individuals for their willingness to take the baton and support a successful Board transition and continuing a strong school year.”

“The Chicago Board of Education has an obligation to take on the challenges of educating Chicago's children, and that includes assuming the financial responsibilities that come with it,” said **28th Ward Alderman Jason Ervin**, chairman of the Chicago City Council Committee on the Budget and Government Operations. “I have supported the right of every Chicago mayor to make his or her decision on how to best address those challenges, and Mayor Brandon Johnson deserves the same opportunity with the appointments he chooses to make.”

Under today's Board appointees, the administration will build on the work of the transitioning Board of Education members, which includes improved special education services, increased charter school accountability in the renewal process and a new five-year strategic plan that emphasizes investing in neighborhood schools and expanding the Sustainable Community Schools model in lieu of school closures.

Olga Bautista

Olga Bautista is co-executive director of the Southeast Environmental Task Force and has dedicated her professional career to improving the quality of life in her community on Chicago's Southeast Side. Bautista has leveraged her expertise as a facilitator, advocate and thought leader throughout her decades of community organizing, serving as a mentor to the youth girls organization Rebel Bells and also as Community Leadership Director for Our City Our Voice, a civic engagement organization aimed at increasing participation in local governance. Before that, she led community engagement efforts for the Participatory Budgeting Project and is trained in Restorative Justice Conflict Resolution. Bautista has also served as a Local School Council parent representative at John L. Marsh School and a YWCA Crisis Intervention Specialist. She is the mother of two Chicago Public Schools students.

Michilla Blaise

Michilla Blaise began her career in public service in 2007 as a staff member for then-46th Ward Ald. Helen Shiller, later starting her own consulting firm, Blaise and Associates, helping uplift progressive candidates and initiatives. She is currently the chief of staff for 16th District Cook County Commissioner Frank J. Aguilar, and volunteers as Board Secretary for Westside Justice Center and as a Board Commissioner for Northwest Home Equity Assurance Program. From 2018 until 2020, Blaise was also executive director of Judicial Accountability PAC and her years as board member for the Grassroots Curriculum Task Force solidified her understanding that the educational system is just as relevant to children's learning



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as the materials taught in schools. A lifelong Chicagoan, she is the proud mother of two CPS students, ages 14 and 15.

Mary Gardner

Mary Gardner is one of the most prominent community organizers on the West Side of Chicago and the wife of the late Joe Gardner, a member of Mayor Harold Washington's cabinet as Commissioner of Neighborhoods. The middle child of eight children, she experienced her parents' financial struggles after they migrated from Alabama to the West Side of the City, and worked her way through college while providing for her children, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Organizational Management from Concordia University. A longtime collaborator with Rainbow PUSH, she became involved with 100 Women for Harold Washington, whose historic campaign opened the door for several women to be elected to Chicago City Council, the Illinois State legislature and U.S. Congress. In 2020, she was appointed to the City of Chicago Women's Advisory Council and after the botched raid on the home of Anjanette Young, helped organize a coalition of 1,000 women, marching in support of criminal justice reform.

Gardner has served as membership chair of Chicago Women Take Action, former secretary of Chicago Urban Professionals and is a former member of the National Forum of Black Public Administration and Women of the 7th State Representative District. She has been elected both Local School Council parent representative and Local School Council community representative for three different CPS schools and is the mother of two CPS alumni.

Rev. Mitchell L. Ikenna Johnson

The Rev. Mitchell L. Ikenna Johnson has been a Chicagoland community leader for more than two decades, and is a nationally recognized economic development expert who has helped hundreds of churches serve as catalysts for economic growth and empowerment in their communities. Rev. Johnson's focus on community economic development and collaboration has led to roles serving as executive director of Developing Communities Project (DCP), a position previously held by former President Barack Obama. His work at DCP resulted in community bonding companies as well as local minority-owned electric companies receiving contracts for public sector projects including the Chicago Transit Authority Red Line upgrade. Rev. Johnson's work has also helped foster the growth of community-based private enterprises in underserved communities.

Rev. Johnson has served as the Economic Development Officer for the Baptist State Convention of Illinois as well as a faculty member of Lifeway Black Church Leadership and Family Conference. He has been a consultant for Alpha Epsilon Pi, the world's largest Jewish college fraternity, operating chapters on more than 190



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college campuses in seven countries. A graduate of Fisk University in Nashville, TN, Johnson received his Juris Doctorate from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and is a resident of Hyde Park. He is the father of a current CPS student and two CPS graduates.

Deborah Pope

Deborah Pope began her career as a substitute teacher in Chicago Public Schools before spending a decade with the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, where she advised midwestern state agencies on the correct application of Food Stamp Program (now Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) policies and regulations. She returned to teaching at Benito Juarez High School in 1990 as a bilingual and regular history teacher, later moving to Schurz High School where she taught while earning a Master's in Bilingual/Bicultural Curriculum and Instruction from National Louis University. In 2004, Pope began teaching at Gage Park High School where she continued to teach history and English as a Second Language and launched an AP Psychology program. She earned a second Master's degree in Couple and Family Therapy from Adler School of Professional Psychology and retired from Chicago Public Schools in 2011. She is a parent of two CPS alumni.

Frank Niles Thomas

Frank Niles Thomas is a longtime Chicagoan and veteran of the U.S. Air Force with a wealth of experience in City of Chicago government, organized labor and civic engagement over the past 40 years. A graduate of Chicago Vocational High School with continued education at City Colleges of Chicago and Roosevelt University, Thomas served as 21st Ward superintendent for the Department of Streets and Sanitation for more than a decade, and served as chairman of the Local School Council at Edward F. Dunne Elementary School. Prior to joining the LSC, he was the founder of a mentoring program at Dunne, helping students attending this predominantly African-American school develop leadership skills.

A well-respected labor and grassroots political organizer, Thomas has capably served various sectors of both business and government, navigating the relationship between labor and management in good faith bargaining and negotiations. He is the father of four CPS graduates.

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