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Board votes to strip accreditation from St. Louis schools

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The state school board voted to strip the accreditation from the St. Louis school district. This will lead to a state takeover that is expected to last at least six years. The board voted 5-1 to strip St. Louis school district's accreditation.

The takeover becomes effective June 15.

The board nominated as the chief executive officer of the district Rick Sullivan, an executive with McBride and Son, the St. Louis construction firm. The president of the St. Louis district's current school board, Veronica O'Brien, who had supported the state takeover, left the building under police protection because some crowd members were yelling derogatory remarks at her.

"I think it's important for them to bring in some new leadership, some new administration, and someone who can really turn the district around," she said.

Later, Gov. Matt Blunt appeared at a news conference in St. Louis with Sullivan, saying that the city school district has not just failed Missouri's children, "but all of us."

"The current status quo is unacceptable," Blunt said. "Change is on the way."

The sole board member voting against the takeover was Stanley Archie of Kansas City, Gov. Matt Blunt's newest appointee to the board. Archie said he was concerned that a sound management strategy was not in place for when the transitional board takes control of the district.

"My goal is to ensure that whatever we put in place has the strategy, the insight and clear objectives to do what's best for the students we serve," Archie said.

Blunt called Sullivan a "true public servant" who cares about children. Blunt said he was confident Sullivan would bring compassion and strong leadership to the position.

Blunt listed off a number of Sullivan's leadership positions on various boards. "He knows what it takes to successfully lead an organization," Blunt said.

Sullivan said the district "has certainly had issues" and that he is looking forward to working with all of the schools' constituents.

Sullivan said that if people want to protest for the sake of protest, that is one thing. But he said, "I'm willing to talk to people who will be reasonable."

When pressed by reporters about what changes needed to be made and what were the most critical issues facing the district, Sullivan said he would have to wait until the two other board members are appointed to the transitional team and he had time to talk to people working with the schools.

"The key will be to listen," he said.

Asked about his education experience, he said he has served on two university boards, raised seven children, been involved with Teach for America, and participated and sat in on classes in the St. Louis schools.

"I've been impressed by what I've seen in those schools," he said, singling out the respectfulness of students in particular.

He also briefly discussed his work with "Read, Right and Run," a program he founded that is part of the Spirit of St. Louis Marathon. In the program, children run one mile a week for 26 weeks, read 26 books, and do 26 acts of kindness.

Asked if he had experience working specifically with urban public schools, Sullivan responded, "I think I'm probably about to get a lot more experience with that."

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JEFFERSON CITY -- Students protesting the state takeover of St. Louis Public Schools disrupted the meeting of the Missouri Board of Education this morning. One male student was taken into custody after authorities chased him outside the building and used mace to try to control the crowd.

About a 30 minutes into the board meeting, students began chanting "Don't take over!" They had been warned if there were any disruptions there would be a 20 minute adjournment.

Education officials also said that if students continued their disruptions, board members would move their meeting to a smaller room, where only the media and the board of education staff and members would be allowed.

The board is expected to name as the chief executive officer of the district Rick Sullivan, an executive with McBride and Son, the St. Louis construction firm.

Sullivan faces a confirmation hearing next week in the Missouri Senate's Education Committee.

State Education Commissioner D. Kent King had declined to reveal the nominee, whose name will be sent to the state Senate for confirmation next week.

David Lee Jackson, a candidate for the School Board in next month's election, said he has known Sullivan for 10 years. Jackson is a consultant for minority contractors.

"He's a tough businessman," Jackson said. "He's a no-nonsense guy. He'll run the district like a company, because that's the way he runs McBride & Son."

Jackson added that he was disappointed that the governor did not select a city resident for the top job at the school system and also that the choice has no educational background.

Along with appointees selected by Mayor Francis Slay and Aldermanic President James Shrewsbury, the CEO — nominated by Gov. Matt Blunt — will be charged with turning around the fortunes of the troubled district both fiscally and scholastically.

In a 5-2 vote, the state board approved the transitional district in principle at its March meeting. With five votes cast today, the new district would be formally approved.

King said Wednesday that he expects those five votes will be cast.

The elected School Board, meanwhile, will be sidelined. Board Vice President William Purdy said Wednesday that a legal team he has retained along with other

board members could mount a court challenge to the state intervention next week or even earlier.

In an interview Wednesday afternoon, an emotional King — who is being treated for cancer — again expressed regret that the state hadn't acted sooner on behalf of the 32,000 students in troubled city schools.

"The guilt I feel is that I should have done something more before this," he said. "I know a lot of people are not happy with this. That has been very clear. But this is the particular model that is available."

King emphasized that governance of the district will fall completely to the appointed board.

But, he said, the state will closely monitor the situation and encourage the new board to use nationally tested reforms to turn around urban schools — including stepped-up teacher development, longer school days and years, and an emphasis on pre-kindergarten education.

It is imperative, King added, that the transitional board reach out to a community outraged by the intervention and unsure of what it means for students, parents, teachers and schools.

King saw that outrage up close at the state board meeting in February.

And he got another taste of it Wednesday during an early afternoon meeting with 12 St. Louis high school students who last week occupied Slay's office, concerned that an unaccredited district would hamper their chances to compete for college placement and scholarships.

As was the case with Slay, the students were not placated by assurances from King and Deputy Education Commissioner Bert Schulte that accreditation would not affect college admissions.

The students criticized the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for using nonspecific language — such as "should not" and "we believe" — in a written promise that accreditation will not have an effect when they apply for college.

"We want a guarantee," said a student at Soldan International Studies High School.

After the meeting, St. Louis School Board member Donna Jones accused the state of racism. "If it had been a white district, you wouldn't have done this," she shouted at education department spokesman Jim Morris.

Moments later, the students — joined by 14 other students who were not part of the meeting — angrily peppered Morris with questions.

The students will be joined at today's state board meeting by at least three busloads of parents and teachers equally dismayed by the state intervention.

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The Associated Press contributed to this story

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