



What's next for Wilmington Education Improvement Commission

By [Larry Nagengast](#) • Jul 15, 2016 Delaware Public Media

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Delaware Public Media's Tom Byrne and contributor Larry Nagengast discuss the future of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission.

Following six months of uncertainty capped by votes resulting in unfulfilled expectations, the fate of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission's plan to strengthen schools in the city and to provide additional funding statewide for children living in poverty and needing additional educational services remains as murky as ever.

The commission made progress in the last six months. The optimists among its supporters note that approvals won this year represented the first time since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling outlawing public school segregation in 1954 that state lawmakers had voted affirmatively to improve Wilmington's historically segregated schools.

But the General Assembly's hesitant steps and the weakness of the state's financial outlook means there are no assurances that the WEIC plan will ever take effect.

Only two things seem certain.

At its next meeting, scheduled for July 26, the commission is expected to vote to suspend implementation of the plan because the General Assembly did not appropriate "necessary and sufficient resources" to put it into effect according to its original timeline.

And, from the end of the month through the next session of the General Assembly, commission members will prepare a fiscal impact projection – designed to give the lawmakers a better understanding of what lies ahead, in the hope that they will appropriate the funds needed to get the plan rolling by this time next year.

During the recently concluded legislative session, the General Assembly passed a resolution affirming the State Board of Education's approval of the Commission's redistricting plan, which would shift Wilmington schools

operated by the Christina School District into the Red Clay Consolidated School District, with the condition that more details must be provided before lawmakers give final approval. The legislature also appropriated \$200,000 for the commission to continue working on transition planning and preparing the fiscal impact projection.

However, neither the \$6 million proposed by Gov. Jack Markell nor the \$9 million sought by the commission to provide additional funding to schools in Red Clay, Christina and two downstate districts to strengthen programs for low-income, English-language learning and special needs students in kindergarten through third grade was included in the budget for the fiscal year that began July 1.

Markell subsequently promised to include \$7.5 million in new funding in the budget he will propose before he leaves office next January, but there are no assurances that his successor will endorse that recommendation or that the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee will keep those funds in the next budget. U.S. Rep. John Carney, a Democrat considered the favorite to succeed Markell, made no specific mention of the WEIC plan in the education section of the platform posted on his campaign website this week.

"I don't know what will happen next year," says state Rep. Kim Williams, a Democrat from the Newport area who served on the Red Clay Board of Education before being elected to the General Assembly.

Williams was the sole House Democrat to vote against the WEIC plan in June, and she isn't sure what it would take to convince her to vote for the plan next year. All the Red Clay residents who contacted her this spring urged her to vote against the plan, she said.

"People support the concept [of improving education] but they're afraid [the financial burden] is going to fall on their backs," she says, even with wording in the legislation that says that Red Clay cannot raise taxes to cover expenses associated with the plan without going to residents for approval via referendum.

The task of persuading legislators to support and fund the plan falls squarely on the commission and its staff, says Dan Rich, the University of Delaware administrator who serves as the commission's staff director. "We have to begin a dialog," he says, with particular attention being paid to legislators representing the Red Clay area and those in Kent and Sussex counties. "The challenge is to frame things more accurately," he says.

"We've had a lot of encouragement from members of the General Assembly, and we're going to keep going," Rich says. "There has been a series of hurdles all along the way. We'll do whatever we have to do to move forward."

The fiscal impact projection the commission will prepare should give lawmakers, as well as school officials and the public, a better understanding of how costs will change when Wilmington schools and students are shifted from Christina to Red Clay, Rich says. Originally scheduled to occur for the 2018-19 school year, that shift will now be postponed for at least a year, and perhaps longer.

Throughout the past year, the commission has insisted – and lawmakers have generally agreed – that additional costs incurred as part of redistricting should be the responsibility of the state, not the local districts.

While Williams and other legislators representing the Red Clay area say their constituents fear that they will shoulder the burden of any additional costs, Rich says the General Assembly can include language that protects Red Clay property owners from having to pick up the tab.

The key concern for Kent and Sussex lawmakers is the reality that schools in their counties have significant numbers of students who are living in poverty, are English-language learners or who are in kindergarten through third grade have been identified as needing special education services. Downstate legislators were

understandably reluctant to commit additional funding to serve Wilmington without students in their districts getting additional support too. WEIC addressed that concern by making a funding request that would have introduced weighted funding for students with these needs not only in Red Clay and Christina but also in one district in Kent County and another in Sussex.

Because of time pressures as the legislative session rushed to a close, Rich says the commission didn't have the time to explain the details of that proposal as well as it might have.

The overriding issue, he says, is that Delaware remains as one of about 15 states that has no direct weighted funding for low-income students, one of four states with no direct funding for English-language learners and one of the few states with no special funding for basic special education in kindergarten through third grade.

The needs might be there, Williams says – and she introduced legislation last year seeking additional funding for special education students – but, given the state's tight budget this year, she is not optimistic that funds for new programs will appear next year.

One big difference for the commission in the coming year is that it no longer has to worry about persuading the State Board of Education of the merits of its plan. After three contentious months of discussions, the state board gave its endorsement in March and the General Assembly affirmed that approval – albeit without funding – in June.

“Our responsibility now,” says Donna Johnson, executive director of the state board, “is to have WEIC come back and present updates around any work that is ongoing and continuing.”

The first of those quarterly reports will be due in December, but may be ready sooner, Rich says.

Johnson says no decision has been made on whether the updates will be presented at a state board meeting or in written form only. “I think we'll probably play it by ear,” she says.

Rich describes the commission's work thus far as one of the most intense projects ever undertaken in the state. “We believe one can hardly find anywhere in Delaware public policy history a more evaluated, engaged, discussed and participatory process than what we went through,” he said.

But it still wasn't enough to secure all the needed approvals.

Assuming that the commission acts as expected later this month and suspends implementation, it will have two more years to gain approval. If funding isn't approved next year, the law allows the commission to suspend implementation a second time.

“If funding is not in place by July 2018,” Rich says, “the whole plan expires.”

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