

The importance of a citizen voice in education reform

Education series: Tizzy Lockman & Kenny Rivera 1:26 p.m. EST December 16, 2015



(Photo: Supplied)

Editor's note: This week, The News Journal opinion pages will feature a series of essays written by members of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission. Read the series at www.delawareonline.com/opinion. Submit your view to letters@delawareonline.com.

In Delaware, we are passionate about education. We understand the powerful link between education and a strong community, our economy, and continued advancements in the 21st century. Some of us are even more aware of what a weak education system means for public safety and quality of life. But for all of our passion, and despite the efforts of devoted educators and dedicated parents, our system has struggled, and generally fails, to meet the needs of those students who have the most at stake in its success. These are students for whom education should be the pathway out of poverty. This has been particularly acute and long-standing in Wilmington, where the consequences have mirrored disastrous outcomes experienced in many American cities.

In the last two decades a number of task forces, most recently the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee (WEAC), have made parallel proposals to strengthen Wilmington public education. Few of these recommendations have been acted upon, until *now*. Last June, the General Assembly and the Governor approved two pieces of legislation that, if we play our cards right, could go down in the history of public education as a turning point for the most vulnerable students in our state. One was Senate Bill 122 which gave limited power to the State Board of Education to redraw district lines to reflect the recommendations of the WEAC report, [Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda](http://www.ipa.udel.edu/publications/weac_final_report_33115.pdf) (http://www.ipa.udel.edu/publications/weac_final_report_33115.pdf). The other was House Bill 148, which established the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (WEIC), a group of city and suburban parents, students, educators, school administrators, community and business leaders who were appointed with a five-year mandate to carry forward WEAC's bold recommendations until 2021. Each of these bills passed both houses of the General Assembly with broad bi-partisan support that amounted to just three "No" votes.



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The early work of the commission has concentrated on reforming the antiquated way we fund our schools and students while creating a more responsive structure of school governance for Wilmington students. The governance plan calls for the Christina School District to transfer its schools and students in the City of Wilmington to the Red Clay Consolidated School District beginning in the 2018-2019 school year. It also calls for additional funding needs to be met, phased in statewide for our students most at risk: low-income students, English language learners, and K-3 special education students.

On Tuesday evening, WEIC Commissioners will vote on a transition, resource and implementation plan for carrying out these recommendations. For it to move forward, the State Board of Education must approve our full package of recommendations, specifically our requirements that redistricting must come with resources to meet the needs of at-risk students without imposing undue costs on Red Clay families and taxpayers. State Board approval must then be confirmed by a joint resolution of the General Assembly that is signed by the Governor. If this occurs, implementation will proceed on a three-year timeline that balances urgency with the need to engage in a community-based process to consider and implement innovative programs and new school configurations.

Contrary to what word of mouth might lead us to believe redistricting is only the first action step in what will be a five-year effort by the commission to strengthen Wilmington education and improve support statewide for students at risk. We are committed to doing our work in the light of day. Since September 2014, many Delawareans have participated in the most transparent citizen-led process in recent memory. Our efforts have included town halls and forums for concerned families throughout New Castle County, formal public hearings whose comments have informed our final plans, school board meetings, a 2,000 member interactive Facebook page and a website, www.solutionsfordelawareschools.com (<http://www.solutionsfordelawareschools.com>). Open WEIC Commission and committee meetings have included hundreds of interested citizens. In all of these venues, we have facilitated intense dialogue and debate and welcomed opposing views – and we think this has improved our work.

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Before us now lies an unprecedented opportunity to make our public schools launching pads for generations of successful lives. As the WEAC report stated, "The simple and undeniable historical fact is that our entire Delaware community is responsible for the conditions that currently exist," and "only the entire community, acting together, will change these conditions, and even then it will not be easy". There is momentum now for this to be the moment in this generation to make meaningful reforms.

Regardless of what side you're on, we hope you will join us.

Tizzy Lockman is a Red Clay parent, Public Allies Alumna and Director of Christina Cultural Arts Center's Parent Advocacy Council for Education (PACE). Kenny Rivera is a teacher in Brandywine School District and the President of the Red Clay Consolidated School District Board of Education. Both are Vice Chairs of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission.

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