

PACIFIC★STANDARD

Billionaire Bureaucrat

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For a 30-minute period that feels like it's dragging for an hour, a man and a woman representing an education software company speak about how great and popular their Web-based aptitude tests are. It's one week before Christmas, and it is, even to most of the people at this Nevada State Board of Education meeting, the least interesting show in Las Vegas. Almost every educator, bureaucrat, and policy wonk in the sunless second-floor meeting room is checking their phone, shuffling in their seat, or reviewing other paperwork. Everyone, that is, except the billionaire education-board president at the top-center of the conference-table horseshoe. Elaine Pascal Wynn sits attentively, her elegant fingers laced into a hammock for her chin. A large bejeweled Team USA Olympics basketball championship ring reflects light off a finger of her left hand. In a soft chocolate turtleneck under a slate-colored Oscar de la Renta pantsuit, she stares at the speakers with narrowed eyes. A creamy Hermès Birkin handbag sits on the floor. The total value of her wardrobe and accessories rivals that of a new teacher's salary.

As the lofty presentation winds down, Wynn is convinced that schools will screw up the rollout of the new tests. "So when is the dress rehearsal?" she asks tartly. A variety of answers bubble up, none specific. So she asks again. And again. She is not rude, but an eye-roll betrays her exasperation. After not receiving an actual answer after repeating the question for the fourth time, she firmly orders: "Let's load her up and see if it works. Let's see if it works." Then, on a sunnier note, she dismisses the testing company people. "We wish you all good luck," Wynn says. "You know it's keeping me up at night."

Elaine Wynn is 74 and one of the wealthiest women in the United States. She was so pivotal to her ex-husband Steve Wynn's success in building their high-end casino-resort empire (the Mirage, Bellagio, and Wynn hotels) that he gave her half of his stake six years ago without a fight because "no one deserves it more." (The Wynns have since had a public falling out.) Her confidants include the likes of Warren Buffett, Maria Shriver, and Duke University's [Mike Krzyzewski](#). She's on the boards of the [Kennedy Center](#), the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), and the [Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame](#). Her two daughters, now adults with their own kids, live in Los Angeles and attended private schools back in the day. She, too, makes Southern California her main residence outside Nevada, and has opulent homes in New York and Sun Valley as well as the apartment she keeps in Vegas.

“Many people ask, ‘Why is she doing this?’” says former Nevada Schools Superintendent Dale Erquiaga, now chief strategy officer to Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval. “She really is one of a kind. There is no one else of her stature with both personal and financial means to effect change and who actually rolls up her sleeves and does this kind of work. She could be doing so many other things.”

Wynn agreed to an appointment to the board, and then to be its president, after securing a promise from Sandoval, a Republican, that he would actually try to make radical changes to an education system that persistently produces some of the country’s highest dropout rates, lowest test scores, and fewest college-bound graduates. Last year, he did just that—improbably persuading the GOP-controlled legislature to approve \$1.5 billion in new taxes to pay for an array of reforms, including all-day kindergarten, vastly expanded English as a Second Language programs, new accountability for schools, and a special statewide school district focused on taking over failing institutions. The splashiest achievement, though, was a first-in-the-nation school-choice program that gives every parent the ability to withdraw their kids from public schools and use the money the state spends on them for alternative educational efforts. “Overnight,” an analyst from the Cato Institute (usually not in the business of praising a state’s largest-ever tax increase) told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, “Nevada has become the most interesting state for education reform.” (The last component, though, is on hold for now in the state court system.)

Wynn, who testified publicly and made many phone calls to encourage reticent lawmakers, was also a major figure in persuading the state’s business community to support the package. When Sandoval announced the outlines of his proposals in his State of the State address, Wynn sat in the front row with other state leaders before bolting to gather the chairwomen of the Assembly’s and Senate’s education committees for an impromptu 90-minute discussion. “She expressed her confidence and faith in my abilities to do what was right for the children of Nevada,” recalls State Senator Becky Harris, who had just been elected for the first time weeks earlier. “That was just a pretty powerful, empowering thing.”

Now, she knows she’s “the face of the plan.” It’s down to her and her board to implement many of the pieces of the reform and to ensure the accountability promised by the governor is enforced. This is the gritty, often tedious stuff laden with head-scratching jargon and bureaucratic inefficiencies that make those in the business world cry for mercy. But Wynn appears to relish mucking around in the weeds and insists it is “endlessly fascinating” to listen to school officials discuss their challenges. At one point in the fifth hour of the December meeting, after a 15-minute talk via video conference by an official from a rural school district addressing staffing struggles, Wynn brightly tells the woman, “You may be small, but your voice is loud and so is your energy and you absolutely have got great spirit, so we very much enjoyed that presentation and your passion.”

Most people of Wynn’s stature and largesse leave this kind of work to heartier souls and return to lives of writing big checks to their causes and lending their names to do-good philanthropies of national scope—but Wynn already does those things, most prominently as chair of the country’s largest dropout-prevention program, Communities in Schools. “It’s all related,” she says over pepperoni pizza at a Pieology—her suggestion—after the December meeting. She is due to hop on her private plane to Los Angeles for the holiday week. Doesn’t being a bureaucrat get boring?

“Oh, no. If I didn’t have to get to the airport and talk to you, I might have let the meeting go on longer.”

The small-fry stuff, it is clear, is how she earns credibility and avoids being labeled a showboating dilettante. It has landed her at a place in education reform that few ever approach. Wynn has helped win the sustained political and financial support to put some big ideas—from controversial public education reformer Michelle Rhee and Yale University child psychiatrist James Comer, among others—into practice. “My philosophy is innovation,” she says. “I am an all-of-the-above person. You’ll get examples everywhere that say extra money for schools helps, and then you’ll get examples of extra money doesn’t help. You’ll get the same argument with charter schools. But we came up with a very elaborate program that was all tied together. It wasn’t the kind of thing that could get broken into bits—because they tried. As long as I’ve lived in Nevada, I never thought I was going to see it happen. And now I have to do my part to see it through or I’m a hypocrite. I can’t be a hypocrite, you know?”