"DIMINISHED, DEGRADED, AND DESTROYED"

A Report by the Commission on the Takeover of HISD

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Executive Summary

On June 1, 2023, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) took control of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), replacing the district's democratically elected, geographically representative school board with an appointed Board of Managers and superintendent. Two years later, the Commission on the HISD Takeover (hereafter, the Commission) was formed to investigate how the takeover has affected students, families, educators, and the broader Houston community.

Over the course of the 2025–26 school year, the Commission heard testimony from parents, students, educators, and community members; facilitated in-person and virtual focus groups; and met regularly to analyze evidence and develop findings. Though no single report can accurately capture every individual's experience across a district as large and diverse as HISD, the evidence we collected points to five major conclusions.

First, the takeover diminished the curriculum. Rigorous and enriching learning was replaced by a narrow focus on standardized test preparation. Systematic gaps emerged in the provision of federally mandated accommodations for special student populations, and students experienced reduced access to books and school libraries.

Second, the takeover dismantled relationships. District-level policy changes severed bonds connecting students, educators, and families. This, in turn, eroded the relationships that sustain healthy school communities, which provoked profound grief and loss over schools that became unrecognizable.

Third, the takeover demeaned educators. Teachers endured diminished professional autonomy, intensive surveillance of classrooms, and degrading management practices. These changes produced a hostile school working environment characterized by fear and disrespect.

Fourth, the takeover destroyed democratic governance. By removing local representation, the takeover reduced meaningful opportunities for community engagement and constrained families' influence over decisions affecting their children's schools.

Fifth, the takeover degraded financial stewardship. The Commission uncovered substantial evidence of weakened internal financial controls, which enabled wasteful overspending, improper financial dealings, and unchecked conflicts of interest.

These findings differ sharply from the state's public account of the takeover, which highlights improvements in student test performance and campus accountability ratings as evidence of total success. The testimony gathered by this Commission exposes the human and material costs of these gains—a reality obscured and downplayed in the district's official narrative. Instead, this report documents a broader set of consequences affecting teaching, learning, school culture, democratic governance, and public trust across HISD.

The events examined in this report began on June 1, 2023, when TEA Commissioner Mike Morath appointed a Board of Managers and selected Mike Miles as superintendent after just one of the district's 274 schools received five consecutive unacceptable performance

ratings. Miles—who previously founded the Third Future Schools charter network, was superintendent in Dallas ISD and Harrison School District 2 in Colorado, and served as an Army Rangers officer and foreign service officer during the closing years of the Cold War—proceeded to implement the New Education System (NES), a comprehensive reform model developed in his charter network. Over the past three years, NES reforms have reshaped nearly every aspect of district operations, including school and district leadership, curriculum, instruction, staffing, compensation, and school working conditions.

Since the first state takeover in the U.S. occurred in 1989, 26 states have intervened in more than 170 school districts in response to concerns about academic underperformance, financial insolvency, and governance dysfunction. An overwhelming majority have targeted districts serving large concentrations of Black and Latino students.[1] Though no consistent evidence shows that takeover improves student achievement over the short or long term, many states, including Texas, have continued to rely on its application.[2] State officials have held up the reform model being implemented in Houston as a statewide blueprint, and in recent takeovers of Beaumont, Fort Worth, and Lake Worth ISDs, state-appointed leaders have replicated HISD's NES model.[3]

This report centers the experiences of those most directly affected by its implementation: students, families, educators, and community members. Their testimony reveals key dimensions of the takeover not captured in state accountability ratings or official pronouncements.

The report concludes by offering recommendations, drawn from participant testimony, to inform state and local responses. The Commission's state policy recommendations include:

1. Raising the threshold for triggering state intervention
2. Shifting from a punitive to a collaborative approach
3. Specifying firm guardrails on the authority of state-appointed boards and superintendents
4. Establishing local avenues for ending state intervention
5. Imposing clear limits on the TEA Commissioner's authority
6. Adequately funding public education in Texas.

We also identify five community desires for strong and thriving schools to guide the work of HISD leaders when the district inevitably returns to local control:

1. Enriching curriculum and instruction
2. Caring school climate and culture
3. Respect for educator professionalism
4. Democratic engagement and participation
5. Ethical and transparent financial stewardship.

1 Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. Oxford University Press

2 Schueler, B. E., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2022, January). Evaluating education governance: Does state takeover of school districts affect student achievement? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 41*(1),162–192.; Schueler, B. E. (2025). Centralization and long-term system performance: Evidence from state takeovers of school districts. *Political Research Quarterly, 78*(2), 453–467.

3 Lee, J. (2026, June 3) Will new school district takeovers follow the model - and 'chaos' - of Houston ISD? *Texas Observer.*

Preamble

One of the most important, yet often overlooked, functions of education is its role in cultivating citizenship and maintaining democracy. The nation's founders viewed education as essential for preserving liberty and self-government. Thomas Jefferson argued that an educated citizenry was the best defense against tyranny and corruption.[4] He believed that citizens needed sufficient knowledge to judge the actions of their leaders and to participate responsibly in public affairs. Similarly, John Adams maintained that education should cultivate virtue and wisdom, qualities necessary for democratic government to function effectively.[5]

A similar statement is found in the Texas state constitution. Article 7, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution states

> ***"A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools. (Feb. 15, 1876.)"*** [6]

The constitution of the state of Texas and the nation's founders make it clear that the "diffusion of knowledge"—commonly understood as developing skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic—cannot be separated from developing the tools of citizenship and democracy.

In her 1992 speech, "Accepting Democracy's Responsibilities," Barbara Jordan, the former Congresswoman from Houston and a Phillis Wheatley High School graduate, emphasized the necessity of an educated citizenry for a democratic nation.[7] Similarly, the philosopher John Dewey argued that schools should prepare individuals for active participation in democratic life by teaching cooperation, critical thinking, and problem-solving.[8] According to Dewey, democracy was more than a political system; it was a way of life that required citizens who could engage thoughtfully with one another and contribute to the common good. Education, therefore, served as the foundation for democratic habits and values.

Just as education is vital to democracy, so is local self-governance. Local governance serves as the foundation of democracy because it brings government closest to the people. In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that local institutions, particularly town governments in the United States, taught citizens the habits of participation, cooperation, and public responsibility.[9] In his view, democracy flourished when citizens were actively involved in solving community problems rather than remaining passive observers of national politics. Local government provided practical experience in self-rule and helped develop the civic virtues necessary for democratic life.

4 Jefferson, T. (1779, June 18). *A bill for the more general diffusion of knowledge*. National Archives. Founders Online.
5 Adams, J. (1765, May 1–October). A dissertation on the canon and feudal law. Massachusetts Historical Society. Adams Papers Digital Edition. https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/PJA01dg2.
6 Texas Constitution. Article VII, §1.
7 Jordan, B. (1992, March 27). *Accepting democracy's responsibilities*. University of North Texas Libraries. The Portal to Texas History.
8 Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Macmillan.
9 de Tocqueville, A. (1994). *Democracy in America* (Vol. 2). New York :Alfred A. Knopf/Random House.

The public schools provide one of the most important and accessible local institutions for communities to participate, engage, and influence the decisions that affect them. Through locally elected school boards, open school board meetings, Parent Teacher Organizations, and various other venues for engagement, the public schools provide the opportunity for democratic participation and representation and political empowerment.

For historically marginalized communities, the public schools provide a particularly critical role in helping cultivate and develop citizenship. Through public school engagement, Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous communities have had a direct voice in public governance, especially when access to other political institutions has been denied. It is through public school participation, including electing members to local school boards, that these marginalized groups have been able to break through barriers for political participation and help ensure that public education remains accountable to the people most affected by its decisions.

This document brings together the views, questions, frustrations, and aspirations of the people of Houston as they have experienced the state takeover of their public schools. Some have been involved with their public schools for decades, and others have become involved more recently—but all express a desire for a system of public education in Houston that helps young people flourish as students and citizens and they view the voices of the people of Houston as vital in fulfilling the promise of education.

City Hall Protest, May 2024 (Credit: CVPE)

Introduction

1. National Context on State Takeovers and Elected School Boards

State takeover of local school districts is a policy intervention that fundamentally changes the governance structure within public education systems by removing powers traditionally held by locally elected school boards and transferring them to a state-appointed entity. The U.S. Constitution does not identify education as a federal power, instead reserving the responsibility for education for states. Local grassroots movements during the mid- to late-19th century, known as "the common schools movement," established public school systems by embedding public education as a right in state constitutions.[10] Although local school districts were created and exist at the discretion of the state legislature, they have historically operated as the primary political institution through which education policy decisions are made and implemented.[11]

The tradition of local control in the U.S. reflects a commitment to everyday people engaged in the political process to shape educational decisions. This is not to romanticize local school boards and their politics. School boards are imperfect institutions, where inequities are both reproduced and challenged.[12] During the post-WWII era, the demographics of cities transitioned into majority-minority electorates as several factors cemented race and class boundaries between cities and suburbs across the U.S.[13] As the Civil Rights movement crested in the 1960s, these demographic and political shifts increased representation by members of racialized minority groups at different levels of government, particularly at the local level. Local school boards are, in fact, key political institutions for catalyzing Black and Latino representation in elected office and remain one of the more racially diverse and representative bodies of government in U.S. politics.[14] In other words, while local government has the potential to be responsive to local communities, there are no guarantees that it will be a site of transformative policies and practices. However, it is a site of possibility for those committed to engaging in the political arena and participating in the democratic process.

In contrast, state takeover is a form of political centralization codified by state law that, by definition, erodes local democratic governance in school districts in the name of addressing chronic academic underperformance, fiscal mismanagement, or perceived political dysfunction in local boards. State-appointed officials are granted legal authority to override the decision-making power of local school boards and are insulated from public accountability to their

10 Givens, J. R. & Ison, A. (2023). Toward new beginnings: A review of Native, white, and Black American education through the 19th century. *Review of Educational Research*, *93*(3), 319–352. *See* Givens & Ison for a synthesis of research on this period and inequitable origins of the public education system. Despite democratic aims of universal public education, U.S. public school origins privileged white male students; limited white female students' opportunities to lower levels; violently excluded and legally barred Black students; and violently included Indigenous students through culturally assaultive boarding schools.

11 Oluwole, J. O. & Green III, P. C. (2009). State takeover of school districts: Race and the equal protection clause. *Indiana Law Review.*, *42*, 343.

12 Collins, J. E. (2023). Policy Solutions: Should we abolish school boards?. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *105*(1), 58–59.

13 Historians of education argue that schools played a large role in structuring racial segregation between the city and suburbs in ways that were mutually constitutive with the more commonly known factors such as federal housing policy, municipal politics, and racialized violence. *See* Benjamin, K. (2012). Suburbanizing Jim Crow: The impact of school policy on residential segregation in Raleigh. *Journal of Urban History, 38(2),* 225–246.; Erickson, A. T. (2019). *Making the unequal metropolis: School desegregation and its limits*. University of Chicago Press; Dougherty, J. (2012). Shopping for schools: How public education and private housing shaped suburban Connecticut. *Journal of Urban History*, *38*(2), 205–224.; Lassiter, M. D. (2012). Schools and housing in metropolitan history: An introduction. *Journal of Urban History*, *38*(2), 195–204.; Steffes, T. L. (2024). *Structuring inequality: How schooling, housing, and tax policies shaped metropolitan development and education*. University of Chicago Press.; Stern, W. (2018). *Race and education in New Orleans: Creating the segregated city, 1764–1960*. LSU Press

14 Henig, J. R., Hula, R. C., Orr, M., & Pedescleaux, D. S. (2001). *The color of school reform: Race, politics, and the challenge of urban education*. Princeton University Press.; Lay, J. C., & Bauman, A. (2019). Private governance of public schools: Representation, priorities, and compliance in New Orleans charter school boards. *Urban Affairs Review*, *55*(4), 1006–1034.

local constituents.[15] The governing authority under takeovers can take various forms, depending on state-specific legislation: state-appointed boards, shifting authority to mayors, complete eradication of school boards or limiting boards to an advisory role, and direct administration of finance or school turnaround by charter growth through state agencies.[16]

Emerging in the 1980s, takeover represents a decades-long educational policy approach often implemented by Republican governors and Republican-dominated legislatures at the state level.[17] Federal education priorities elevated during this era focused on standards and accountability, placing an enduring emphasis on test scores across multiple presidential administrations, irrespective of political party.[18] As of 2017, 34 state legislatures passed takeover laws, and as of 2026, 26 states have taken over local school districts 176 times.[19] However, more often than not, takeovers do not achieve their stated aim of improving outcomes in the short or long term,[20] which prompts the question: what do state takeovers accomplish instead?

As mentioned previously, local school boards became crucial sites for growing political power among Black and Latino stakeholders in the post–Civil Rights era, so state takeovers must be situated in this history. Across time and state/district context, takeovers follow a predictable narrative, one that frames districts prior to state intervention as failures while casting appointed leaders' "transformative" actions as justified and necessary.[21] This narrative often draws on racialized discourses to paint local elected leadership as dysfunctional and incapable of solving problems of their own making to rationalize state intervention as the only possible and responsible solution.[22] This narrative is seductive, as it acknowledges legitimate concerns held by stakeholders, particularly those who have faced historic and systematic marginalization. Yet, identifying symptoms does not equate to correctly diagnosing causes and, perhaps more importantly, prescribing solutions.

Takeovers disproportionately target school districts with majority-minority student populations, higher Black and Latino representation in local political positions, and in states where school finance litigation succeeded in equalizing or increasing state contributions to school funding, even when compared with whiter districts with similarly low performance.[23] Oftentimes, state-appointed leaders authorize charter operators to "turn around" failing schools, producing marketized educational landscapes with high densities of privately managed public schools (e.g., charter schools).[24] Charter schools, in particular, reallocate governing authority to appointed

15 Lyon, M. A., Bleiberg, J., & Schueler, B. E. (2022, December). *Does centralization promote fiscal health? The effect of state takeover of local school districts on education finance.* (EdWorkingPaper. 22-0689). Annenberg Institute at Brown University.; Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education and American democracy.* Oxford University Press.; Oluwole, J. O., & Green III, P. C. (2009). State takeover of school districts: Race and the equal protection clause. *Indiana Law Review.42*, 343–409.; Wong, K. K., & Shen, F. X. (2003). Measuring the effectiveness of city and state takeover as a school reform strategy. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *78*(4), 89–119.

16 Green, R. L. & Carl, B. R. (2000). A Reform for Troubled Times: Takeovers of Urban Schools. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *569*, 56–70.; Ziebarth, T. (2002). *State Takeovers and Reconstitutions*. [Policy brief]. Education Commission of the States.

17 Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. Oxford University Press.

18 *See* Klein, A. (2015). The nation's main K-12 law: A timeline of the ESEA. *Education Week*.

19 Mitra, D. L. (2022). *Educational change and the political process*. Routledge.

20 Schueler, B. E. & Bleiberg, J. F. (2022, January). Evaluating education governance: Does state takeover of school districts affect student achievement? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 41*(1), 162–192.; Schueler, B. E. (2025). Centralization and long-term system performance: Evidence from state takeovers of school districts. *Political Research Quarterly, 78*(2), 453–467.

21 Cucchiara, M., Gold, E., & Simon, E. (2011). Contracts, choice, and customer service: Marketization and public engagement in education. *Teachers College Record, 113(*11), 2460–2502.; Eisinger, P. K. & Hula, R. C. (2004). Gunslinger school administrators: Nontraditional leadership in urban school systems in the United States. *Urban Education, 39*(6), 621–637.; Rogers, R. & Pole, K. (2009). A state takeover: The language of a school district in crisis. In L. MacGillivray (Ed.), *Literacy in times of crisis,* (138–158). Routledge.

22 Lovell, D. (2022). Narrative building in state education intervention: Framing the takeover attempt of Houston Independent School District. *International Journal of Educational Reform,* 31(1), 44–78.; Morel, D. (2018) *Takeover: Race, education and American democracy.* Oxford University Press; Welsh, R. O., Williams, S., Little, S., & Graham, J. (2020, January 16). Examining the narrative: An analysis of the racial discourse embedded in state takeover. Equity & Excellence in Education, *52*(4), 502–526.

23 Morel, D. (2017). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. Oxford University Press.; Schueler, B. E., & Bleiberg, J. F. (2022, January). Evaluating education governance: Does state takeover of school districts affect student achievement? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *41*(1), 162–192.

24 Anderson, C. R. & Dixson, A. D. (2016). Down by the riverside: A CRT perspective on education reform in two river cities. *Urban Education*, *51*(4), 363–389.; Arena, J. (2023). *Expelling public schools: How antiracist politics enable school privatization in Newark*. University of Minnesota Press.; Buras, K. L. (2014). *Charter schools, race, and urban space: Where the market meets grassroots resistance*. Routledge.; Welsh, R. O., & Williams, S. M. (2018). Incentivizing improvement or imposition? An examination of the response to gubernatorial school takeover and statewide turnaround districts. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *26*(124).

charter boards, which tend to be disproportionately whiter than both the local district representatives they replace and the student bodies they oversee.[25] While some aspects of district financial health have been found to improve in some takeovers, these often reflect increased state contribution and greater spending on targeted districts,[26] an effort that does not require governance change. Critically, these financial benefits do not apply to predominantly Black districts,[27] reflecting a broader pattern of takeovers' racialized consequences. Specifically, takeovers have been found to exacerbate discipline disparities, protract fiscal surveillance, and trigger the mass termination of majority-Black teaching workforces.[28] Moreover, takeovers curtail Black school board representation, especially in districts with high levels of Black political empowerment in local politics. Consequently, some have asserted that state takeovers reflect white backlash at the state level to increasing minority political empowerment at the local level.[29]

The research is clear: state takeovers are fundamentally about power and cannot be understood without keeping the racial and political—alongside the academic—ramifications in mind. State takeovers undermine public education by dismantling foundational democratic institutions and representation, especially for Black and Latino communities. Though state takeovers existed long before Project 2025, this policy tool aligns with visions of the latest national conservative policy agenda aimed at eroding the democratic foundations of public education.[30] For example, Texas has already implemented several policy components proposed by national conservative networks, including universal private school vouchers,[31] "anti-DEI" curricular restrictions in K-12 and higher education,[32] and congressional redistricting to undermine political representation of majority-minority locales (specifically targeting Harris County, which encompasses Houston).[33] The HISD takeover follows these longstanding state and national trends. In the following section, we provide background on the HISD takeover to demonstrate how these anti-democratic dynamics manifested in Houston, one of the most diverse large cities in the U.S.

2. Background on the HISD Takeover

HISD is the eighth-largest school district in the nation and the largest district in Texas. As of the 2022–23 school year, HISD served nearly 190,000 students across 274 schools.[34] Like many other large, urban school districts, HISD serves a racially/ethnically and culturally diverse student body, about 90% of whom attend Title I schools that qualify for federal funding for low-income students. Over a third of students are classified as Emergent Bilingual, and about 10% of students qualify for special education services. HISD offers over 100 magnet programs and

25 Lay, J. C. & Bauman, A. (2019). Private governance of public schools: Representation, priorities, and compliance in New Orleans charter school boards. *Urban Affairs Review*, *55*(4), 1006–1034.; Lu, A. & Williams, R. E. (2025). Contra–ting whiteness: Charter authorizing and the erasure of blackness in Southern urban spaces. *Urban Education*, *60*(4), 1154–1183.

26 Lyon, M. A., Bleiberg, J., & Schueler, B. (2025, July 3). How state takeovers of school districts affect education finance, 1990 to 2019. *Education Finance and Policy*, *20*(3), 379–407.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Buras, K. L. (2014). *Charter schools, race, and urban space: Where the market meets grassroots resistance*. Routledge.; Kissell, R. E. (2023). Coercion and consent for the US education market: community engagement policy under racialized fiscal surveillance. *Journal of Education Policy*, *38*(5), 738–760.; Nelson, S. L. (2018). Could the state takeover of public schools create a state-created danger?: Theorizing at the intersection of state takeover districts, the school-to-prison pipeline, and racial oppression. *National Black Law Journal*, *27*(1).

29 Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, education, and American democracy*. Oxford University Press. It is also important to note that this study found that takeovers can increase descriptive representation for Latino communities, as they tended to have lower representation prior to takeover.

30 Project 2025 articulates a K-12 educational policy vision for school choice (vouchers, education savings accounts); eradicating the Department of Education; increasing state authority over federal funds; and safeguarding the civil rights of those negatively impacted by "gender ideology" and "critical race theory." As conservatives work to "return power to states," their policy agenda is committed to detaching federal funding from historic civil rights aims; expanding school choice programs; and restricting curriculum. Takeover is a policy tool to advance these aims of "returning power to states," not only undoing the federal role in protecting civil rights, but eroding locally empowered racial and party minorities in otherwise majority conservative and white states. *See* Dans, P. & Groves, S. (2023). Project 2025 mandate for leadership: The conservative promise. The Heritage Foundation [organizational report].

31 Edison, J. (2025, May 3). Private school vouchers are now law in Texas. Here's how they will work. *The Texas Tribune*.

32 Office of the Texas Governor. (2025, January 3). Governor Abbott directs state agencies to ban DEI policies.[Press release].

33 Human Rights Watch. (2023, July 19). US: Texas laws threaten Houston area voting rights: Local officials sue to overturn law targeting the jurisdiction. [News release].

34 Texas Education Agency (2023). *2022–2023 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) for Houston Independent School District.*

houses some of the highest-performing schools in the state[35] alongside schools that have struggled academically, reflecting the district's complex legacies of institutional neglect, segregation and desegregation, and migration trends. The fight for educational justice is neither unique nor new in HISD,[36] but the state takeover marks a new chapter in this history.

Since 2015, state officials have painted HISD's local school board as dysfunctional, its educators as incapable, and its communities as irresponsible, portraying students as victims of political infighting.[37] Yet the narrative underpinning the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) intervention in HISD obscures the state's complicity in producing the very problems it purports to address by ignoring racial and economic segregation,[38] chronic underfunding of education,[39] and its own role in illegally capping the identification of students for special education services.[40]

TEA first attempted to take over HISD in 2019, with Commissioner Morath citing "the long-standing failure of the board of trustees" for allowing five consecutive years of unacceptable accountability ratings at just one of HISD's 274 schools, with only Wheatley High School, as justification.[41] This action was enabled by an amendment to a 2015 law, HB 1842, that lowered the threshold for takeover to a pattern of underperformance at a single campus. This amendment was written by Houston-area Democratic State Representative Harold Dutton with the explicit intention of granting TEA authority to take over HISD—a measure he believed was necessary for addressing what he viewed as the district's neglect of Northeast Houston schools and Wheatley, his alma mater.[42] TEA's initial attempt to take over HISD was highly contested politically and legally, especially since six years earlier, in 2013, TEA dissolved and annexed North Forest Independent School District, a predominantly Black district, into HISD.[43]After a four-year battle in court, the Supreme Court of Texas in January 2023 struck down an injunction that had previously blocked state intervention, clearing the way for TEA to take over.[44]

On June 1, 2023, the TEA took over HISD, deposing the district's geographically representative elected school board and installing a Board of Managers and Superintendent Mike Miles.[45] These leaders, appointed by TEA Commissioner Mike Morath, were granted the same powers and authorities typically exercised by elected boards, giving them control over all district operations, budget, curriculum, and personnel decisions. Miles came to the position from an unusual background: after a lengthy career in the military and foreign service, he served as a superintendent in Colorado and Dallas[46] before founding the no-excuses charter school network,

35 Houston Independent School District. (n.d.). Magnet school/ Programs; U.S. News & World Report. (n.d.) *2026–2027 Best high schools in Texas*.

36 For more on HISD's history, *see* Kellar, W. H. (1999). *Make haste slowly: Moderates, conservatives, and school desegregation in Houston*. Texas A&M University Press.; McNeil, L. M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing* (1st ed.). Routledge.; San Miguel, G. (2001). *Brown, not white: School integration and the Chicano movement in Houston*. Texas A&M University Press.; Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press.

37 Morath, M. (2023, March 15). *Re: Appointment of board of managers*. Texas Education Agency. https://tea.texas.gov/health-safety-and-discipline/school-boards/hisd-coe-correspondence.pdf.; Wallace, J. (2023, March 17). HISD takeover comes as Gov. Abbott touts legacy-shaping education reforms. *Houston Chronicle*.

38 Ramirez, F. (2018, January 9). Heat map shows how Houston schools continue to be segregated. *Houston Chronicle*.

39 Baker, B. D., Di Carlo, M., & Weber, M. (2026, February). *The Adequacy and fairness of state school finance systems*. 8th Ed. Albert Shanker Institute, University of Miami School of Education and Human Development, & Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

40 Dellinger, H. (2021, August 31). Feds say TEA has failed to fix its special education problems as it had promised. *Houston Chronicle*.; Matos, A. (2018, January 11). 'Delayed or denied': Feds find Texas schools violated special education laws. *Houston Chronicle.*; Swaby, A. (2018, January 11). Feds say Texas illegally failed to educate students with disabilities. *Texas Tribune*.

41 Morath, M. (2019, November 6) *Re: Appointment of board of managers due to special accreditation investigation and lowered accreditation, campus performance ratings, and the conservator appointment*. Texas Education Agency.

42 Dutton, H. (2023, March 13). Dutton: My amendment lets TEA take over HISD. I have no regrets. *Houston Chronicle*.

43 Wray, D. (2013, October 2). Everyone says they want the best for North Forest students, as long as they stand to benefit. *Houston Press*.

44 Miller, J. (2019, November 22) 'Almost akin to a political coup': Houston teachers fight back against state takeover. *Texas Observer.*; Nguyen, A., & Serrano, A. (2023, January 13). Texas Supreme Court clears way for state's education agency to take over Houston ISD. *Texas Tribune*.

45 We recognize that the legitimacy of Miles's authority is highly contested amongst local stakeholders. Nevertheless, we refer to Miles as HISD's Superintendent throughout this report to call attention to the positional power and responsibility associated with his role as a state-appointed district leader.

46 Miles and Morath had history before HISD, as Morath had previously hired Miles as DISD superintendent in his capacity as an elected DISD school board trustee. For background on Miles's tenure in Dallas, *see*: Foundation for Community Empowerment (2013, September 7). *Disruptive change: Mike Miles and the crisis in Dallas ISD*.

Third Future Schools.[47] Crucially, rather than being accountable to local constituents, like the elected school board, the appointed Board of Managers answers only to the Commissioner, who can remove or replace them at will.[48]

Upon assuming office, Superintendent Miles—with the approval of the Board of Managers—swiftly enacted a barrage of policy changes affecting all aspects of district operations, an approach he terms "wholescale systemic reform."[49] This has entailed the following:

- **Bureaucratic Restructuring:** "Right-sizing" HISD's Central Office by reorganizing or eliminating entire departments;[50] which included introducing the "Unit Concept" dividing the district into four geographic divisions, each with its own chain of command overseen by a Division Superintendent.[51]
- **Expanding Superintendent Authority:** Removing requirements for monthly consultations with teachers' unions;[52] increasing the Superintendent's discretionary spending authority from $100,000 to $1 million;[53] converting HISD to a District of Innovation, which is a TEA classification that enables leaders to waive state regulations to allow hiring uncertified teachers and extending the school year.[54]
- **Changing Educator Working Conditions:** Altering educators' labor conditions in terms of professional duties and responsibilities,[55] the appraisal process,[56] compensation,[57] and leave/paid time off policies.[58]
- **Increasing Fidelity to Lone Star Governance**: HISD's Board of Managers adhered to TEA's Lone Star Governance framework (LSG), which requires Board members to defer substantial authority over district financial and operational decisions to the Superintendent and focus primarily on readily quantifiable student outcomes measuring students' knowledge and skills, such as standardized test scores.[59]
- **Opening Sunrise Centers:** Partnerships between the district and existing community-based organizations at eight locations across district boundaries to consolidate support services and basic resources previously provided by campus wraparound specialists.[60]

The cornerstone of these reforms was the **New Education System (NES)**, a comprehensive school turnaround model that mirrors practices in Third Future Schools.[61] Prior to the

47 The no-excuses model refers to an educational approach that mandates strict academic and behavioral standards, driven by the philosophy that factors external to school (ex. poverty, racism, etc.) are "no excuse" for low performance. For more information on the no-excuses approach, *see*: Golann, J. (2021, May 11). I spent a year and a half at a 'no-excuses' charter school – this is what I saw. *The Conversation US*.

48 Sanchez, J. & Sgroi, M. (2026, February 24) Families frustrated by secrecy over Fort Worth ISD's takeover leadership. *Fort Worth Report*.

49 Miles, M. (2023, June 22). *Destination 2035 - An action plan for HISD* [PowerPoint Slides]. HISD board meeting presentation. Digitally preserved by *Houston Landing.;* Miles, M. (2023, June 22). *Destination 2035: Baseline data presentation and overview of year one metrics.* [Video archive]. Houston ISD board meeting, Houston, TX.; Miles, M. (2023, August 3). *The HISD transformation journey*. [PowerPoint]. Houston Independent School District School Board Work Session, Houston, TX.

50 Lehrer-Small, A. (2024, November 1) 1,500 job cuts, big department overhauls: How HISD's central office changed under Mike Miles, *Houston Landing*.

51 Miles, M. (2023, June 22). *Destination 2035 - An action plan for HISD* [PowerPoint Slides]. Digitally preserved by*Houston Landing.*

52 Dunlap, M. & Lehrer-Small, A. (2023, August 10) Houston ISD board shrugs off protests, unanimously votes to increase superintendent's power. *Houston Landing*.

53 Ibid. Superintendent Miles initially requested a $2 million cap on his discretionary spending authority, which was lowered after community pushback. *See:* Downing, M. (2023, August 4). HISD school board ready to let superintendent Miles handle the details. *Houston Press*.

54 González Kelly, S. (2023, December 14). HISD becomes District of Innovation to waive some state laws. *Houston Chronicle*.

55 Bauman, A. (2023, September 1). HISD teachers say they are fearful after first week under Miles' leadership: "Every day, I'm crying." *Houston Chronicle*.

56 Houston Independent School District (2023, September 3). 2023-2024 *Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) for Houston Independent School District*. [Presentation at meeting of the HISD Board of Managers]. In Houston Independent School District School Board meeting agenda packet.

57 Menchaca, M. (2024, March 17) Houston ISD will reduce, remove some stipends of employees, teachers who sponsor extracurriculars. *Houston Chronicle*.

58 González Kelly, S. (2023, September 19). HISD's Miles says teachers must get approval for any time off, could fire those who go overboard. *Houston Chronicle*.

59 Menchaca, M., & Partain, C. (2025, June 1). Has Houston ISD improved board governance? Here's what appointees and trustees think. *Houston Chronicle. Note:* While Lone Star Governance does not prescribe what outcomes to prioritize, it incentivizes focusing on certain outcomes, like test scores, more than others. For more information on Lone Star Governance, *see*: White, R. S., & DeMatthews, D. (2025, June 2). Unproven school board governance training in Texas is all hat and no cattle. *Austin American Statesman*.

60 Houston Independent School District (n.d.). *Sunrise Centers*.

61 Dunlap, M. (2023, August 9). Mike Miles' plans for Houston ISD have been done before in Texas. Here's what happened. *Houston Landing*.

takeover, HISD's principals were entrusted with greater discretion over campus decision making within a district accountability framework.[62] However, the NES model centralized district authority over decisions related to curriculum, budget, and staffing.[63] More specifically, NES prescribed the following school-level reforms:

- **Instruction:** NES schools follow timed, scripted lesson plans with daily quizzes (called Demonstration of Learning, or DoLs) provided by the district's Curriculum Department, which relies on generative AI for content creation.[64] Students who score above a certain threshold on the DoL transition to the Teams Center, typically the former site of the school's library, to receive more advanced work, while other students stay in the classroom so that the teacher can re-teach the scripted material.

- **Discipline:** NES schools follow rigid disciplinary practices commonly found in no-excuses charter schools, such as barriers splitting hallways to control traffic flow, shorter passing periods, and tighter restrictions on students' behavior (such as bathroom use), and—perhaps most controversially—removing disruptive students to the Teams Center, where students rejoin class virtually.

- **Personnel:** The staffing configuration at NES schools follows what Superintendent Miles calls the "hospital model," comparing teachers to surgeons—their primary role being the delivery of instruction. All other tasks, such as developing lesson plans, grading, and printing, are outsourced to support staff, like curriculum developers, teacher apprentices, and learning coaches. Teacher apprentices and learning coaches do not require teaching certification, though they are expected to work towards it. At times, teacher apprentices would replace classroom teachers who were absent or are removed/leave mid-year. Furthermore, the transformation of libraries to Teams Centers also meant removing school librarians and digital media specialists, so campus libraries no longer had designated staff to attend to or maintain them.

- **Hours and Compensation:** NES campuses provide a higher base salary that varies greatly depending on grade level and subject area. The first year under takeover, NES teachers received a competitive stipend of $10,000. At the same time, NES educators are expected to work longer hours, with schools opening at 6:30 am and closing at 5:00 pm most days. NES educators typically work morning or afternoon duty once a week in addition to mandatory weekly professional development called Demo Days that lasts until 5:30 pm.

- **Dyad:** The Dyad program at NES schools replaces or supplements nonacademic and/or elective course offerings. These classes are taught by Dyad instructors, typically uncertified individuals who are hired as independent contractors on an at-will basis. Dyad also offers an international trip for 8th graders and domestic trip for 7th graders who demonstrate good attendance and behavioral standing.[65]

The first cohort of 28 NES campuses was announced at the beginning of the takeover in June 2023 and included all schools in the Wheatley, Kashmere, and North Forest high school feed-

62 Moon, J. (2018, February). HISD's decentralization reform (Part 1: Policy analysis). *Rice Houston Education Research Consortium, 6(*2).
63 Houston Independent School District (2024, May). *HISD Defined Autonomy*.; Mizan, N., & Goodwin, A. (2024, June 7). Can HISD Superintendent Miles change your school? The 'defined autonomy' framework explained. *Houston Chronicle*.
64 Menchaca, M. (2024, December 20). What to know about Prof Jim Inc, the AI company Houston ISD is using to generate reading passages. *Houston Chronicle*.; McDaniel, W. C., & Srinivasan, R. T. (2025, June 5). We're professors. We're parents. HISD students don't deserve AI slop. Opinion. *Houston Chronicle.*
65 According to the Dyad student travel page on HISD's website, students must have no more than 6 absences and no record of school suspension to qualify. *See* Houston Independent School District. (n.d.) *Dyad student travel.*

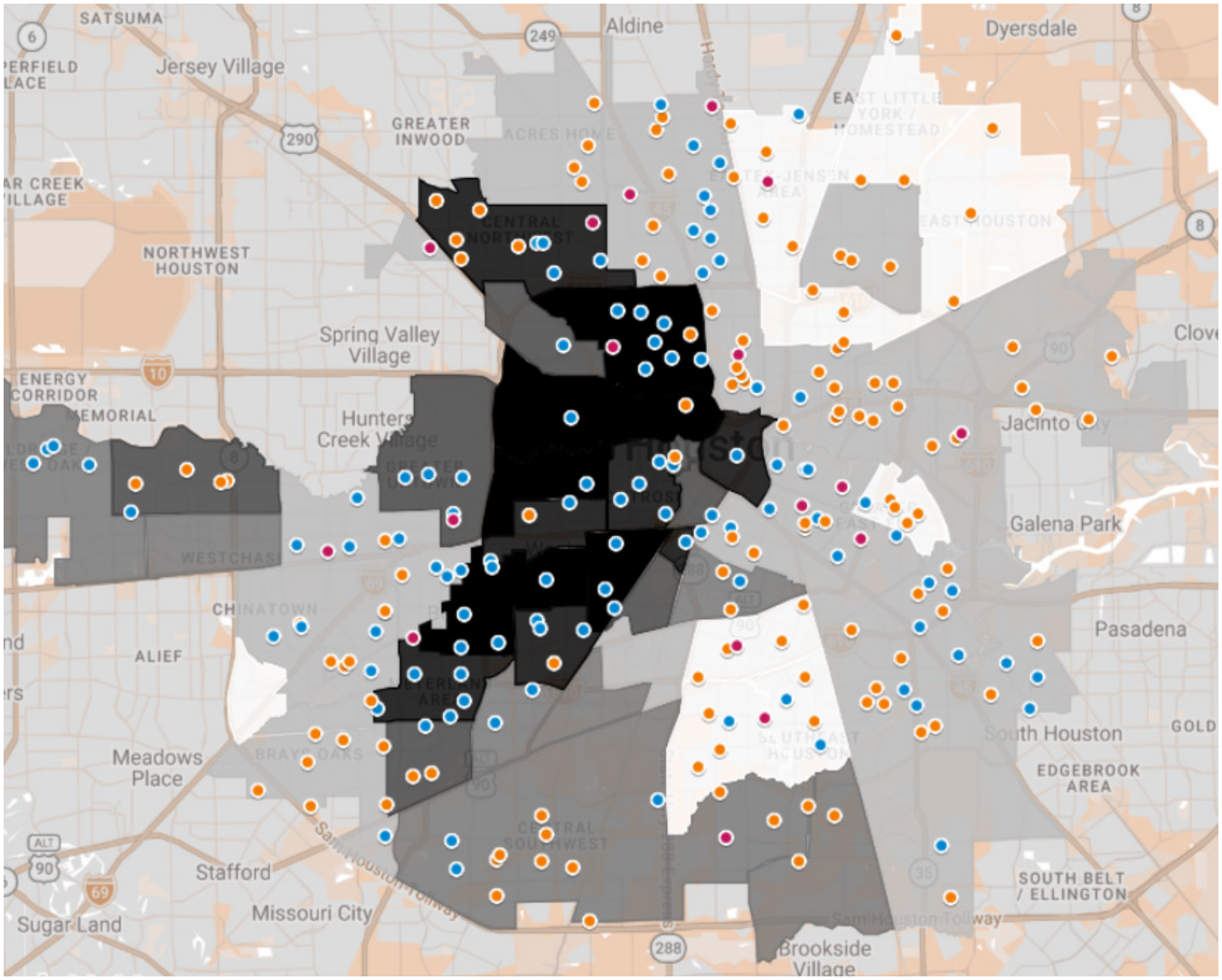
er patterns.[66] At these original 28 NES schools, all instructional staff were removed from their positions and required to reapply for their jobs if they wanted to return for the upcoming school year.[67] Fifty-seven additional schools opted in to become NES-Aligned.[68] Forty-five additional campuses were added to NES for the 2024–25 school year, bringing nearly half of the district's schools under the NES model.[69] Notably, as Figure 1 shows, schools officially implementing the NES model are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. These schools also serve disproportionate concentrations of HISD's Black and Latino students. Additionally, at the start of the 2025–26 school year, 17 additional campuses were identified as "Special Focus" schools.[70] Despite lacking the NES designation, Special Focus campuses were expected to implement NES-style instructional reforms, but without the infusion of additional resources or personnel.[71] Though the superintendent promised non-NES schools would retain most of their autonomy, these campuses experienced pressures to adopt elements of the NES instructional model, including district-created curriculum.[72]

Other notable changes that occurred over the years under the takeover include:

- **Mass staff layoffs and resignations** impacting principals, teachers, support staff, and custodial/maintenance. Using Public Information Requests, the Houston Federation of Teachers estimates nearly 22,000 staff departures since the start of the takeover.[73]
- **Elimination of school-based wraparound specialists**—a position explicitly designed to meet students' and families' non-academic, material needs—in favor of Sunrise Centers.[74]
- **Failed $4.4 billion school bond initiative**, which was voted down by a 60-40 margin, largely as a referendum on the superintendent and the takeover.[75]
- **Sunsetting of magnet programs** at multiple campuses related to Career and Technical Education (CTE),[76] dual language,[77] and International Baccalaureate (IB).[78]
- **Investments in new communications strategies** that amplify district leaders' messaging and narrative, including $350,000 on billboards promoting academic gains and $2 million on an in-house news operation, HISD NOW, flooding the information ecosystem with a stream of news favorable to state-appointed leaders.[79]
- **Closure of 12 schools** after a two-week notice to the public,[80] in addition to closing or demolishing two other campuses with no formal vote.[81]

66 González Kelly, S. (2023, June 18). Mike Miles' plan to reform 29 HISD schools has parents, teachers on an 'emotional roller coaster'. *Houston Chronicle*.
67 González Kelly, S. (2023, June 2). HISD Superintendent Mike Miles offers new details on staffing model for struggling schools. *Houston Chronicle*.
68 González Kelly, S. (2023, July 11). HISD announces final list of 57 schools voluntarily joining Mike Miles' reform program. *Houston Chronicle*.
69 Walsh, D. A. (2024, February 9). Houston ISD releases final list of NES campuses, including Austin High and 18 elementary and middle schools. *Houston Public Media*.
70 Mizan, N. (2025, September 23). Here are the 17 HISD schools Mike Miles considers 'special focus.' *Houston Chronicle*
71 Mizan, N.(2025, August 15). 'Poorly planned disruption': Durham Elementary School parents protest abrupt curriculum change. *Houston Chronicle*.
72 Lehrer-Small, A. (2024, August 16). HISD promises more freedom to teachers in top-rated schools. Will it follow through? *Houston Landing*.; Lehrer-Small, A. (2023, October 2).Teachers, parents say HISD changes creeping beyond Mike Miles' 85 overhauled schools. *Houston Landing*.; Partain, C. (2025, December 12). Fact check: HISD claims 15 schools aren't using district curriculum. Records indicate otherwise. *Houston Chronicle*.
73 Menchaca, M. (2024, May 9).HISD confirms widespread job cuts for teachers, custodians and principals for the 2024-25 school year. *Houston Chronicle*.; Texas House Public Education Committee, 89th Leg. (2026, June 1). (testimony of Jessi Heiner).
74 Downing, M. (2024, May 2). Wraparound specialists and other HISD employees told they are out of jobs. *Houston Press*; *Note:* A report series on Sunrise Centers released by the Houston Education Research Consortium showed challenges to geographic accessibility for some areas, lack of knowledge about or perceptions of inaccessibility around Sunrise Centers, and close collaboration between Sunrise Center staff and campus wraparound specialists during service provision. *See:* Pham, A., Horne, A., Bonnerf, H., & Sánchez-Soto, G. (2025 April 22). *Increasing access to HISD's Sunrise Centers*. Houston Education Research Consortium, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University. Houston, TX.
75 Terry, C. & Taylor, B. (2024, November 5). Election results for Houston ISD's record $4.4 billion bond proposal. *Click2Houston*.
76 Seward, B. (2026, January 7). Houston ISD's proposal to shutter magnet programs sparks community outcry. *Houston Public Media*.
77 Partain, C. (2026, February 4). HISD broke barriers with the first public French program in Texas. Now, it plans to dismantle it. *Houston Chronicle*.
78 Menchaca, M. (2025, January 28). HISD's Yates High School will lose International Baccalaureate designation in 2025-26 school year. *Houston Chronicle*.
79 Mizan, N. (2025, October 8). Houston ISD plans to spend $2 million in 2025-26 on its promotional show 'HISD NOW.' *Houston Chronicle*.
80 Sinha, T. (2026, February 27). Houston ISD closed 12 schools. Here's what parents need to know. *Houston Defender*.
81 Mizan, N. (2026, February 23). HISD demolishes Las Americas Newcomer School after moving students to another campus. *Houston Chronicle*.; Partain, C. (2026, April 8). HISD adds another campus to its list of closures. Here's the latest. *Houston Chronicle*.

Figure 1. Map of HISD NES, Special Focus, and non-NES schools, 2025–26.



Since taking control, Superintendent Miles and the state-appointed Board of Managers have claimed victory in "fixing" a broken district, citing improvements in test scores and school accountability ratings as evidence of their "transformation."[82] Takeover leadership has even boldly declared to have eradicated inequality, claiming, "In Houston ISD, zipcode [*sic*] no longer dictates destiny."[83] This triumphant narrative has garnered broad appeal, with other districts and states looking to HISD for their own "Houston Promise."[84] Thus, takeover actors in HISD enact the same, tell-tale script underlying other takeovers across the nation: yet another "failing" district that was "saved" by bold, courageous leaders who had the gumption to make tough decisions.[85]

Asserting this improvement narrative requires deeming only certain forms of "data" legitimate and dismissing the persistent concerns expressed by the constituents they allegedly serve as "alternative facts," "anecdotes," and "noise."[86] Yet, even the quantitative data that state-appointed leaders have marshaled as proof of their success have been subject to manipulation, such as systematically delaying access to STAAR-tested subjects [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness], namely biology and Algebra I, at schools following the NES model, thereby denying students access to more advanced coursework while inflating state accountability ratings.[87] Additionally, analysis by the *Houston Chronicle* and others revealed that accountability ratings at NES high schools were inflated by placing large numbers of students in remedial "college prep" courses, which research has shown have net negative effects on students' actual college readiness.[88] Thousands of HISD educators and students have voted with their feet and left the district, with student declines especially pronounced at NES schools.[89]

These trends indicate a strong signal that HISD stakeholders reject the narrative put forth by state-appointed leaders. For years, students, families, educators, and community members have attempted to voice their legitimate concerns and desires under takeover, only to have their pleas fall on deaf ears. Without trust and transparency, state-appointed actors cannot be the sole entities determining how the HISD takeover is narrated and remembered. This brings us to the purpose, goals, and work of this Commission.

82 HISD NOW. (2026, June 25). *Continuing three-year trend, HISD 2026 STAAR scores show growth in nearly all 3-8 grade exams.;* HISD NOW. (2026, August 18). *As achievement gaps shrink, nearly 8 in 10 HISD schools are A or B-rated in 2026.*

83 Houston Independent School District. (n.d.) *The Houston Promise*.

84 Hatch, B. (2026, January 22). Tennessee Republicans want a Houston-style takeover of Memphis schools. What does that mean? *Chalkbeat Tennessee*.

85 Miles, M. (2023, June 22). *Destination 2035 - An Action Plan for HISD* [PowerPoint slides]. HISD board meeting presentation. Digitally preserved by *Houston Press.;* Miles, M. (2023, August 3) *Destination 2035: Baseline data presentation and overview of year one metrics.* [Video archive]. Houston ISD board meeting, Houston, TX.

86 Menchaca, M. (2024, January 17). Houston ISD superintendent Mike Miles calls closing schools Tuesday due to freeze a mistake. *Houston Chronicle*.; Menchaca, M. (2024, November 7). 'It's not a referendum on me:' HISD Superintendent has no plans for changes after $4.4B bond failure. *Houston Chronicle*.; Bohlman, G. (Producer). (2025, August 18). *Hello Houston.* [Interview] Houston Public Media.

87 Partain, C. & Goodwin, A. (2025, July 1). Fewer test-takeovers, better results: What HISD's biology STAAR data shows. *Houston Chronicle.*; Hardy, M. (2025, July 1) One key to Houston ISD's rising STAAR scores? Holding students back. *Texas Monthly*.

88 Dawer, D. I., & Kravetz, R. (2026, August 5). The 'Houston miracle' shell game. *Texas Observer.;* Ghisolfi, C., Menchaca, M., & Partain, C. (2026, August 19). Exclusive: Online courses inflated HISD ratings. Without them, some schools would have F's. *Houston Chronicle*.

89 Templeton, T., Friedman, W., & Heller, B. (2026). *Houston ISD takeover: By the numbers*. Institute for Education Policy Research and Evaluation, University of Houston Education Research Center.

3. Purpose, Goals, and Work of this Commission

As the Commission on the HISD Takeover, we recognize that we, too, are putting forth a narrative—one that centers testimony from dozens of HISD students, families, educators, and community members who generously shared their time and stories. Our effort to document how this takeover has "transformed" pedagogy, relationships, and educator professionalism is also incomplete, as it does not fully capture the totality of perspectives that comprise HISD's diverse stakeholders. At the same time, by elevating the voices of ordinary Houstonians, we offer a counternarrative challenging the "official" takeover narrative produced exclusively by those in power. Indeed, such perspectives are crucial for reimagining the kinds of schools, learning environments, and communities we want for our young people when HISD returns to local control.

The groundwork for the Commission on the HISD Takeover began in the early spring of 2025 and the Commission itself was formed in the summer of 2025.[90] Concerned with the growing lack of trust in the state takeover and Mike Miles, community members came together to form a citizens' commission. Citizens' commissions have historically been created when elected officials cannot or will not transparently and accountably share information about matters of public concern. Elsewhere they have been used to document human rights abuses, the degradation of infrastructure, and other matters. The Commission is focused on thoroughly investigating the current conditions within HISD. It is:

- Focused on, but not limited to, student outcomes and wellness, teacher retention, family and community engagement, safety, facilities, and finances.
- Supported by data collection, current and archival, and a series of public hearings.

The Commission's chairs include Texas Senator Molly Cook, Texas Representative Lauren Ashley Simmons, and Rev. Dr. Colin Bossen, Senior Minister at the First Unitarian Church of Houston. Commission members include academic researchers, community representatives and advocates, an HISD parent and former teacher, and a current HISD student. Its work was supported by a clerk and a community engagement team.

The Commission employed multiple methods for collecting testimony from a range of HISD constituencies. First, in fall 2025, the Commission hosted three in-person listening sessions held at three locations across the city of Houston: Trinity Gardens Church of Christ in northeast Houston's Greater Fifth Ward; First Unitarian Universalist Church in central Houston's Museum District; and Westbury United Methodist Church in southwest Houston (see Figure 2). Our intent was to host a fourth session at the Talento Bilingual de Houston (TBH) Center, a community-based arts center in East Houston that serves a predominantly Latino population, many of whom do not speak English. The listening session was aimed at drawing Spanish-speaking parents, students, and community members. Unfortunately, this Commission canceled this session due to aggressive Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence in Houston and the potential for a raid on the facility.

Listening session participants shared testimony either through public participation or through private and anonymous conversation with one Commission member. In total, the Commission received in-person testimony from 51 individuals, a group that included HISD parents, students, community members, current and former teachers, and other HISD staff (including administrators, wraparound specialists, and librarians). Listening session participants represented more than 40 different campuses across HISD, which included NES and non-NES schools,

90 For more detailed information on how this Commission was formed, refer to Appendix A.

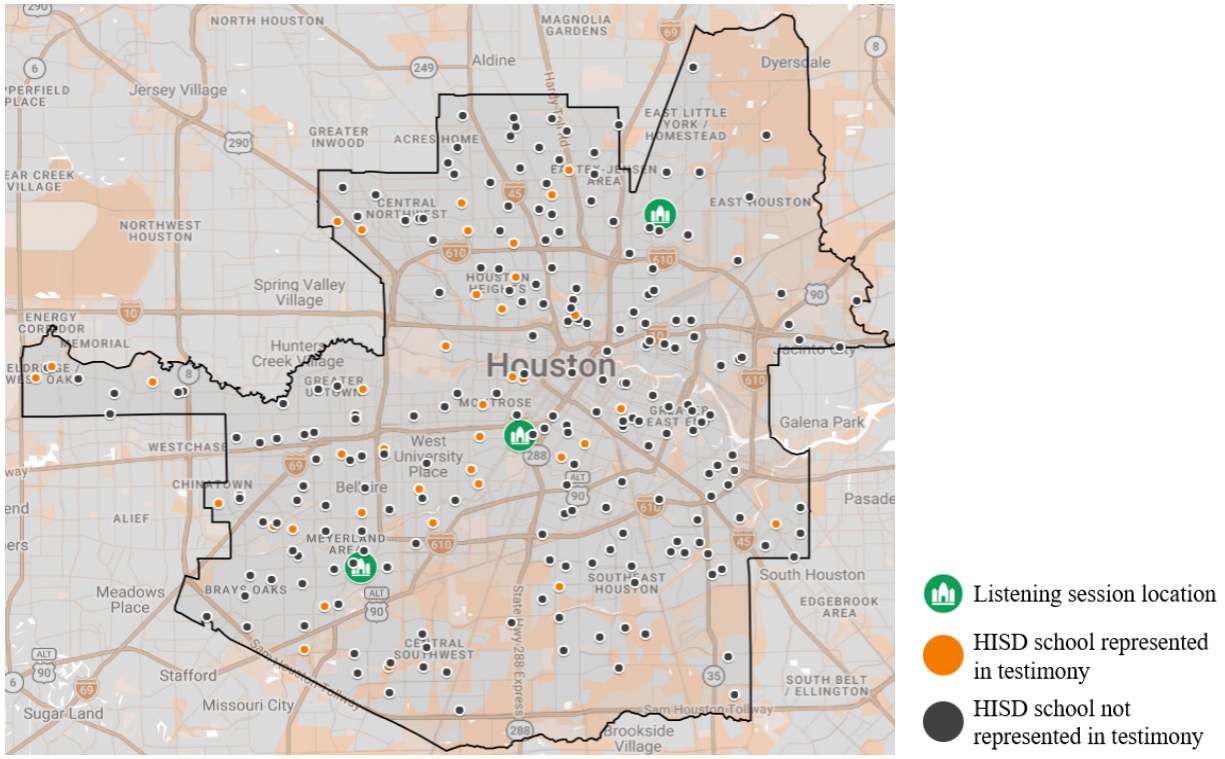
Special Focus schools, dual language campuses, early college high schools, International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, magnet schools, and Montessori schools.

Second, the Commission created an online form for people to privately submit testimony. Specifically, the form asked online participants: 1) What would you like to share with us about your current experiences in HISD? and 2) What would you like to see from our schools and our district to make it an ideal learning environment for our students? Participants were asked to identify their position in the community, the school(s) they referred to in their testimony, and their contact information, though responses to these questions were optional. People also had the opportunity to submit online testimony by directly emailing the Commission. In total, the Commission received online testimony from 32 individuals, representing parents, teachers, community members, and other district staff.

Third, Commission members facilitated four focus group discussions with different communities across HISD. These included two online discussions with teachers and parents (one group from a Special Focus-designated elementary school, and another with speakers from several NES schools) an in-person focus group discussion with community members at a Super Neighborhood association meeting, and an in-person Spanish language focus group with parents.

Commission members met regularly to analyze testimony and discuss findings. This process enabled the Commission to identify five major themes, which are discussed in subsequent sections of this report: 1) diminishing curriculum, 2) dismantling relationships and student supports, 3) demeaning professional educators, 4) destroying democracy, and 5) degrading financial stewardship.

Figure 2. Locations of Listening Sessions and HISD Schools.



Diminishing Curriculum

Introduction and Key Findings

Though HISD earned a *B* rating for the 2022–23 school year, TEA cited academic underperformance as one justification for taking over and mandated that the district improve academic achievement. In response, state-appointed leaders implemented drastic changes to teaching and learning in HISD through the New Education System (NES). Decades of research on education theory and philosophy have demonstrated the importance of culturally relevant,[91] culturally responsive,[92] culturally sustaining,[93] and culturally revitalizing[94] curricula. However, NES is not grounded in any existing frameworks or theories widely accepted in peer-reviewed educational research and remains empirically untested using these rigorous academic standards. Notwithstanding this lack of concrete evidence, aspects of the NES model have permeated nearly all schools in the district, beyond those officially designated as NES.[95] Testimony from students, families, and communities revealed significant divergence from the stories the state tells regarding satisfaction with the educational experiences under takeover.[96] Specifically, testimony revealed:

1. The NES curriculum diminished curricular offerings in HISD, prioritizing narrow state accountability indicators at the expense of enriching and rigorous learning experiences.
2. The NES model inhibited educators from meeting students' unique learning needs. Specifically, this model compromised legally mandated accommodations for students with disabilities and Emergent Bilingual students and gutted specialized school programs.
3. Closing dozens of school libraries deprived HISD's most vulnerable students of access to books and certified librarians.

1. "They're doing more test-prep": Narrowing the Curriculum

Participants in listening sessions noted a drastic narrowing of the curriculum in HISD schools. They shared that the NES curriculum hyperfocused instruction on test preparation to create the appearance of improved student learning and achievement. Participants also shared stories of efforts to game the system by strategically placing students who were eligible to take more advanced classes in less rigorous courses. Finally, participants noted widespread errors in NES lesson plans and accompanying materials, heightening distrust in the learning process.

91 Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491.
92 Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, practice and research.* Teachers College Press.; Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(2), 106–116.
93 Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.
94 McCarty, T., & Lee, T. (2014). Critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and Indigenous education sovereignty. *Harvard Educational Review*, *84*(1), 101–124.
95 Mizan, N. (2026, May 11). Exclusive: See how Houston ISD's 9 new NES schools voted on the transition. *Houston Chronicle*.; Partain, C. (2025, November 15). These 15 campuses are not using HISD's district-made curriculum. *Houston Chronicle*.
96 Seward, B. (2026, January 15). Houston ISD parents praise schools but question district's direction, new survey shows. *Houston Public Media*.

a. Militant Test-Prep Curriculum, Without Enrichment or Remediation

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

It's a test-prep class, so they're doing more test-prep. They do IXL lessons, so just more math and reading because she's in 9th grade.[97]

Parent, Westbury Methodist Church Listening Session

Here's the Mike Miles teaching method. The teachers get to teach a lesson for 30 minutes…and the students get five minutes to complete a digital assessment. Based on their score, they walk in front of class to a brightly colored bin and select a worksheet that publicly reflects their performance. Those who do not pass are pulled in front of class for a reteach session. **It's not just inefficient; it's humiliating.**

My nine-year old, along with many others, was subjected to this daily routine. She spent much of her day watching the timer tick down second of every class activity and the time she had left to complete an activity. She cried multiple times a day after failing and at the shame she felt walking in front of her peers to get a paper from a red bin. **This militant style of teaching fosters shame, not growth. It instills fear, not curiosity. Our children deserve a safe place to learn and fail and try again, not to be publicly labeled and isolated.**

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

I'm told to go over [the] curriculum, internalize it, and make adjustments. Make whatever adjustments that [I'm] going to make. **The entire administrative team has no problem admitting, "…this [curriculum] is AI (artificial intelligence).** The AI has done all of this, so we need you guys to make sure that you're internalizing your lessons and customizing your lessons."

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

My second grader has told me that **technically there are books in her classroom, but none of them have been touched**…. we don't quite know if the early grades are even being allowed to use anything like crayons and paper or other manipulatives, largely because the school is not allowed to communicate with parents.

Parent, Online Focus Group Listening Session

Supposedly, they're not as touched and affected by [the NES], but she and her Spanish class just did a Frida Kahlo segment…They were going to go to the Museum of Fine Arts [because it has] a Frida Kahlo exhibit that is wonderful…**Well, they're not gonna go on any field trips. [My daughter] said, they told us what they wanted, but the district wouldn't allow it**…. There's not equity in education, and experiences through field trips is the best way to learn and have this real-life xperience. I'm very frustrated because **even at a school like [my school], which has [privileged] parents and all…they're being denied field trips.**

97 IXL is an online test prep program.

b. Gaming the System Through Selective Student Placement and Tracking

Community Member, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

I spoke with a freshman that is currently in Physics I. **This is a new thing with HISD, putting students in Physics as opposed to Biology, so that [Mike Miles] makes [the district's] Biology scores.** It is the beginning of the year and he is already behind…He wanted to do engineering, and he would be the first in his family to go to college. He told me that **he doesn't think he can do it anymore because he is struggling in the class**, specifically with equations. He's never taken Algebra I, **so of course, he would be struggling because he doesn't have the foundations in the course**.

Student, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

I really love math. I've always been good at math. That's always been my strong suit in school. **Last year, I was in geometry. Because of NES, we did not have a teacher who taught a pre-AP** (Advancement Placement) **geometry class, so I never got to move up. I had to stay on level…** They decided that they were going to take me out of Algebra II and stick me in a TSI [Texas Success Initiative] algebraic reasoning class, making me have to take Algebra II next year. I was trying to challenge myself at school. That's my ultimate goal. Because of this, I can't take Pre-Calculus next year…**My only way to go to college, which I plan to do, is to go to college through academics, and I can't do that when they stick me in [Algebraic Reasoning]**.[98]

c. Error-Laden Curriculum

Community Member, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

I've spoken with many students who are refugees and have come from other countries that have been in the emergent bilingual program. What they have told me is that **the curriculum they've received from NES is filled with numerous errors** that has been making it harder for them to learn English. [It] has been filled with numerous errors and the answers, which [have] confused them in their process of learning English, has been detrimental to them trying to graduate, and that concerns me.

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

In an A-rated, non-NES school with a relative amount of resources, **the teachers are scrambling on weekends to correct error-ridden, AI-generated curriculum** that students nevertheless receive. [My other child] has become cynical about some of the materials that are sent home, which are again full of errors [and] mistakes.

2. "The kids are suffering, and the law is being broken": Impacts on Special Populations and Programs

The NES instructional model compromises services and programs for specialized populations, placing students and the district in jeopardy. Legally, these changes interfere with students' and families' rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a federal law that

98 For more detail on how the district's systematic efforts to pull students from Algebra II and place them in Algebraic Reasoning (a remedial math course) to inflate accountability ratings, *see*: Dawer, D., & Kravetz, R. (2026, August 5). The 'Houston Miracle' shell game. *Texas Observer*.

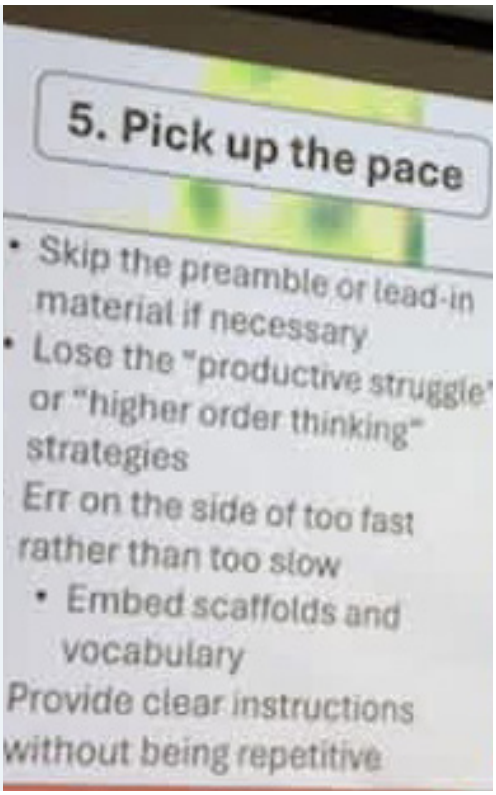
requires states and school districts to provide educational accommodations for all students with disabilities.[99] Already parents have pressed the district to improve special education services, going as far as filing state[100] and federal[101] complaints about the district's services. Moreover, the district's implementation of NES may be out of compliance with existing federal precedent under *Lau v. Nichols*, which requires public school systems to provide specialized supports for Emergent Bilingual students.[102] This issue is particularly consequential, as one in every three students in HISD is classified as Emergent Bilingual.[103] Finally, many of HISD's enrichment programs, such as AP and IB programs, must meet specific requirements to maintain their credentials. NES has narrowed and reduced the curriculum in ways that undermine program integrity, which could result in schools losing these designations in the future. In many ways, Mike Miles' decision to implement the NES model as well as the pressure for non-NES schools to adopt it likely violates federal law and curtails enrichment opportunities throughout the district.

It is worth noting that specialized programs have not always served the needs of all students in HISD, especially those who are most marginalized. Yet, as the student body of HISD has become more diverse, there are a number of specialized programs—such as IB, magnet programs, and dual language programs—that provide integral academic support and enrichment for the students and families furthest from opportunity. With this context in mind, the following testimonies highlight how curricular changes under the takeover have further neglected students requiring specialized accommodations and diminished specialized programs for all students.

a. Special Education (SPED) Programs

Parent, Westbury United Methodist Church Listening Session

> Both of my children are in SPED, one for dyslexia, the other one for autism and health-related concerns. **I'd like to simply state compliance is not equal to support.** We have filed three TEA complaints and each one has various violations…The major issue is when violations occur, it has already affected the child, and compensatory time isn't always effective because you're asking the violators to execute corrective action. If they were capable of doing so, they wouldn't be in violation in the first place. With a takeover, the investigators are investigating themselves. This was a so-called A-rated campus. **The takeover has put special needs on the backburner.**



HISD Professional Development Slide

99 *See* Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(3) for IDEA's "child find" requirement (requiring states to seek out and identify students with disabilities within their jurisdiction); *see also* Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(1) for IDEA's "zero reject" requirement (requiring states to serve all students with disabilities, no matter their severity or the location of the student in public or private schools).

100 Partain, C. (2026, July 10). TEA orders HISD to review special education overhaul after violations found. *Houston Chronicle*.

101 U.S. Department of Education (2026). *U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights opens disability discrimination investigation into Texas school district.* [Press release].

102 Lau v. Nichols 414 U.S. 563 (1974) (leveraging Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to hold that public schools must assist students in overcoming language barriers that prevented students from accessing lessons to offer equal educational opportunities).

103 Texas Education Agency (2025). 2024-25 *Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) for Houston Independent School District.*

Educator, Westbury Methodist Church Listening Session

My SPED students are not receiving in-class support most weeks. My in-class support person services all six math classes simultaneously while being called out to handle any, literally any, administrative job. He has been called to break up fights, cover classes, and the list goes on. Needless to say, **the kids are suffering, and the law is being broken.**

Student, Westbury Methodist Church Listening Session

Because of my ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder] and dysgraphia, I wasn't able to succeed in elementary before the takeover, and it seems so much worse now. During lesson time, I would have been fine and understood everything, but because of my dysgraphia, I wouldn't have been able to quickly complete writing-based MRS strategies [Multiple Response Strategies].[104] Even with an understanding of the curriculum, I would have had a hard time doing paper DOLs [Demonstration of Learning],[105] especially with the time limit. If I failed the DOL, as I would inevitably do most of the time, I would have to work on an easier curriculum that I already understood. If I was lucky enough to pass the test, then I would have had to do harder packets, which I would have, again, been unable to easily handwrite. Since everything is formulaic and test-prep centered, **there would be no break from packets to read, have a fun discussion, or do a project.** I went to an IB school, so we did projects. **They were the only thing that let me accurately show my knowledge within the curriculum.**

Educator, Online Focus Group Listening Session

In the field of special education, there are ways that you provide classroom supports without clearly singling out students. This is an entire field of study within education: how to help remediate students in the classroom environment in ways that bring dignity. **Much like everything else, [the takeover] puts a torch to human dignity whether it's a student that struggles, whether it's a teacher, whether it's a parent.** It is just like human dignity is a thing that cannot be afforded in this world of achievement, and unfortunately, human dignity is one of those things required in order for someone to learn. It is just the utterly backwards nature of this entire thing. **We will torch dignity, emotional security in the name of achievement**, but Maslow's hierarchy of needs will tell you that human dignity and emotional security is needed for higher-level achievement. It is the most backasswards thing imaginable.

b. Services for Emergent Bilingual Students

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

So, I spent the last two years studying, researching, looking up the best ways to teach ESL (English as a Second Language) students, and last year we got pretty much every point you could for a school as far as the ESL growth and population. I mean growth and development….I spent the first two weeks of school relearning curriculum, and then **I found out a month ago, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) is the same core content that the on-level native speakers are taking in the high school.** They just added some pictures and vocabulary words. When I complained and pulled out the research from the U.S. Department of Education, from local universities who've done studies on how people develop language and acquire language, I was told,

104 Multiple Response Strategies (MRS) are eight prescribed engagement strategies introduced under NES that educators are required to use every 4 minutes.
105 The Demonstration of Learning (DOL) is the 5-minute quiz students take after the lesson and is used to identify which students will remain in the classroom or go to the Teams Center within the NES instructional model.

"Research is fine, but **we're going to do what we're told because there are things you can't control.** There are some things that are out of our hands."

Educator, Westbury Methodist Church Listening Session

My campus is approximately 70% emergent bilingual, including refugees. I'm learning Spanish, Pashto, and Persian as I teach my students how to solve equations…I am not ESL certified. I do not have any training on how to support my EB [Emergent Bilingual] students. **Seeing how this model falls short, I decided yesterday to buck the system**…Yesterday was the first time this year that I loved my job, and I felt like that was something I needed to hide. I felt like it was shameful. I worked with one girl that only speaks Persian. **I was able to finally sit with her one-on-one for several minutes and translate to make the content approachable, and she finally got it.** She was so excited to hear me speak in her language and finally do what the other kids were doing. **It took everything not to cry in that moment.**

c. Dual Language, Magnet, and IB Programs

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

It is an IB campus. It's dual language, but he comes home now, and he says school isn't fun. He gets worksheets after worksheet after worksheet. When he finishes his worksheets, he's sent to a computer. Then, he just keeps doing worksheets on a computer. He used to have options for different programs. He doesn't anymore, and his love has dimmed. **His love of [the school] has dimmed because HISD has systematically taken away everything that made our campus amazing. The IB program has been diminished. Its dual language program has been diminished**… It's boring. It's a one-size-fits-all curriculum that has short-term gains without long-term results for our children, and these worksheets make our children hate school. They really do…the point is that HISD is treating this situation like [the school's] educational values cannot coexist with good academic criteria.

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

My understanding is **there is absolutely no incorporation of [the] IB curriculum at the school currently**. I know that there's been talk about sending kids home with IB projects, which is not what IB is about. IB is about being next to people that are different from you and understanding [their perspectives]. It's not happening. **We are very worried about losing our IB designation because of the lack of respect for it.**

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

The magnet program has basically been abandoned just because there's nobody there to manage the gardens, manage the projects. **It's largely a magnet school now only in name.**

3. "That's just the most ridiculous thing, to not have a functioning library": Closing the Book on Education with Library Closures

Libraries are critical assets within schools. Yet HISD's state-appointed leaders have closed over 120 school libraries since the takeover, disproportionately eliminating certified school library staff

in Black and Latino neighborhoods.[106] At NES schools, many school libraries were converted to Teams Centers, which doubled as spaces for pushing out students who met minimum performance levels on DOLs to complete additional work and for warehousing students removed from their classes for misbehavior. Losing this vital, often taken-for-granted resource was deeply upsetting to many of our participants, including students who were directly affected by these library closures.

a. Importance of School Libraries

Parent, Online Focus Group

I want to see the library restored and the Teams Center go away. Books are important. Children need to read. They need access to literature. They need access to books, hard stop! It's a school. **That's just the most ridiculous thing, to not have a functioning library.**

Student, Westbury Methodist Church Listening Session

The one thing that allowed me to enjoy learning was the library, **but now I wouldn't just be unable to read books in many schools or be taken to the library during class.** The library would be entirely gone. **That was the one thing that allowed me to learn and grow and thrive and not fall behind**.

b. Deepening Disparities to Library Access

Educator, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

Decades of research have shown that having **a fully functioning school library with a certified librarian has a tangible, positive impact on achievement**, and this impact is even greater in low-income communities because librarians can help close some of those literacy gaps and engage students in literacy outside of the academic setting. That is what I have a heart and a passion for.

When I was hired, I was hired at [an elementary school], which was a Title I campus in [a historically Black neighborhood]. I was filling a position that had been empty for 10 years. I was ecstatic. I chose that campus knowing it would be a challenge to update all of the books and to get a program started from nothing. **Then, Mike Miles came, and I had to transfer because my library was closed**.... There are **only a handful of libraries left in HISD, and they're all in affluent neighborhoods**.

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

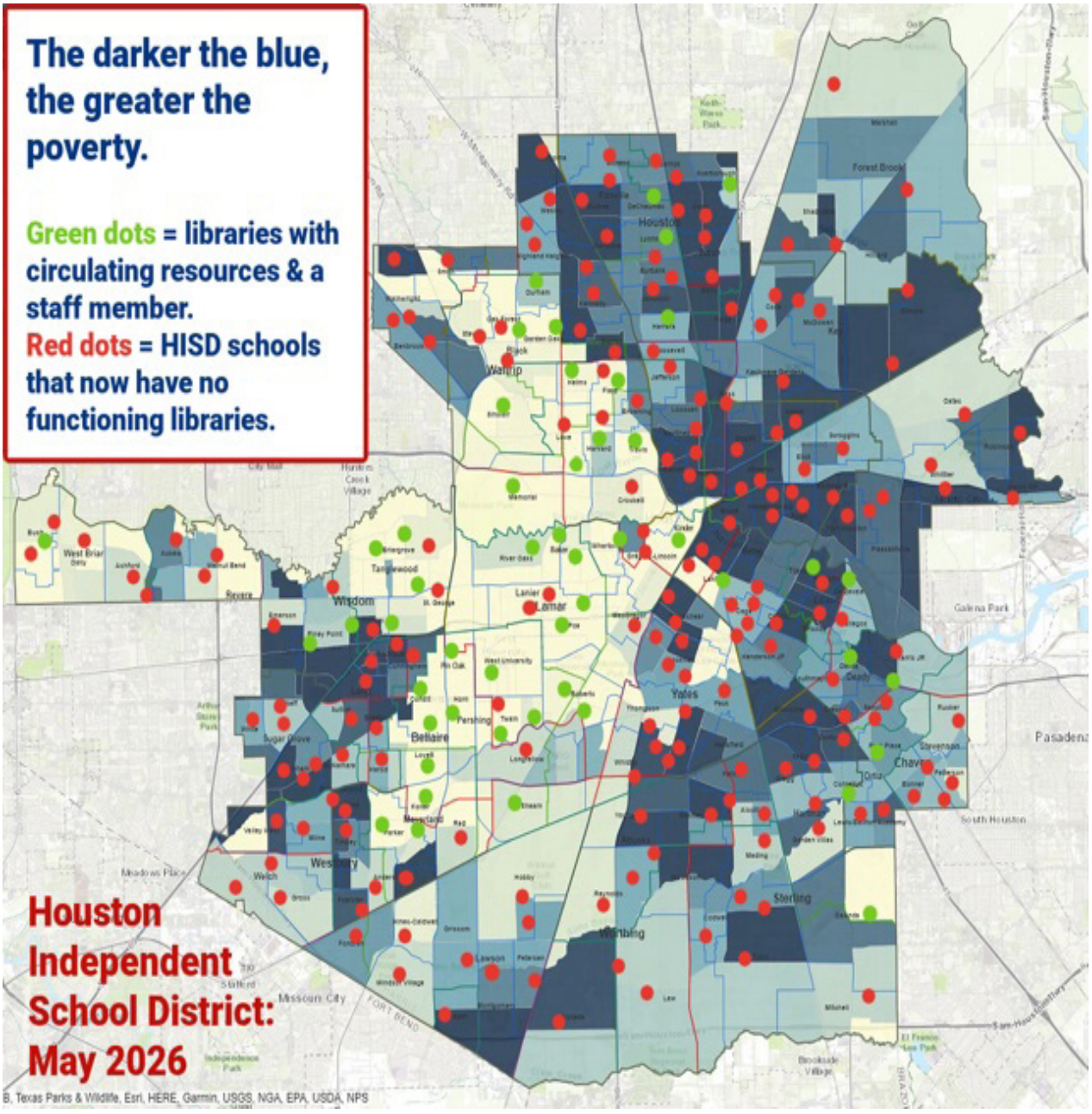
The first thing that happened was the libraries were removed, so books weren't being read anymore... so I got a letter from my doctor as well. I have been advocating for my child for years now. **I was able to remove her on my own from the NES system into a non-NES school where she was actually reading books. They have a library.**

106 At the close of the 2025–26 school year, nearly 190 campuses in HISD had no libraries at all. *See:* Friends of HISD Libraries (2026). *What we do*. (Accessed Aug. 4, 2026).

Conclusion

Though state-appointed leaders claimed to improve academic achievement through the NES model, multiple testimonies ran counter to this claim. Instead, HISD stakeholders shared how the takeover diminished learning opportunities by implementing scripted test-prep instruction, inhibiting the provision of legally mandated accommodations and specialized programs, and removing school libraries that are crucial to cultivating students' love for reading. These accounts suggest that, rather than enhancing curriculum and pedagogy, the NES model implemented under the takeover has hindered genuine teaching and learning, depriving students access to more rigorous, engaging classroom experiences.

Figure 3: Locations of HISD library closures (Credit: Friends of Houston Libraries)

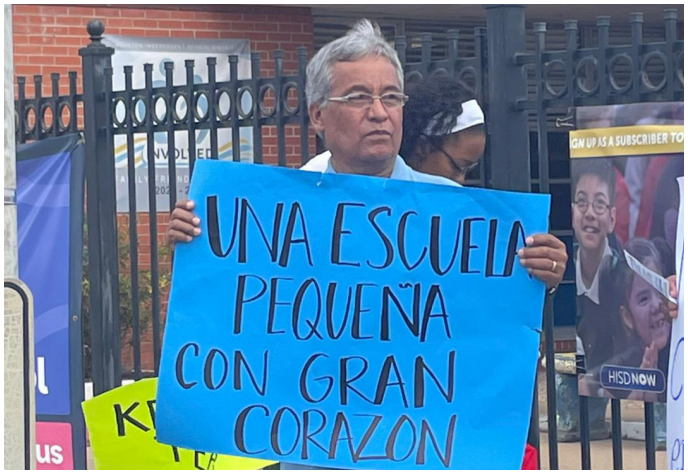


Top: Askew MS library before takeover (top); Bottom: Askew MS library after takeover conversion into Teams Center (Credit: Students Need Libraries in HISD)

Dismantling Relationships & Student Supports

Introduction & Key Findings

Learning is fundamentally social and relational, with schools serving as crucial institutions that bring individuals together within and across communities.[107] The changes wrought by the takeover not only diminished academic programming and pedagogy within the classroom—they also disrupted vital relationships within schools. This section documents how the HISD takeover systematically dismantled local stakeholders' connections to their schools and to one another in three ways:



Parents protest closure of Port Houston Elementary

1. Takeover reforms created conditions that inhibited the formation of meaningful relationships among students, educators, and families.
2. Elevated staff turnover—both voluntary and involuntary—severed existing bonds between families and educators.
3. District mandates destroyed the sense of community within and outside of schools, especially as some made the difficult decision to leave their schools, a choice often marked by grief and guilt.

1. "You should be nurturing a real relationship": Devaluing Relationships in Schools

The diminished curriculum mentioned in the prior section did more than merely transform instruction into a formulaic, test-prep oriented endeavor. These mandates constrained educators', students', and families' capacities to build relationships with one another. The narrow focus on accountability metrics, such as test scores and attendance, left little room for educators to prioritize the authentic connections necessary for thriving learning environments.

Some performance metrics, like teacher evaluations and appraisals, strained the professional relationship between teachers and administrators. Regardless of whether people thought these expectations came from district or campus administrators, these accounts point to the same conclusion: Increased pressure to perform in accordance with seemingly arbitrary district mandates damaged professional relationships, especially in the absence of genuinely constructive feedback.

107 Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (2009). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.; Li, J., & Julian, M. M. (2012). Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of "what works" across intervention settings. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *82*(2), 157–166.; Velasquez, A., West, R., Graham, C., & Osguthorpe, R. (2013). Developing caring relationships in schools: A review of the research on caring and nurturing pedagogies. *Review of Education*, *1*(2), 162–190.; Vygotsky, L. S. (2001). Interaction between learning and development. In M. Gauvain & M. Cole (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children (3. ed)*.(pp. 34–40). Worth Publishers. OR Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. In. M. Cole, V. Jolm-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman (Eds.).

a. Fewer Opportunities to Build Bonds in the Classroom

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

I also know that after the first week of school, he came back saying, I hate school, I hate school. I asked him why, and he said, because of all the testing. I was like, okay, well, beginning of year [tests] are about to finish**. He's like, all my teachers seem really nice. I can't wait to learn. Then, I asked him a few days later, how are things going? I hate school. I hate school. Why? Well, because we have more tests**. Because now, it's progress report time, and they have to have grades, and if they don't have grades, they're going to get fired. **So the whole first two weeks of school is nothing but testing.**

Parent, Online Submission

I told them NOT to worry about the test or their grades, but to concentrate on what they are learning. But I fear that the message they will be getting 8 hrs a day is very different. This is not to bash our current school, as there are good things happening there, but more the **broader testing culture we have experienced** and the detrimental effects of **a curriculum and lessons too centralized to meet the needs of the variety of students** and a pace too fast to allow for deeper learning and curiosity, a **removal of the humanity of elementary education in favor of the streamlined industrial approach to education**….

Their experience in HISD classroom should prepare them for future education, but also inspire them to be life long learners. There should be opportunities for hands on learning. Students and teachers should have the time and **be able to form bonds and communities with the classroom and the school**.

Teacher, Email Submission

I have personally heard our executive director tell one of my administrators via speaker phone to put a struggling reader on a computer with an "HISD science of reading slide deck" in order to catch them up, **rather than have their teacher spend time helping them.**

Former Wraparound Specialist, Westbury Listening Event

Wraparound is a very unique department. I always felt privileged to be in that position because I knew my families so well, and a lot of the positions within the school don't allow for that, don't allow time for that. And so **I think with us not being there, those relationships kind of fall apart.** And I always saw myself as a person when nobody else would listen, I would listen, even though at times I didn't have a solution. **It would keep students and families coming back to us.**

And so towards the very end, Wraparound turned into an attendance department, which is interesting because our relationships is what improved, at times, attendance. And it was just them knowing that they had somebody to go to and somebody to go see. And they were really facing... true problems, especially now with our economy the way it is. It's needed now more than ever.

b. Strained Professional Relationships Due to New Appraisal Process

Educator, Online Submission

> I have also observed that some administrators face pressures from district-level expectations, which can influence scoring and feedback and, in effect, can **create tension between administrators and teachers.** While my administrators have been supportive**, it is clear that systemic pressures sometimes impact evaluations and even professional rapport.** Additionally, there has not been an example of a perfect score provided from the district. **This lack of transparency makes it difficult for teachers to fully understand expectations and meet them consistently, adding stress to the teaching environment**.

Parent, Online Submission

> It was mentioned at the last PD [professional development] admin went around directly asking IF teachers are invested and going to put in the work and do whatever it takes to get it done and stay late past the end of the school day. Because if not, they can leave.
>
> Why are you using idiotic threats? What makes you think they would want to stay, much less stay and work with people like you? **You should be nurturing a real relationship with the teachers that work with our kids.** They continue to show up for our kids and unfortunately, have to put up with you mistreating and degrading them. **Isn't this what they refer to as "school culture"? Fix it or we will lose even more teachers.** We have already lost 4 in three months. The problem is you!

2. "I had to sign so many goodbye cards for my teachers": Destabilizing Relationships Through Turnover

Again and again, participants testified about numerous instances of educators being removed from or leaving their schools. During the first year under the takeover alone, 4,700 of HISD's nearly 11,000 teachers left the district,[108] and HISD's teacher turnover rate nearly doubled the state average by the 2024–25 school year, when another 3,100 teachers left.[109] Moreover, principals at over half of HISD schools were reassigned, removed, or forced to resign,[110] prompting protests and walkouts at multiple campuses.[111]

The magnitude of this exodus itself is alarming, but these numbers alone do not fully capture the emotional toll for the students, families, and colleagues left behind. For some, it meant no longer seeing their favorite teacher. For others, it meant the loss of stability critical for ensuring they continued to receive services and supports. These were not just departures of people, but of the passion for students and institutional knowledge they carried.

108 Goodwin, A., & Mizan, N. (2024, August 5). HISD sees 'unprecedented' departures, with more than 4,000 employees leaving the district in June. *Houston Chronicle*.

109 Goodwin, A., & Mizan, N. (2025, August 25). Houston ISD's teacher turnover rate is 1.7 times that of the state's in 2024-25. *Houston Chronicle*.; Goodwin, A., & Mizan, N. (2025, July 10). More than 800 teachers left Houston ISD in the 2024-25 school year. *Houston Chronicle*.; Goodwin, A., & Mizan, N. (2025, August 6). More than 2,300 teachers left Houston ISD in June, continuing trend of high turnover under Mike Miles. *Houston Chronicle*.

110 HISD principal tracker. (n.d.) *Houston Chronicle*. Last retrieved August 22, 2026.

111 Fox 26 Houston. (2024, May 13). Houston schools in turmoil: Parents protest principal ousting, more staff cuts feared. [Video file].; Fox 26 (2023, October 26). Eastwood High School students state walk-out in response to abrupt firing of staff. [Video file].; Click 2 Houston. (2024, November 20). Lantrip Elementary parents gather to protest principal's removal, call for transparency from HISD.[Video file].

a. Severed Relationships Due to Turnover

Parent, Online Submission

The ESL teachers that cared and followed the pre-school students to ensure their success were removed. Teachers that parents adored and really taught our kids, prepping them for the challenges of middle school, were removed. **The spirit of the school is gone.** It was a special place.

I saw first hand the destruction of our middle school**. Last year, my daughter DID NOT HAVE a math teacher for 85% of the year.** The GT (gifted and talented) teachers were removed from both my children's classes and their schedules were changed…. Regardless of the students academic level, they ALL NEED GOOD TEACHERS that are supported, mentored/trained and challenge them to do their best. TEACHERS SHOULD INSPIRE STUDENTS TO LEARN!... **ALL of our seasoned and favorite middle school teachers have left over the last 2 years.**

Parent, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

The value of relationships is completely ignored by the district. Three years in a row, my kid has come to school with brand new staff. Nobody knows the school. Third principal, third AP, third SPED team, third first grade team, third kinder team, new second grade teachers—teachers all over are gone. **I can't wait for him to go to a first day of school and someone to know his name.**

Teacher, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

My students literally weren't understanding I was going to leave. I told them upfront a month before that I'm heading out because I wanted them to have closure. And I asked them to give me feedback as well on my teaching. And honestly, they gave me real feedback. But then I thanked them for offering me the chance to be their teacher for a year. I was their graphic design teacher, and I saw them graduate. I saw them off the stage, saw them have fun there. You know, at the end of the day, I just... **I just feel I should fight harder for them, because they deserve it. They do deserve a teacher that will stand up for them.**

b. Lapses in the Continuity of Services and Institutional Knowledge

Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

If the teacher just decides they don't want to come back, it throws you off for the rest of the year **because most of the time, if a teacher leaves, you either don't get a teacher for the rest of that semester, or you don't get a teacher for the rest of the year.** I have so many classes from last year and the year before where I had like five teachers that one year because **no teacher stayed the whole year.**

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

So being that my kids are SPED [special education], **my oldest had three SPED directors change over the time**…They have a three-year developmental cycle, and they've been interrupted twice in that cycle. And he's also a dyslexic student. **So it's the continuity of education and development that gets destroyed.** And then the ones that we see that are holding this whole thing together are the teachers that have been here the longest.

Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

During my time at [school name], eight of my teachers alone—and I've only been there for two years—have left. That is more than half of my teachers. Many of these teachers have taught at [School Name] for over a decade, and they left despite their long history because of their treatment by the district. I've been in classrooms as teachers broke down crying because of what the district did to them. **I've had to sign so many goodbye cards for my teachers, and I thought these were the people who were going to watch me graduate.** I thought these were the people who were going to watch me grow up, who were going to write rec letters for me, who were going to help me build my future, **and they're being pushed out now.** And that's just the tip of the iceberg. That's just what I see as a student and not what's going on behind the scenes.

It has infiltrated every aspect of my education. **And all of these teachers, they go to teach at private schools. They go to teach in wealthy suburbs**. And I just think about the kids who get the free lunches, what's going to happen to them?... They're not going to have the experienced teachers to teach them, and **they're going to get left behind**…

We don't have that stability. We don't know who to turn to when we need a recommendation letter because we met our teacher last week. So that kind of stability, **that long-term planning is really damaged by not having teachers there for a long time.** And when it comes to extracurricular programs like newspaper, for example, when you lose someone who's been running that program, there's a huge learning curve for teachers who have to learn how to best help students run those programs. and how to, how to do all these things that require a very specific skill set, **you lose a lot of that knowledge that that teacher had**.

3. "We didn't just leave the school. We left a community": Dismantling Community Connections

Relationships are what make a school more than the sum of its parts. When those relationships are systematically eroded, the school loses its heart, its character, its spirit. As education scholar Eve Ewing wrote about Chicago's largest wave of school closures, "we mourn those institutions, like our schools, that have helped shape our sense of who we are."[112] Three years into their appointment, the Board of Managers unanimously voted to close twelve schools, all in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, after just two weeks of advance notice to the public.[113] By closing these twelve schools, takeover leadership decided to erase longstanding traditions, legacies, and communities housed within these campuses, with little public engagement.[114] But even before they formally shuttered schools, Superintendent Miles and the Board of Managers made decisions that unmoored many schools and their respective communities, even

112 Ewing, E. (2019). *Ghosts in the schoolyard: Racism and school closings on Chicago's south side*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 127.
113 Seward, B. (2026, February 26). Houston ISD board votes to close 12 schools, angering audience at meeting. *Houston Public Media*.
114 Mizan, N., & Partain, C. (2026, February 17). Some HISD parents feel blindsided by proposed school closures: 'So many objections on so many levels'. *Houston Chronicle*.

as their physical buildings remained standing and occupied.

In this last section, we highlight how the takeover dismantled a sense of school and neighborhood community. Some of these schools were anchors, connecting neighbors and other community institutions to foster a collective identity, a shared pride in their school, due in no small part to the dedicated educators and established programs within them.[115] Campus-based wraparound specialists, in particular, were crucial for not only meeting students' and families' material needs, but also in facilitating connections between schools and community-based partnerships with local organizations to bring additional supports and investments. Yet when faced with the onslaught of changes to district policies and practices that disregarded these bonds and dissolved existing assets within schools and neighborhoods, families were left with the impossible decision to either uproot themselves or endure, if they had the luxury of choice at all.

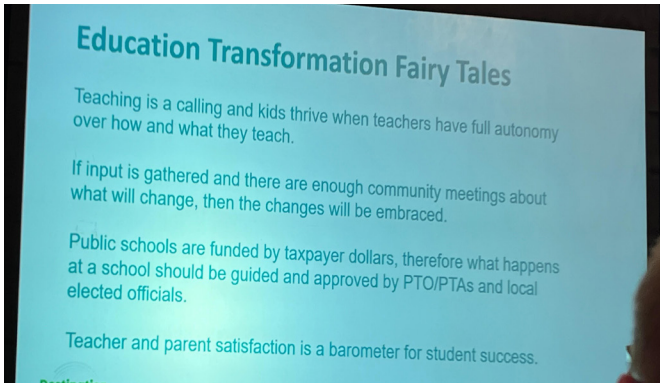
a. Weakened Family and Community Engagement

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

> **Our principal has not allowed parents to come in to the school and volunteer anymore during the day.** Previously, we were allowed to come and help the teachers, whether it was packet preparation, folders, anything like that…**One kid has said, mommy, I don't want to go to school anymore and make new friends because every time I do, they leave**.

Community Member, Online Comment

> I am the pastor of [church name] in the Heights; we have been in partnership with an Elementary School in the Near Northside since 2017. Since the HISD takeover, we have had 3 principals in three years at that school. And the current principal, who had really shifted the culture with this start of this year, was just forced to resign. **So we have no idea what is happening with the leadership of the school, but we have watched our teachers, students, and their families, who already experience so much marginalization in our city, deal with being overlooked and uncared for and left to fend for themselves.**



Left: Slide from HISD's "Destination Transformation Conference ; Right: Protest against the firing of Crockett Elementary Principal

115 Homer, M. (2024, May 11). *She was principal of the year in 2023. A year later, she said HISD forced her to resign.* KHOU 11 Houston.; Zuccarini Kelly, A. (2025, September 3). I taught at Durham Elementary more than 10 years. Here's why HISD removed me. | Opinion. *Houston Chronicle.*

b. Sense of Mourning Due to Leaving Beloved Schools

Teacher, Online Comment

I was a teacher at a high performing school in HISD for 9 years. **I left at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. The constant anxiety was too much to handle. I wanted my children to go there, and I wanted to retire from there.** The constant spot observations, terrible curriculum and continuous changing of expectations/requirements was exhausting. I have 14 years of experience, and **it was heartbreaking to walk away**. It was an ever-changing bar that could never be met. Nothing about it helped student outcomes or was best for students. Students were bored and no longer enjoyed school. It was more than double the work to do anything but poorly prepared HISD slides. My administrators started acting erratically and lashing out at teachers. No one was happy, and seeing the downfall of such an amazing school was hard to handle. **I feel like I am still grieving a loss that never should've happened.**

Parent, Westbury United Methodist Church Listening Session

After three weeks of chaos**,** my family cried together and we decided to leave public education and HISD. **We didn't just leave the school, we left a community. Mike Miles has divided our friendships and created a feeling of guilt and abandonment.** Houston's children deserve better. They deserve books, libraries, a time to be creative, and a time to fail without shame…

When things that we couldn't deal with happened, there were people who had the resources to leave, and **it feels like we're leaving that community behind**. Personally, I feel that. I would say **friendships get shattered**. Our kids have gone to school together, and we've fought together against the takeover. And personally, I think it feels to me like I left them behind, but I felt like I had to do what I could…

So, the community is, it's hurting. And like, I think a lot of us are still trying to support our friends that are still there, but it's not the same. And that's one of the things, you know, you can't pick up with data, like the mental effect that it's had on people and **just like the friendships that are challenged and strained because of it.** Yeah, it's really, really sad.

Conclusion

The HISD takeover imposed the rigid NES instructional approach that prioritized delivering content over establishing student-educator relationships and facilitated incessant educator churn through voluntary exit and forced removal. Together, these conditions dismantled local stakeholders' bonds with their schools and each other. Even as quantitative statistics, such as teacher turnover and student enrollment rates, signal discontent, they do not capture the full social and emotional distress expressed in these testimonies.

Demeaning Professional Educators

Introduction and Key Findings

Early into his tenure as the state-appointed superintendent of HISD, Mike Miles expressed admiration for the district's 11,000 teacher workforce, stating, "I want them [teachers] to succeed. I want them to [feel] good about helping kids . . . I really respect what they have to do."[116] However, testimony gathered by this Commission painted a different story of teachers' experiences under the takeover. Teachers who addressed the Commission described systematic assaults on their professional autonomy, near-constant surveillance, and threats of removal for noncompliance.[117] What Superintendent Miles describes as a "high-performance culture" was, to many teachers, a "culture of fear"[118] that was hostile, demoralizing, and demeaning.

As described in the previous section on dismantling relationships, an unprecedented number of teachers have left HISD, prompting state-appointed leaders to rely increasingly on uncertified teachers to fill vacancies. Nearly half of new hires since the takeover have been uncertified, with roughly 1 in 4 HISD teachers lacking certification by the start of the 2025–26 school year.[119] Furthermore, the average years of experience among HISD's teacher workforce has declined since the takeover.[120] The voices of teachers, students, and parents featured in this section illuminate the human costs of systematically degrading HISD's professional educators in three ways:

1. Mandates to follow HISD's prescribed curriculum and maintain urgency in pacing, coupled with insufficient training for new teachers, devalued educator professional knowledge.
2. Enhanced monitoring techniques, including Spot observations and a new teacher appraisal system, were used to surveil and control instruction. Consequently, teachers' time and capacity were dedicated toward performative compliance at the expense of authentic teaching and learning.
3. Systematic bullying and intimidation, along with the threat of retaliation and suppression of dissent, subjected educators to a culture of fear and disrespect.

1. "We have to teach from a script": Devaluing Educators' Professional Knowledge

After the takeover, experienced educators in HISD were directed to forgo their prior training and preparation to instead adhere strictly to the district's centralized instructional model. Newer teachers, meanwhile, reported minimal training before they faced expectations to implement district directives with fidelity. Teachers were told to follow a prescribed curriculum produced by the district's Curriculum Department, which drew heavily on AI tools to generate passages,

116 Mike Miles and Editorial Board: Read the transcript. [Editorial]. (2023, June 1). *Houston Chronicle*.
117 Bauman, A. (2023, September 18). HISD teachers say they are fearful after first week under Miles' leadership: 'Every day, I'm crying.' *Houston Chronicle*.; Walsh, D. A. (2023, September 18). After Houston ISD administrator tells 'nonbelievers' to accept reforms or 'You will not be here,' students and parents protest. *Houston Public Media*.
118 McDonough, M. (2023, October 20). Former HISD principal: Superintendent Mike Miles has created a 'culture of fear.' *Houston Chronicle*.
119 Perez, A. (2024, December 17). Houston ISD relying more on teachers with no classroom experience. *Houston Landing*.; Mizan, N., & Kanik, A. (2025, October 1). Houston ISD starts 2025-26 school year with 1 in 4 teachers uncertified. *Houston Chronicle*.
120 HISD's teacher workforce is becoming less experienced. Across the takeover's first two years, the number of teachers with 11 or more years of experience declined by 12%, while the number of teachers with between 0 and 5 years of experience rose by 25%. *See:* Templeton, T., Friedman, W., & Heller, B. (2026). *Houston ISD takeover: By the numbers*. University of Houston Education Research Center.

questions, and activities.[121] During instruction, teachers were required to "pick up the pace" rather than pause to respond to students' questions. They were ordered to follow the structure of prescribed lessons rather than adapting content to make it comprehensible to Emergent Bilingual students or provide mandatory accommodations to students with disabilities. And despite promises that being provided district curriculum would reduce their workload, teachers described how this move actually added more work to their plates, as they faced onerous expectations to check and correct the many errors they found in district-created slides and assignments.

Deprived of their ability to exercise professional judgment or pedagogical autonomy, many teachers became exhausted and demoralized under HISD's takeover regime. The testimonies below illustrate what teaching under these constraints looked like in practice, and how it affected students whose learning needs went unaddressed as a result.

a. Prescribed Curriculum

Educator, Westbury United Methodist Church Listening Session

> **We have to teach from a script.** And I teach Algebra 1, and so that's a STAAR prep class, basically. **Everything is dictated.** There is no time for us to really change things around for the students that lack the language... **There is no time to sit with them and really work with them one-on-one, which is how you gauge what a student knows.** I mean, you can hold up a whiteboard with an answer on it over and over again, but you don't know what's in their head. And especially when they can't even communicate with you, it puts them at such a disadvantage.

Student. First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

> **Teachers are forced to teach exactly what the district wants**. They can't leave the path of what the district wants them to teach... Teachers are forced to assign work to students quickly, **not giving students enough time to finish assignments or even understand what they're learning.** Administrators, like counselors and principals, are using NES as an excuse so that they don't have to do what students need them to do.

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

> I have many low-level learners that need help in math. **I'm no longer able to provide intervention for them**. I was literally told, to get through the math lesson, you go **click, click, click, click and read the script**. I asked, when can I provide intervention? Because now we have to put them on screens to use Zearn because we're getting money from TEA and we're a test subject for Zearn.[122] I don't know what to do with my students. **I feel demoralized and completely powerless to help my kids.**

121 Menchaca, M. (2024, December 20). What to know about Prof Jim Inc, the AI company Houston ISD is using to generate reading passages. *Houston Chronicle*.; McDaniel, W. C., & Srinivasan, R. T. (2025, June 5).We're professors. We're parents. HISD students don't deserve AI slop. | Opinion. *Houston Chronicle*.

122 Zearn is an online math program.

Educator, Online Testimony

Since the takeover, gifted and talented students have not been given education in accordance with the state plan. These students are being given more work, not differentiated work. The additional work has more difficult questions and more of the same. These students are not given projects, creative outlets, nor enrichment activities. **Teachers are forced into using the district curriculum**, which does not meet the state plan for gifted and talented students. Teachers are forced into **strict time constraints and strict adherence to only the activities within the district curriculum.** These activities are not in compliance with the state plan either.

b. "Pick up the Pace"

Educator, Westbury United Methodist Church Listening Session

Today, we got more information about "**pick up the pace."**... Now we're being told to **move faster and faster and faster** with the ESOL students... I get cut off when I ask questions about the fact that **our kids can't handle the pace** at which they want us to teach, because they need time to translate what we said.

Educator, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

What was concerning is that the assistant principal, I was telling her **my Emergent Bilingual kids could not read the passages that the district was giving them**. And I said, "They need to learn how to read in English," because my principal asked me to help with the literacy rate with the kids with the Emergent Bilingual for transitioning. However, she turned around and said, **"There's not any time for that."** Retaliation. I was blindsided by the administration. They came down, but I was used to that, and **tried to force me into breaking SPED [Special Education] laws.** And I made a decision that I was not going to do that. I don't follow unethical, unlawful directives. And the lawlessness is no SPED is taking place, no SPED support or EB support or any of that.

Educator. Online Testimony

The workload is outrageous. I have been questioned by my principal as to why I am not at work until 8 pm like she is…**I am given only so many minutes to teach a lesson, whether students understand it or not.** I have to time them on the test for the material taught and take it from students even if they are not finished. **Students are feeling insecure and lack confidence because they are rushed. I have been told I must change my grades** on the recent report card to show that students are doing better than they are actually doing. When I expressed that I was not comfortable with lying about the grades. I was told by my principal that this is a requirement handed down by our superintendent and **do it, or face repercussions**.

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

Conversations I've had with my children's teachers: a kindergarten teacher who was beloved by the whole school, **who couldn't—because of curricular changes at an A-rated school—do centers for her students** and cried in the parent-teacher meeting, and left after my son's kindergarten year. The first-grade teacher who also had tears in her eyes at our parent-teacher meeting because when the students ask questions trying to follow up because they're curious, "Oh, bats and echolocation. Can we learn some more?" She says, **"Sorry, we got to move on to the next thing."** She left after

the first grade year… [My children] **are very well aware of a culture of micromanagement and disrespect**, of de-skilling, the forced re-skilling without support. It's a really terrible situation.

c. Lack of Training for New Teachers

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

I'm a first year teacher . . . . I was hired on the Monday of the first week of school and I didn't start until that Thursday. . . **I was not given any official training**. I was not given any official modeling. The only other 7th grade ELA teacher there that had tenure almost had to force one of the assistant principals to let me shadow her for at least 30 minutes so I can know what it looks like . . . . There was no proper training beforehand. **I was learning about being Spotted before I knew what it was. I was being told to teach the DOL [Demonstration of Learning] before I knew what a DOL meant** . . . . [My school] is not a NES school. However, **we are being pushed with NES curriculum**, which I am still learning, but the NES curriculum requires extra resources that we do not get. And with that curriculum, **there is no time for students who need extra help.**

Educator, Online Testimony

I am a first-year teacher and a late-career professional who chose education because I wanted to make a meaningful difference in students' lives. Unfortunately, my introduction to the New Education System (NES) under the HISD takeover has been extremely challenging. When I began teaching, **I received no formal training on the NES model**—no orientation, no walkthrough of expectations, and no clarity on daily structures. The only resource I was given was the Spot framework, which I didn't fully understand at the time. **I was handed materials and told to teach** without ever being shown how the system works . . .. I've had to learn everything through trial and error, usually late at night or during weekends, because there is **no built-in time for collaboration or professional learning** during the school day. Most teachers I know are doing the same—working far beyond contract hours just to stay afloat.

This lack of preparation and support doesn't just affect teachers—it directly impacts our students. When new teachers are left to navigate complex systems without guidance, both instruction and student outcomes suffer. Students sense our frustration and confusion. **They lose valuable learning time** while we try to figure out logistics that should have been taught clearly from the start. As a new teacher, I am committed to learning, growing, and giving my best every day. But under the current structure, **this system sets up teachers and students for failure rather than success**. **For real improvement, HISD must prioritize comprehensive training, mentorship, and collaborative planning time, especially for those new to teaching or to the district.** The vision behind NES may have good intentions, but **the implementation is broken.**

2. "It's not about the kids": Surveilling and Controlling Instruction

To enforce teachers' compliance with HISD's centralized instructional model, district and campus administrators implemented the Spot observation and coaching system, a district-wide program of enhanced classroom monitoring. Under the Spot system, campus principals and other designated appraisers were expected to conduct a minimum quota of Spot observations each week, which entailed short 10- to 15-minute walkthroughs during instruction guided by a district-provided Spot form. Additionally, district and campus leaders conducted periodic (and

unannounced) independent review team (IRT) walks of all HISD campuses on multiple occasions throughout each school year. Using the same Spot form employed in appraiser observations, IRT appraisers assigned an average score to each campus based on the handful of classrooms they observed. Finally, at NES schools, all classrooms were outfitted with cameras, usually pointed toward students, that provided a live-stream of instruction, accessible through a Zoom link, which was projected in real time on the classroom wall.

HISD teachers not only reported a significant uptick in the frequency of observations, but also how the district's observation system created fear and imposed controls on their instruction. Rather than receiving constructive feedback from observers about student engagement or the depth of thinking their lessons elicited, teachers described being assessed based on their compliance with a checklist of classroom "look-for's," which changed frequently. Their Spot observation scores—which were consequential for compensation and employment decisions[123]—reflected the specificity of the language teachers used when posting lesson objectives, their pacing on prescribed lessons, and their implementation of Multiple Response Strategies (MRS) with exacting regularity.

These expectations also encroached on teachers' collaborative planning time, as discussions in professional learning community (PLC) meetings were reduced to directives about how to earn points on the Spot form rather than addressing more important problems of practice. Instead of increasing the quality of instruction, the Spot system made teachers feel rushed and belittled. The educator and student testimonies in this section speak to how the compliance-oriented atmosphere that emerged under the takeover reduced teaching to a performance for outside observers rather than ensuring authentic learning experiences for students.

a. Spot Observations

Educator, Online Testimony

> I cannot teach. I've been told, **stay with the card deck and timers**, make sure they are turning and talking, holding up the boards. The students are not processing the information, **just repeating like robots**, no individual work, no projects, special Ed and 504 kids, not getting accommodations, no time for them, no time to diversify the lessons. Some kids can't read, can't spell. This is high school. Boards outside our room checking off what we do right, what we do wrong, **Spot checks to judge without understanding** that the students are working on labs. 4 different spotters and appraisers come in and out. **It's like a prison camp.**

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

> Originally, internalizing [a lesson] meant making it your own. Now, the [district] slides are color-coded, so the people who don't really know what they're doing can come in and say, "This is the part of the lesson you're on," and **if you're on the wrong color** when they come into your room, **you get dinged for it**. **There is no room for asking questions for the students.** There's no room to make explanations to the students if they have questions.

123 Perez, A. (2025, March 20). HISD board approves new teacher evaluation system ahead of pay-for-performance plan. *Houston Landing.*

b. Encroachments on Teacher Planning Time and Professional Development

Educator, Westbury United Methodist Church Listening Session

To this day, **all of our trainings for Spot forms are on-level**, native speaker classrooms, where the kids speak English. They use advanced vocabulary. And whenever we ask, When do we get to see an exemplary version of an ESOL class? We still haven't gotten it, but **we get low Spot scores because we're not performing**.

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

We're not really allowed to do that much [in PLCs]... **We get information like this during PLCs**, or that **the Spot form has changed**. We used to be able to practice and find out best teaching practices. Instead, **it has turned into what the color-coded slides mean**. And every single thing this year has been about points. **How do you get that point on the Spot**? You have to be very clear and voice what you're doing so the adults in the room who are viewing you can give you that point. **It's not about the kids**.

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

So **all of our professional developments**, 70% of it is **how to score points on the Spot form.** And since last year, I constantly ask, how does this apply to the students at [my school]? Because if you're familiar with Houston, those schools in that particular area... it's the Mock United Nations. Seriously, we have 40 campuses, 40 countries in 30 plus languages represented at all of our schools... So we get videos and we're told to rate this teacher using this platform. And it's a pre-AP class somewhere where all the kids speak English. And I'm like, okay, well **how does this apply to me?** And I was literally told in a training last year, **this is not about your class.** And my response to this is... if it's professional development, and I'm not being developed, why are you wasting my time?... Now when I ask questions, I get snapped at, kind of dismissed, if I raise my hand at all. I don't get called on because I ask questions they can't answer.

c. Performing for Outside Observers

Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

Teachers are always on edge because of the frequent observations... There's constant disruption in our classes from HISD members... As soon as administrators come into the classrooms, **students get on edge** because they know they are going to say or do something that will make them uncomfortable. But as soon as **the administrator starts talking to teachers disrespectfully**... the kids automatically stop talking and look straight at their paper, because **they don't know if they're next.**

Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

We got a district observation today... at least at [my school], the standard procedure is: cancel all your plans for the school day. **We're going to put on a show for the district** in the hopes that they'll leave us alone in the future. So we just **try and tick all of their boxes**. We don't do anything that we would normally do that day. It's like a whole different school. In terms of how obvious it is having district officials walk into your classroom with clipboards, analyzing everything that your teachers are doing, it's obvious. And the teacher's response, of course, brings that down to us, because

they're like, don't sing in class. **Don't do anything out of the ordinary in class.** They instruct us on how to behave for the district and how to put on a show and show them what they want to see.

Educator, Online Testimony

Having to post our scope and sequence, lesson plans, student activities, DOLs, etc **outside our door for guests to look at is ridiculous.** Plus, being told to post it all with less than a day to complete it, is absurd... **Being belittled and treated like I don't know how to teach** is crazy. Being told what to do by an ED who has never taught elementary is frustrating. As much as we try to shield from our students, it's noticeable.

3. "Bully the teachers until the students achieve": Subjecting Educators to a Culture of Disrespect

Compounding concerns about curricular control and instructional surveillance, teachers described how campus and district administrators frequently used disrespectful language and bullying tactics to demean them publicly in front of their students and colleagues. They reported being shouted at by supervisors and publicly shamed for their perceived underperformance, and some even faced retaliation for raising concerns. The culture of disrespect teachers experienced was so pervasive that students and parents even described witnessing and experiencing its harmful effects. The testimonies of teachers, students, and parents that follow reveal how this culture of disrespect manifested in the daily activities of HISD schools, producing a toxic climate of fear, belittlement, and hostility.

a. Creating a Culture of Fear and Disrespect

Educator, Online Testimony

Since the takeover, I have seen countless certified educators leave HISD to go to neighboring districts, families turn to private schools, teachers fearing for their jobs, and students being anxious & medicated over school work... The **micromanaging is belittling and insulting**. There used to be a time where we shared and celebrated teachers who were exhibiting "best practices," but now we're in a state of **shaming teachers** for what's going on in classrooms... **We have been told that we're replaceable.** So when the district wants to know about morale and school spirit, well, it starts from the top and goes down. It's hard to cheer for a district that **doesn't believe in their educated teachers.**

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

Our principal is enforcing district discipline largely by roving the halls, **shouting at teachers, upping the pressure**. Mike Miles likes to talk about, "This needs to be about student issues, not about adult issues." But if **the adults do not feel safe in their workplace,** that will impact student achievement. I was a special educator myself. I have a master's in special education. My specialization was students with emotional disabilities. I know what an emotional environment can do to a student. And

that is happening at [our school] because of the ways **teachers are being abused and squeezed**. This is, "**Bully the teachers until the students achieve**."

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

Over the announcements, it was heard from our principal saying, "Remember, **be Miles-ready, every day.**" That's not, "Oh, he's coming tomorrow." That is every day. They're supposed to be Miles-ready. Teachers are coming in to the nurse with **racing heartbeats and panic attack symptoms** just from being in meetings.

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

The staff, in terms of the admin, are not heard. **They will rip you through and cause a sense of fear in everyone in there in order for people to break down the system and, you know, divide and conquer.** Honestly, it's not like I didn't do things perfect either. I could have been to work on time a lot more, but at the end of the day, they wrote me up immediately. And at the same time, **they tried to get me out of there as soon as possible.**

Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

The admin[istrators] will call teachers out by name and **disrespect them in front of students**. And **teachers aren't allowed to sit down** at their desks. They have to stand up the whole 90-minute class period . . . . Most of the teachers they talk to disrespectfully leave the same day, the same time they're talking to them disrespectfully. My aquatic science teacher, they talked to her disrespectfully, and literally the same minute when the principal left the classroom, she grabbed her stuff and she walked. She didn't come back for the rest of the semester. **We didn't have a teacher for the rest of that semester.**

b. Suppression of Dissent and Retaliation

Educator, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

There's **no sense of a safe place to voice any concerns**. A lot of times, when I do take the initiative to voice concerns with an assistant principal, I get cut off a lot. And I get spewed just information, **not being heard to be understood**. I get just a response.

Educator, Online Testimony

As a dedicated educator with 12 years of service to HISD, I have always prioritized the success and well-being of my students. However, my recent experiences have created an **increasingly hostile work environment** that is now affecting my health and ability to perform my duties effectively. During a recent training session, I was approached by the principal after an assistant principal observed me recording the session for personal review. As an auditory learner, recording helps me process and retain important information. However, instead of engaging in a dialogue or offering guidance, the principal tapped me on the shoulder and stated, "Why are you recording our training? That defies trust." I attempted to explain my reasoning, but my explanation was dismissed. Following this incident, **I was removed from the leadership coalition without warning or justification**.

Shortly afterward, I received a "Progressing I" rating on my Spot evaluation, despite having ended the previous year with a "Proficient I" rating and a 95% student pass rate on the STAAR exam. I believe

this sequence of events, including the issuance of a memorandum after I filed a formal complaint, **constitutes retaliation.** I have requested a campus reassignment in good faith, seeking a work environment conducive to my professional and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, my request was denied by the Executive Director. As a domestic violence survivor, **the current environment is triggering and detrimental to my mental health.** Each morning I arrive at work with anxiety, racing heart, and dizziness—clear signs of the toll this situation is taking on me. I chose to work in HISD because of its historic commitment to equity, support, and compassion**. I must honestly say that I miss the old HISD, when educators felt seen, heard, and valued by their leaders.**

Left: Teacher's shirt with reasons they were fired (Credit: Melissa Y.); Right: 2025 Art Car Parade (Credit: Jessi H.)

Conclusion

Rather than empowering educators by harnessing their knowledge of content and students, entrusting them with an appropriate level of classroom autonomy, or respecting them as professionals, the HISD takeover systematically demeaned professional educators. Finding their professional expertise devalued, their instruction subjected to near-constant surveillance, and their work culture transformed by fear- and shame-inducing tactics, teachers found it more difficult to meet students' diverse learning needs, saw their instruction continually disrupted, and were subjected to public humiliation. The mass exodus of experienced teachers from HISD since the takeover is the most visible measure of the costs this system inflicted—not just for the educators who left, but for the students left behind.

Destroying Democracy

Introduction and Key Findings

By definition, takeovers suspend local democratic governance and eliminate traditional avenues for public accountability.[124] Houstonians shared with the Commission that these anti-democratic shifts insulated state-appointed leaders from public accountability and silenced the voices of the constituents they supposedly served. Evidence gathered through listening sessions, focus groups, board meetings, and newspaper accounts unveiled three ways the HISD takeover undermined democratic traditions at the local level in Houston:[125]

1. The takeover eliminated the public's ability to hold district leaders accountable for consequential decisions affecting local stakeholders.
2. State-appointed leaders leveraged their insulated position to actively dismiss the perspectives and wishes of the community, instilling instead a pervasive sense of fear.
3. This undemocratic structure reduced transparency and diminished opportunities for family and community engagement.

1. Removal of Local Constituents' Ability to Hold Educational Leaders Accountable

The takeover fundamentally shifted *how* HISD's leaders operated by removing local stakeholders' ability to hold state-appointed educational leaders accountable. Before the takeover, local constituents chose and voted for their elected trustees. Under the takeover, however, the Board of Managers answers only to TEA Commissioner Mike Morath, who possesses sole authority to appoint, remove, or replace them at will. Consequently, the loss of democratic representation means that the state, not HISD constituents, determines who leads HISD and what consequences, if any, they face for their decisions. For instance, in June 2025, just one week before a budget vote, Commissioner Morath abruptly replaced four members of the Board of Managers who had publicly questioned Superintendent Mike Miles.[126] As a result, Superintendent Miles' $2.1 billion budget and 5-year contract extension passed unanimously, despite only half the Board of Managers having attended the budget preparation meetings. [127]

Deprived of their ability to influence state-appointed leadership's decisions, district stakeholders raised concerns to the Commission about the increasing influence of big money interests, large donors, and private foundations. For example, in March 2026, the Board of Managers approved a plan to contract out the operation of several top-performing schools and pre-K centers to private, nonprofit entities.[128] This move further diminished the public's ability to democratically govern their schools.

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124 Green, R. L., & Carl, B. R. (2000). A reform for troubled times: Takeovers of urban schools. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *569*, 56–70.; Nelson, S. L. (2025). "They're destabilizing a community of people": State takeovers of public schools and districts as political regime change. *Washburn Law Journa*l, 64(2), 211–247.; Ziebarth, T. (2002). *State takeovers and reconstitutions*. [Policy brief]. Education Commission of the States.

125 These categories are adapted from Nelson, S. L. (2025).

126 These four members—Vice President Audrey Momanaee, Cassandra Auzenne Bandy, Rolando Martinez, and Adam Rivon—submitted the majority of formal information requests and cast rare dissenting votes, such as the previous years' budget vote, which passed by a 5-4 margin. *See:* Lehrer-Small, A. (2024, June 14). In unexpectedly close vote, HISD board approves big budget cuts, added overhaul spending. *Houston Landing.*; Menchaca, M. (2025, August 7). Four ousted HISD board members submitted majority of formal information requests, records show. *Houston Chronicle*.

127 DeGuzman, C. (2025, June 13). Houston ISD's state-appointed board unanimously approves $2.1 billion budget. *Houston Public Media*.

128 Al-Shaikh, S.(2026, March 26). HISD approves plan that will turn over control of top-performing schools to non-profit organizations. *ABC 13 News*.

Testimonies from the Commission's listening sessions also emphasized how state-appointed leaders systematically dismissed demands that the district provide legally mandated services for special education and Emergent Bilingual students, as noted in the Diminishing Curriculum section. These complaints led to investigations by the TEA and Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, with both entities raising the possibility of widespread discrimination against students with disabilities in HISD.[129] For a detailed overview of these policy violations and legal complaints, refer to Appendix B.

The following testimonies highlight how the loss of representation, destruction of the system of public education as a vital local institution, and lack of recourse following violations of existing policies inhibited Houstonians' capacity to hold state-appointed leaders accountable.

a. Loss of Representation

Community Member, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

Over time I have heard a lot about HISD, like either through my teachers, talk about what the other districts are like, and also in the news. At first, **when I first heard of the takeover of the state, like I did have some healthy skepticism**, but then as time goes on, and thanks to the, thanks to for the reports and thanks to the testimonies of people who have come forward so far, **I can say that this is not the way to go, not the way to fix HISD.**

Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group

When we had elected representation, we at least had the ability to have a voice at the table. We, sometimes we didn't elect the right person. We could get them out and get somebody in that was interested in the community. What he's talking about in terms of people who look like us, we've had that on the board, and we have gotten them unelected and put and replaced them with people who more, cognizant of our voice. **But now, no one has a voice, and the only people who have a voice are people with money.**

b. Destruction of the Public System of Education

Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group

Just with your question in general, the impact to schools in the Black and Brown communities, I think that we created a formula for at least coexisting, which is church, school, and some type of food, right, like, you know some type of grocery store or some type of food access. In the City of Houston, specifically, we do have pockets that are food deserts, and so we, we relied on church and school, and especially school, having to make sure that they fed our community and our kids, which was important in order for them to learn. And so now, when you strip the food away for

129 In May 2026, HISD confirmed plans that were leaked to the media regarding its Special Education Success Programs, which reassigned over 5,000 special education students away from their original campuses to "hub" campuses without holding federally required Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings with families. *See* Seward, B. (2026, July 14). Houston ISD's special education changes violate student rights, TEA says in letter. *Houston Public Media*; U.S. Department of Education (2026, May 8). *U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights opens disability discrimination investigation into Texas school district* [Press release].

them to be able to eat, you then expect them to still learn. **And then now, you strip the school away with a dilapidated, a religious, structural foundation of that community, you really start seeing a community that was, really, you know, full of energy, now dilapidated and crippled**… [which] increased specifically after the takeover.

Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group

I think the biggest problem that we have with the takeover is the lack of everybody understanding there's a takeover. You could go down the street right here, walk 3 blocks, and ask somebody, you know about the takeover of HISD, they won't know a thing. And so it is important, in terms of the insurgency, that we educate people to understand what they should take away from this takeover. **Because the reality of this takeover is a complete and utter destruction of HISD. It is the purpose and the point. It is on mark to do exactly what it's doing: destroying the district.**

c. Lack of Accountability and Violations of Existing Policy

Parent, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Session

So when Miles talks about gains, it makes me take pause. **Miles is currently shutting out parents, media, and anyone that doesn't just follow suit.** He calls us unprofessional and other things, but our local leaders took him to task, and now he's retreating even more.

Teacher, Trinity Gardens Church of Christ Listening Session

I filed a complaint with TEA, which ultimately got me removed, and they sent out an e-mail saying that they received it, and then they said HISD had until September 23rd to respond**. I also reached out to Disability Rights Texas, and they're opening up an investigation into my school**, because it wasn't just the pacing, it was they were denying placement for our students with autism and forcing them into regular classrooms when they were not equipped and **they didn't have the support that they need to be in these classes**.

2. Dismissing Community Voices and Creating a Climate of Fear

Democratic governance requires iterative deliberation among multiple stakeholders. Throughout our listening sessions, many community members expressed that HISD, like any other school district, has significant challenges. They also emphasized that families and community members have always fought to improve HISD, at times working collaboratively with or organizing against district leaders. Since the state takeover, however, the state-appointed administration reversed many of these gains, such as securing libraries and wraparound specialists at every campus and higher staff salaries and benefits. Furthermore, district leaders demonstrated a pattern of ignoring the very community members who had advocated on behalf of HISD students, families, and educators long before the takeover.

This exclusionary approach not only disrespected the HISD community. It also provoked fear among parents and community members, many of whom stayed silent out of concern that voicing opposition could harm their children. This pervasive fear—driven by concerns of retaliation against educators, families, and students—is one of the most damaging democratic consequences of the state takeover of HISD.

a. Refusal to Listen to the Perspectives and Wishes of the Community

Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group

And what's, the part that drives me insane is before the takeover, **we had just gotten librarians in every school. We had just got wraparound coordinators in every school.** Lamar had two, but we couldn't do anything about that. But we at least got them in every school. **Today, he [Mike Miles] has ripped out every single thing—and when I say every single, I mean every single thing—that we fought for.** Benefits for the staff, benefits for the custodians and the bus drivers. All of the things that we have fought for, he has ripped away without just so much as a thought. **He just, death by policy, he just, policy right out of the, right out of existence, and *that's* what is disturbing to me.** Because we fought for these things because they are right. They are things that we should have. Lamar has a library. Why is it Yates didn't have a library? We fought for it and got it. But he says we don't need a library: We need a place for detention. Well, then you changed it.

Community Member, Trinity Church of Christ Listening Session

Respect the teachers, respect our scholars, and respect everybody that's in the building. Just because, you know, you're cleaning up doesn't mean you're any less than anybody else. Also, we need to get rid of him [Mike Miles] and the Board of Managers. That's just bottom line. **We need to get rid of them because they don't listen to us. They do not listen to the community. We can come, we can have 50, 60, 70 speakers. They don't listen.**

Parent, Trinity Church of Christ Listening Session

[In response to previous quote] And to pivot off of that, **it's collaboration. All of our schools are to serve the community. That is what a public school is.** It's supposed to bring us together and educate. And to come in and fire teachers and micromanage them, minute by minute—that is what the NES curriculum is—and refuse to listen to people who have been through this and seen these things, the lack of collaboration and respect for the community and **this board is not responsible to us. We didn't vote them in. And so they don't care what we have to say.** And the lack of collaboration and respect for our teachers is deplorable.

b. Fear of Speaking Up

Educator, Email Testimony

Please do not use my name as I have to finish out the year before I can leave the district and **people have been fired for speaking up.**

Parent, Spanish Focus Group

Muchos papás tenemos miedo a hablar, a expresarnos nuestras inquietudes por el miedo de que lleven represalias hacia nuestros hijos. Por eso muchos nos quedamos callados, no decimos nada. ¿Por qué? Haya los cambios que haya en la escuela y esté pasando lo que esté pasando, nosotros nos mandamos a nuestros hijos a la escuela, pero no sabemos qué es lo que está pasando con nuestros hijos en la escuela.

Many of us parents are afraid to speak up, to express our concerns for fear of retaliation against our children. That's why many of us stay silent, we don't say anything. Why? Whatever changes there are in the school and whatever is happening, we send our children to school, but we don't know what is happening with our children at school.

3. Reducing Transparency and Diminishing Opportunities for Family and Community Engagement

The undemocratic governance structures instituted by the takeover undermined transparency and avenues for authentically engaging families and communities. State-appointed leaders' hasty decisions to close 12 schools[130] and sell 17 district-owned properties[131] without meaningful community input are indicative of this lack of transparency. These actions were especially controversial, not only because of community outcry over the loss of vital public institutions,[132] but also because the Board of Managers changed existing policy to allow revenue generated from property sales to go to the general fund instead of the capital renovations fund.[133] Community members who spoke at HISD Board of Managers meetings expressed deep skepticism toward this move. As one speaker testified,

> ***"I am strongly opposed to any proceeds from the sale of HISD properties being deposited in the general fund. I don't trust your use or transparency of the general funds. All proceeds from these sales must continue to be allocated to the capital renovation fund with full and transparent accounting."*** [134]

130 Seward, B. (2026, February 26). Houston ISD board votes to close 12 schools, angering audience at meeting. *Houston Public Media.*
131 DeGuzman, C. (2025, January 17). Houston ISD board votes to sell 17 district properties amidst community opposition. *Houston Public Media.*
132 Manna, O. (2026, June 4). 'It's just sad', Last bell rings for 12 Houston ISD campuses as students, parents say goodbye. *KHOU 11 Houston.*
133 We discuss the implications of this policy change in more depth in the Degrading Financial Stewardship section. *See* Houston Independent School District. (2026, January 25). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.; Mizan, N. (2024, September 11). Houston ISD board votes to sell 17 district properties amidst community opposition. *Houston Public Media.*
134 DeGuzman, C. (2025, January 17). Houston ISD board votes to sell 17 district properties amidst community opposition. *Houston Public Media*.

Even for campuses that remained open, the state takeover is undermining the work and potential of groups like Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO), especially in communities with large immigrant populations. PTOs provide one of the most important and accessible mechanisms for parents, teachers, and community members to participate in decision-making and school governance, particularly for those who are unable to vote. By discussing school policies, organizing events, and addressing community needs, PTOs encourage civic engagement, collaboration, and respect for diverse viewpoints. They help individuals develop skills such as leadership, communication, and problem-solving, which are essential in a democratic society. Additionally, PTOs create stronger connections between schools and families, ensuring that different voices are heard and represented, reflecting the democratic values of participation, inclusion, and shared responsibility.[135] School PTOs are one of the few outlets for democratic engagement for *all* stakeholders, even those with no formal right to vote due to documentation status or other extenuating circumstances, which further demonstrates how the HISD takeover denies democracy to everyone, not just voters.

Houston Deserves Democracy (Credit: Houston Federation of Teachers)

a. School Closures and Loss of Public Property

Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group

> **When they sold off all the property, they were selling the assets without representation. The community had no voice.** *And* you couldn't get any information. We don't know who they sold them to. We don't know how much they sold them for. Because they don't—because [State Attorney General Ken] Paxton said they don't have to give us that, so we don't even know. And that's the thing: **they are selling off all of the parts that make HISD strong, and that make HISD viable, and that makes, makes everybody continue to fight for what we need to happen.**

135 While PTOs have the potential to help expand democratic opportunities, we also want to bring attention to a body of research that shows that PTOs may be harmful in certain settings because they can serve as a mechanism to exacerbate inequities by hoarding resources and stratify parent engagement within schools in some cases. *See* Posey-Maddox, L. (2013). Professionalizing the PTO: Race, class, and shifting norms of parental engagement in a city public school. *American Journal of Education*, *119*(2), 235–260.

b. Undermining Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs)

Parent, Spanish Focus Group

Porque directores antes daban la oportunidad… hay un parque cerca del Y[MCA]. No pertenece al Y, pero este parque lo tomábamos para eventos para los niños, traíamos juegos y todo. **A raíz de los cambios de los directores, todo eso han–Ellos "No, no, no."** Cualquier evento que- es para ellos mismos. Es para recaudar a la misma escuela. Y ellos dicen "No." Es un "no" tajante. Entonces han—Ellos otorgaban las playeras para que todos los niños en los field days estuvieran iguales o desiguales por los grados. Pero ellos también pararon eso. Antes se vendían los paquetes de útiles para más económicos y para que las mamás no anduvieran en las tiendas. Y eso también. Eso, nada que ver. Lo pararon. Entonces es todo- **es beneficio para la escuela y todo eso lo han parado. Eso es ahora la gran diferencia entre el PTO. Y ha sido causa también de los directores que han estado.**

Before, principals would give us the opportunity…There's even a park near the Y[MCA]. It doesn't belong to the Y, but we would use this park for events for the kids, we'd bring games and everything. **Ever since the changes in principals, they have—all of that, they're like, "No, no, no."** Any event that— it's for their own benefit. It's to raise funds for the school itself, and they say, "No." It's a flat "no." So they—They used to provide the t-shirts so that all the kids on field days would be matching or different by grade. But they stopped that, too. We used to sell school supply packages so they would be cheaper, and moms wouldn't have to go running around the stores, and that too. That, absolutely not. They stopped it. So it's all— **it's for the school's benefit, and they've stopped all of that. That is now the big difference with the PTO, and it has also been because of the principals we've had.**

Conclusion

Our investigation shows that the state's role in provoking fear in the community, stripping citizens of their right to elect representatives to their local school board, failing to listen to the demands of community, lacking accountability, undermining parent-teacher organizations, and dismantling of public education, have dire implications for the state of democracy in the city of Houston and beyond. The essence of state officials' actions is to undermine democracy in Houston and to deprive its citizens of the opportunity to participate in the shaping of a government that truly serves their interests and needs. The state should not be using education to undermine the democratic tradition in this country. Rather, it should uphold the nation's founding principle that education is fundamental to democracy and that the best defense against tyranny and corruption is local self-governance.

Degrading Financial Stewardship

> *The lack of support from the district is alarmingly worse under the takeover. Why take over if it's not going to include resources, support, and funding? This is a fire sale.*
>
> **- Parent, Westbury Listening Event**

Chapter Summary & Key Findings

During the Commission's data collection phase, stakeholders across multiple listening sessions raised concerns about the state of district finances under the takeover. Based on their persistent unease regarding state-appointed leaders' stewardship of district finances, the Commission examined the extent to which the fiscal policies and practices enacted by Superintendent Miles and the Board of Managers reflect standards for responsible financial oversight and transparency of public funds.[136] As this section reveals, the Board of Managers actively dismantled policies designed to ensure oversight and transparency. Given that state-appointed leaders operate with fewer guardrails compared to elected representatives when tasked with protecting the integrity of public expenditures, we heeded community members' legitimate concerns. As such, this section differs from others in the report, as it takes stakeholders' lived experiences as a starting point for our own investigation into the financial changes under the takeover. Evidence in this section relies on board meeting minutes and local reporting to reveal patterns underlying state-appointed leadership's financial decision-making

Since the start of the takeover, the Board of Managers has adopted hundreds of changes to board policy, approving over 120 policy changes between April 2025 and June 2026 alone, only 38 of which were required by law or based on Texas Association of School Boards recommendations. This section demonstrates three traits characterizing state-appointed leadership's approach to district finances:

1. Increasing Superintendent Miles' spending authority and discretion, with little, if any, recourse for wasteful, improper spending, and greater dependence on unsustainable revenue sources and financial practices;
2. Diluting internal financial controls and oversight by compromising financial checks and balances, conducting fewer audits, reducing oversight of donations, and limiting accountability of district purchasing;
3. Emboldening conflicts of interest held by district leaders, especially regarding outside consulting and potentially unlawful promotion of the 2024 school bond proposal.

136 It is important to acknowledge that fiscal mismanagement and corruption in HISD predated the takeover, with financial misconduct, bribery, and violations by previous elected trustees and administrators being among the many reasons TEA Commissioner Morath cited to justify state intervention. However, local constituents exercised their democratic rights to remove the trustees who engaged in these financial improprieties *before* the takeover went into effect, an option that no longer exists with the state-appointed Board of Managers.

1. Increasing Superintendent Spending Authority and Its Consequences

> ***I'm a part of my school's newspaper. I'm involved in fine arts. I'm watching Mike Miles spend $470,000 on a musical about himself, and our fine arts don't get any money at all. My friends and I spend so much time selling ads, fundraising, going to businesses, trying to get money to keep these programs alive for ourselves and for the next generation of students, because Mike Miles can't spare a cent for our fine arts. He's destroying our schools. He's destroying our future. And they're not his to destroy.***
>
> **- Student, First Unitarian Universalist Church Listening Event**

Like the elected trustees they replaced, HISD's state-appointed managers maintain a fiduciary responsibility to prudently manage the district's financial resources. Yet Lone Star Governance (LSG), TEA's mandated school board governance model, strictly limits the Board's ability to discuss topics other than student outcomes in any public meeting, including board budget workshops.[137] Consequently, this restriction on the minutes available to discuss financial issues has hindered the ability of HISD's Board of Managers to "make effective use of community resources," a duty required by the Texas Education Code.[138] In an effort to reduce Board meeting time devoted to discussing financial issues, state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles has demanded unprecedented authority over district spending decisions and budgeting.

For instance, Miles requested that the Board streamline district purchasing processes by increasing the threshold for vendor contracts requiring Board approval from $100,000 to $2 million. On August 10, 2023, the Board voted to expand Miles' spending authority tenfold, allowing him to unilaterally approve purchases up to $1 million without a prior Board vote.[139] Community pushback is partially responsible for settling on the $1 million threshold instead of the original $2 million request. Days later, on August 16, 2023, HISD hosted a district convocation event at Houston's NRG Center that cost taxpayers nearly $470,000, which did not include additional expenses incurred across a week of professional development activities held at NRG.[140] Nearly half of the convocation's total cost (over $212,000) entailed a musical performance starring none other than Superintendent Miles that was written and produced by his son.

Additionally, in October 2025, the Board of Managers deleted pre-takeover district policy outlining a decentralized approach that empowered principals to lead budget decisions that best suited their unique campus context and recommended that the Superintendent seek "community opinion on financial aspects." Instead, the new policy was reduced to a single sentence: "The budget shall be aligned with and developed to achieve the Superintendent's Key Action Plan, thereby connecting financial resources to the District's strategic priorities and goals."[141] This section shines a light on the dangers of the unprecedented spending authority granted to Superintendent Miles, which enabled wasteful and duplicative spending as well as unsustainable financial practices.

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137 Improving governance is one of the three exit criteria that HISD must meet in order to exit state intervention. Lone Star Governance is the standard by which the Board of Managers is assessed on this criterion. *See* Texas Education Agency (2023). *Lone Star Governance Continuous Improvement for Governing Teams Participant Manual.*

138 Texas Education Code §11.1511.

139 Lehrer-Small, A. (2023, August 9). HISD's new superintendent wants more power to move faster. Why some say he shouldn't get it. *Houston Landing.*

140 González Kelly, S. (2023, December 15). 'A horrible waste': HISD convocation, including Mike Miles' musical, cost taxpayers nearly $470K. *Houston Chronicle.*

141 Board Policy CE(LOCAL), Annual Operating Budget, changed by Board of Managers on October 9, 2025. See Houston Independent School District. (2025, October 9). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.

a. Wasteful, Duplicative Spending

The superintendent's expanded authority over district finances has put new strains on district resources, as demonstrated by the multiple budget amendments Superintendent Miles proposed for Board approval that increased HISD's budget deficit beyond initial projections. In December 2024, for example, Miles asked the Board to approve doubling the district's deficit for 2024–25 from $125 million to $250 million, before the district's deficit eventually rose to $520 million.[142] Subsequent annual budgets have operated with forecasted deficits of $14 million in 2025–26 and $25 million in 2026–27.[143] This growing deficit is due, in part, to questionable spending decisions proposed by the Superintendent and approved by the Board of Managers.

By March 2024, Miles had spent over $97 million on building improvements, furniture, and equipment for NES schools,[144] such as desks for Teams Centers, adult-sized spin bikes, interactive whiteboards, and video recording/livestreaming equipment for every classroom. These purchases were made without consulting campus administrators or inventorying existing equipment. For example, district leaders bought new interactive whiteboards to replace functioning SmartBoards; elementary schools received adult-size spin bikes that remained in their boxes;[145] and piles of excess student desks, which had already been upgraded, crowded school hallways. Certainly, HISD students deserve dedicated funds for school improvements, but this cursory approach neglected existing assets and supplies on campuses, leading to duplicative and wasteful spending of already limited resources that could have been better spent elsewhere.

Furthermore, many budget amendments were due to overbudget expenditures to compensate high-paid district executives. By June 2024, Miles had exceeded his allocated budget for Instructional Leadership by over $32 million and for School Leadership by $59 million.[146] Contributing to these growing costs, the number of HISD administrators earning salaries over $200,000 has increased from 22 to 45,[147] with Miles and members of his executive cabinet also receiving annual performance bonuses ranging between $30,000 and $175,000 along with 32 days of vacation and personal leave (in addition to 29 paid holidays for all 12-month employees) and travel and car allowances.[148] All the while, HISD educators are returning to school in the upcoming 2026–27 academic year without knowing their official salaries due to state-appointed leaders' new pay-for-performance system.[149]

Superintendent Miles also requested authority to engage outside attorneys without board approval on August 10, 2023.[150] All school districts are sued and typically hire private firms. However, since this policy change, HISD's spending on private law firms has increased dramatically. While pre-takeover in 2022 and 2023, HISD spent $1.8 million and $1.3 million on outside legal services, respectively, the district spent $2.9 million in 2024 and $2.6 million in 2025. As of June 2026, HISD had already spent $1.2 million to retain private law firms, nearly matching annual pre-takeover spending levels just halfway through the calendar year.

142 Lehrer-Small, A. (2024, December 10). HISD now projecting a $250 million budget deficit. Here's what to know. *Houston Landing*.; Sinha, T. (2026, June 10). HISD proposes raises, staffing cuts in $2 billion budget. *The Houston Defender.*

143 Mizan, N. (2026, June 25). Houston ISD passes $2 billion budget, with $25M deficit heading into 2026-27 school year. *Houston Chronicle*.; Sinha, T. (2025, June 14). HISD passes $2.1B budget amid board shakeup, new spending priorities. *The Houston Defender.*

144 Terry, J. (2024, May 23). *Houston Independent School District 2024-2025 fiscal year budget.* [PowerPoint slides] (slide 37). Houston Independent School District School Board Special Meeting.

145 Downing, M. (2023, October 3).Wanted: A fitness instructor with mechanical abilities on the side for HISD spin bikes. *Houston Press.*

146 Houston Independent School District. (2025). 2025-26 *Adopted Budget Book.*

147 Mizan, N. (2026, July 16). Here are the new Houston ISD schools leaders ahead of 2026-27. *Houston Chronicle.*

148 Mizan, N. (2026, January 28). HISD top leaders get $30k bonuses on top of their over $200K salaries. Read more on their contracts. *Houston Chronicle.*

149 Rahming, D. (2026, July 23). Some HISD teachers will return to work before learning their 2026-27 salary. *KHOU 11 Houston.*

150 Houston Independent School District. (2023, August 10). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.

b. Unsustainable Financial Practices and Revenue Sources

Alongside these rising expenses, state-appointed leaders have relied more heavily on unsustainable revenue sources. On October 9, 2025, HISD's Board of Managers nullified the requirement to maintain an unassigned general fund balance equivalent to three months of operating expenses, which prior elected boards maintained at $750 million.[151] These reserves are crucial for covering the costs of running deficit budgets and for maintaining HISD's AAA bond rating. Indeed, HISD's elected trustees regularly maintained fund balances well above this threshold: at the start of the takeover in 2023, for instance, the district had a total beginning fund balance of over $1.1 billion. Yet the district's general fund balance is now projected to fall below $730 million during the 2026–27 school year.[152]

Months earlier, in January 2025, the Board of Managers approved a policy change that enables proceeds from real estate sales to be deposited into the district's General Fund to be used for district operations rather than the Capital Renovations funds, which are allocated for the maintenance or construction of existing school buildings. State-appointed leaders took advantage of this policy by selling district property to offset financial shortfalls caused by Superintendent Miles' overbudget expenditures. The Board of Managers voted to sell 17 district properties on January 16, 2025, more than 230 acres of surplus property were sold on December 11, 2025, and another 12 properties were declared surplus with authorization given for sales procedures on August 13, 2026, including 9 of the schools that the Board of Managers closed just months earlier.[153] Though the exact amounts of proceeds earned from these sales were not disclosed, the district's budget for 2024–25 listed $80 million in expected income from property sales.[154]

2. Diluting Internal Financial Controls and Oversight

> ***My problem is they are ripping out the financial guts of HISD, and they're doing it with purpose and intention. They're not doing it by accident. They're not doing it as a consequence of something else. They're doing it in a structured manner.***
>
> **- Community Member, Third Ward Focus group**

Any business with an annual operating budget of $2 billion requires strong, redundant internal controls—policies, procedures, and officials tasked with detecting and preventing problematic financial dealings. Yet since the takeover, HISD's Board of Managers has approved multiple changes to board policy that have weakened its financial oversight role. This has enabled several instances of improper financial dealings, including violations of HISD's procurement policy and state law.

a. Compromising Financial Checks and Balances

A key principle of internal financial controls is that purchasing and payment departments should be separated and report to different senior administrators. If the same individual oversees both purchasing and payments, the potential for honest mistakes or dishonest dealings

151 Houston Independent School District. (2025, October 9). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
152 HISD NOW.(2026, June1). HISD officials propose employee pay raise, minimum wage increase in $2B balanced budget [Video file].
153 DeGuzman, C. (2025, January 17). Houston ISD board votes to sell 17 district properties amidst community opposition. *Houston Public Media*.; Partain, C. (2025, December 11).HISD approves sale of more than 230 acres, including three abandoned schools. *Houston Chronicle*.; Mizan, N. (2026, August 13). Houston ISD moves to sell 12 properties, including 9 recently closed schools. *Houston Chronicle*.
154 Houston Independent School District. (2024). *Houston Independent School District adopted budget, 2024-25.*

grows substantially. Yet Jim Terry, whom Miles originally hired in 2023 to serve as HISD's Chief Financial Officer (CFO), was also appointed as the District's Chief Operations Officer (COO) in 2024,[155] contradicting widely accepted business practices due to the increased risk of fraud created by having procurements and payments overseen by the same individual.

b. Conducting Fewer Internal and External Audits of District Expenditures

HISD's Board of Managers has also voted to scale back internal and external audits of district expenditures, opening the district up to greater risks of fraud and corruption. On August 10, 2023, the Board approved Miles's request to remove the district's Internal Audit Office and Chief Audit Executive, which had previously been tasked with investigating claims of theft, fraud, and misappropriation, and instead assigned these audit responsibilities to the existing office of Ethics and Compliance.[156] In the same meeting, the Board voted to eliminate a requirement that HISD hire an attorney to provide board members representation and advice regarding financial issues during meetings, removing their access to counsel that could answer questions about the legality of financial transactions. Further adjustments to HISD's audit policy occurred on February 8, 2024, when the Board voted to remove the district's annual requirement for an independent external audit.[157] The Board also approved hiring an external auditor to conduct internal and external audits, requiring that they work directly with the superintendent prior to reporting to the board.

c. Reduced Oversight of Donations

On August 10, 2023, the HISD Board of Managers reduced its oversight of donations to the district, granting the superintendent unilateral authority to approve donations above $5,000 and removing the Board from the approval process for any gift other than those donated for a specified purpose, or real estate.[158] This change occurred shortly after Good Reason Houston donated $3 million in kind to help accomplish the superintendent's goals and vision.[159] On June 11, 2026, however, the Board retroactively approved nearly $12 million in donations after it came to light that Miles had violated Board policy by unilaterally accepting dozens of outside donations for specified purposes—which still required board approval—between August 2023 and May 2026.[160]

d. Violation of Procurement Policies

This was not the first time the state-appointed administration had violated its own procurement policies. In December 2024, local news reports uncovered that Miles violated HISD's procurement policy by failing to obtain required approval for nearly 130 purchase agreements between August 2023 and December 2024, totaling $870 million.[161] These contracts were procured through cooperative agreements, an expedited process through which the district selects vendors using lists created by other organizations. Unlike contracts negotiated in the traditional bidding process that only required board approval if they exceeded the recently established $1 million spending threshold for Superintendent Miles, all cooperative agreements at the time were subject to board approval, no matter the cost. Despite this procedural oversight, the Board of Managers retroactively approved all $870 million in purchase agreements during the January

155 *Houston Independent School District 2024-25 Adopted Budget Book.*
156 Houston Independent School District. (2023, August 10). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
157 Houston Independent School District. (2024, February 8). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
158 Houston Independent School District. (2023, August 10). School Board Meeting. Agenda packet. Houston, TX.
159 Houston Independent School District. (2023, June 8). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX. Houston
160 Houston Independent School District. (2026, June 11). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX; Mizan, N. (2026, July 17). Houston ISD accepted nearly $12 million in donations without board approval. *Houston Chronicle.*
161 Lehrer-Small, A. (2025, January 13). HISD leaders failed to get board approval for up to $870 million in spending, records show. *Houston Landing.*

2025 board meeting, with no consequences imposed for Superintendent Miles or other district administrators responsible for this error.[162]At the same meeting, the managers approved a policy change to extend Miles' $1 million spending allowance to purchases made through cooperative agreements, and in October 2025, they further extended it to purchases associated with intergovernmental agreements, also known as interlocal agreements.[163] Rather than holding Miles accountable, the Board of Managers simply changed the policy to accommodate him.

While many of these donations and purchases pertained to daily operations and resources for schools, these incidents are nonetheless troubling because they demonstrate that there is no recourse or accountability in the event that state-appointed leaders breach their own policies.

3. Emboldening Conflicts of Interest

> ***So one of the things we've seen is conflict of interest by people who, on one hand, standing up saying they're fighting for the schools who look like us—conflict of interest—at the same time, they may be in bed in some kind of financial way with some of these entities.***
>
> **Former HISD Parent and Community Member, Third Ward Focus Group**

Changes to HISD policy related to the superintendent's spending authority and district financial controls have not only created the potential for financial conflicts of interest—they have allowed Miles to engage in activities that have directly violated state law. These moves were further enabled by several changes to the district's conflict-of-interest policies. For instance, on March 20, 2025, the Board voted to eliminate the Conflict of Interest Review Committee, which had previously been tasked with analyzing "possible conflict of interest disclosures involving the Superintendent."[164] Additionally, on November 13, 2025, the Board granted the superintendent authority to use district intellectual property to further his "own projects."[165]

a. Outside Consulting

Miles has since used district intellectual property to pursue several non-district projects, for which he has received financial compensation in violation of state law. For instance, on January 14, 2026, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that Miles helped broker a $950,000 deal between the charter school network, International Leadership Texas, and Education Partners, a for-profit firm.[166] Education Partners is led by Dwight Jones, who also serves as corporate board president of Third Future Schools, which Miles founded and previously served as CEO. The agreement included promises of free access to HISD curriculum and training from Miles himself. Furthermore, an April 15, 2026, investigation by the *Texas Observer* found that Miles had been paid $190,000 by Third Future Schools for more than two years of consulting services conducted during his tenure as state-appointed superintendent of HISD.[167] Though Miles' contract allowed for outside consulting, payment for these consulting services directly violated Texas HB 3372, which prohibits superintendents from moonlighting for other districts, charter schools, or education companies. Miles only canceled his contract with Third Future Schools after an *Observer* reporter shared a copy of the agreement with HISD's Board of Managers.

162 Houston Independent School District. (2025, January 16). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
163 Houston Independent School District. (2025, October 9). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
164 Houston Independent School District. (2025, March 20). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
165 Houston Independent School District. (2025, November 13). School Board Meeting. Agenda Packet. Houston, TX.
166 Mizan, N. (2026, January 14). Exclusive: Mike Miles helped broker a nearly $1M deal for HISD-style reforms at a charter network. *Houston Chronicle*.
167 Lee, J. (2026, April 15). Mike Miles cancels moonlighting contract with his former charter school network. *Texas Observer.*

b. "Failed" Attempt to Push Through a Questionable Bond Proposal

Finally, HISD may have violated Texas Education Code and Texas Election Code rules against school district electioneering in its efforts to promote a $4.4 billion bond package, which failed in a November 2024 election. This reflected Houstonians' distrust of Superintendent Miles and state-appointed leaders' dubious stewardship of public dollars.[168] Though school district employees are prohibited by state law from spending public funds to advocate for or against a candidate or ballot measure, HISD spent more than $1.48 million on three different public relations and consulting firms that promoted the bond through social media posts and billboard advertisements.[169] An October 16, 2024, letter from Texas's Office of the Attorney General to HISD expressed "reason to believe that the HISD Board of Trustees has engaged in electioneering in favor of the Proposed Bond," and that commentary promoting the bond and spending of public funds violated sections of the Texas Education Code and Texas Election Code.[170] Nonetheless, neither Miles nor any appointed Board member was held accountable.

Conclusion

This section reviewed the various ways that the state-appointed Board of Managers advanced financial policies that increased superintendent authority and reduced internal controls, dismantling a protective infrastructure of oversight and transparency. It shows how Miles' budget philosophy and the enabling policies enacted by the Board of Managers have played out in practice. The effects of these policies chronicled in local reporting include wasteful overspending, increased overhead spending, unsustainable revenue sources, and the proliferation of conflicts of interest. Though these are the immediate effects documented by this Commission, there may be other financial improprieties that have not yet come to light. These findings emphasize the need for continued scrutiny of district financial practices under the takeover and elevate community members' demands for ensuring ethical stewardship of public resources.

168 Balogun, R. (2024, June 4). 'Only opportunity to vote on anything': Houston ISD parents consider bond proposal a referendum on superintendent. *Click-2Houston.*; Zunavich, A. (2024, November 4). Houston ISD bond rejected in large margin by voters, an unofficial referendum of state takeover. *Houston Public Media*.

169 Partain, C. (2025, April 4). Houston ISD may have engaged in electioneering for $4.4B bond on Facebook, Attorney General says. *Houston Chronicle*.

170 Wilson, M. (2025, May 23). Houston ISD investigated by both AG and DA over electioneering allegations. *Texas Scorecard.;* Diaz, M. (2025, April 7). Attorney General's letter criticizes Houston ISD's bond campaign practices. *Click2Houston.*

Halloween protest parade at the polls (Credit: CVPE)

Top: Protesting library closures (Credit: Houston Federation of Teachers)
Bottom: Protesting the takeover and proposed bond (Credit: Houston Federation of Teachers)

Conclusion & Recommendations

1. Summary of Findings

In response to sustained concerns by students, families, educators, and community members, the Commission on the HISD Takeover was formed to thoroughly investigate current conditions within the district and document local stakeholders' lived experiences. We prioritized the perspectives of those most impacted by the takeover—students, families, teachers, staff, and administrators—and collected data that gave voice to their experiences. The Commission's investigation uncovered five major findings:

1. **The takeover diminished curriculum.** The takeover replaced rigorous and enriching curriculum with a narrow focus on test preparation, undermined the provision of legally mandated accommodations for special student populations, and curtailed student access to books and libraries.
2. **The takeover dismantled relationships.** The takeover inhibited and severed the bonds connecting students, educators, and families, thereby dismantling entire school communities themselves.
3. **The takeover demeaned and disrespected educators.** The takeover created a hostile work environment for teachers that devalued their professional knowledge, tightly surveilled instruction and punished noncompliance, and subjected educators to a culture of fear and disrespect.
4. **The takeover destroyed the democratic tradition in American education.** The takeover had detrimental consequences for the democratic rights of local communities and led to the weakening of democracy in American education.
5. **The takeover degraded financial stewardship.** The takeover compromised checks and balances designed to ensure transparent and ethical fiduciary management by district leaders, increasing the possibility for corruption in hiring, procurement, and program spending.

Photo Top Left: Art Car Parade 2026 (Credit: Houston Federation of Teachers); Photo Top Right: Learning Should Be Fun (Credit: CVPE)

Each of these findings is troubling on its own. Put together, they illuminate how **the state takeover of HISD constitutes wholescale, systemic corrosion of public education**.

HISD *will* inevitably return to local control—a necessary first step in a longer journey to rebuild a district that has been subjected to an undemocratic assault for the last three years. Local stakeholders will be crucial to this recovery process, and through testimonies, focus groups, and conversations, Houstonians have articulated their visions for what this new future could look like, and how the district can fulfill the democratic promises of public education. The following section explores these freedom dreams,[171] which reveal community members' desires for paths forward.

2. Community Desires for HISD and Local Freedom Dreams

The purpose of the HISD Takeover Commission was not only to document stakeholders' experiences under the takeover, but also to dream of a different future defined by Houstonians and not by state actors who actively disregard the district's complicated history and context. In this Commission's conversations with Houstonians, we asked them a simple question: *What would you like to see from our schools and our district to make them ideal learning environments for our students?* Our respondents were resounding in their demands to 1) end the state takeover of HISD, 2) return to local control of their schools, and 3) fire Superintendent Mike Miles. These measures reflect their desire for democratic, shared decision-making, where process cannot be divorced from the outcome, and authentic community engagement is non-negotiable.

At the same time, Houstonians also acknowledged that HISD was never perfect and faced systemic challenges even under local control. Yet far from being an antidote, the takeover exacerbated these problems. When we asked participants to imagine alternative solutions for improving the district, what students, families, educators, and community members articulated was neither a prescriptive program nor a sequence of technical "fixes" imposed by outsiders. As much as they desired a return to local control, Houstonians were adamant about not reverting to the pre-takeover status quo ante. Instead, they dreamed of a collaborative, well-funded, and community-driven school district that cares for its students, teachers, and parents. They envisioned a public school system that cultivated and preserved the joy inherent in the learning process, addressed students' non-academic and material needs, meaningfully engaged families and communities, and instilled a professional culture that valued and humanized those within it.

Over the course of collecting these testimonies, the Commission captured these local freedom dreams. The following Figure 4 outlines the core components that participants identified as being foundational to strong and thriving public schools. Given the diversity of the schools and communities served by HISD, accomplishing these aims will look different across the district, as no one size fits all. This underscores the complexity of democracy itself as a process, one that is sometimes messy and raises more questions than it does provide answers: *What will the transition to local control look like? How can we be intentional about ensuring that we do not perpetuate the problems of the past that planted the seed for a takeover? How do we make sure that HISD isn't set up for failure when it returns to local democratic governance?*

Before Houstonians can begin to ask these questions and actualize their local freedom dreams, however, the state must do its part in contributing to a vibrant, thriving public education system.

171 Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom Dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Beacon Press.

Figure 4

Community Desires for Strong & Thriving Schools in HISD

Enriching Curriculum & Instruction

Schools should provide meaningful learning experiences within and outside the classroom that foster joy, curiosity, and growth.

This entails providing access to peer-reviewed, research-backed curriculum that is not generated solely by AI, reading whole books, authentic writing, project-based learning, and functioning libraries staffed by a certified librarian at every school. Students should also have opportunities for field trips, social and emotional learning, fine arts, and career and technical education (CTE).

The district must accommodate students' diverse language and learning needs, especially for special education and Emergent Bilingual students.

Caring School Climate & Culture

Schools should value the relationships that make each campus its own unique community.

This entails prioritizing stability in school personnel, adopting more restorative disciplinary practices addressing root causes of students' behaviors, and creating channels for authentic family involvement that engages them on their terms rather than marginalizing their voices and perspectives.

The district must encourage care, collaboration, and trust, not fear. It should also invest in non-academic services and community-based partnerships to provide every campus with wraparound specialists/services, nurses, counselors, and mental health providers.

Respect for Educator Professionalism

Schools should respect educators, who are the backbone of thriving public schools.

This entails building educators' professional capacities by trusting educators to design and modify curriculum, providing research-based professional development that enhances their teaching knowledge and capacities, and recognizing the importance and validity of teachers' certifications.

The district must adopt fair educator appraisal systems that provide meaningful, not punitive, feedback. It should also consider factors, like school climate, trust, and relationship-building, not solely focus on narrow achievement indicators.

Democratic Engagement & Participation

Schools should reflect and represent the communities they serve because they are fundamentally democratic institutions.

This entails ensuring that community interests are represented in decision-making, restoring avenues for public participation in the democratic process, and strengthening systems that make education leaders accountable to the people they serve.

The district must follow the principles of democratic governance by encouraging stakeholder participation and deliberation in all levels of the education system. Furthermore, it should not dismiss or silence voices through retaliation.

Ethical & Transparent Financial Stewardship

Schools should be adequately funded and well-resourced to prioritize students first and foremost.

This entails allocating resources equitably, granting schools flexibility to acquire programs and supports that meet their students' unique needs, and seeking community input for financial priorities.

The district must increase transparency regarding financial matters and institute necessary safeguards to prevent corruption. It must codify avenues for holding district leaders accountable for the district's financial wellbeing.

3. State-Level Legislative and Policy Recommendations

HISD stakeholders' experiences and voices under takeover have illuminated important lessons for state officials and leaders. Moreover, TEA has rapidly expanded its intervention to four other school districts in the state—Beaumont,[172] Connally, Fort Worth, and Lake Worth ISDs—with state-appointed leaders in these contexts adopting many of the same policies, practices, and even personnel associated with HISD's state-appointed administration.[173] The recent release of the 2026 state accountability ratings have brought even more districts into the crosshairs of takeover, including Austin ISD.[174] With this context in mind, the Commission makes the following policy recommendations at the state level:

a. **Raise the threshold for triggering state intervention:** As currently written, Chapter 39A of the Texas Education Code unfairly burdens larger school districts like HISD, resulting in takeover's disenfranchisement of wider swaths of constituents across the state. Legislators should therefore increase the threshold for triggering state intervention from five consecutive unacceptable accountability ratings at a single school to a pattern of underperformance at a larger portion of a district's campuses (e.g., 10%).[175]

Save Our Schools Rally 2025 (Credit: CVPE)

b. **Shift from a punitive to a collaborative approach:** Replacing a district's elected school board with an appointed Board of Managers removes the capacity for shared decision-making necessary for sustaining long-term improvement. Rather than deposing elected school boards, legislators should adopt a partnership-based intervention model that works with locally elected leaders to increase their capacity to govern. This could entail adding technical expertise to district leadership structures rather than replace elected boards[176] or targeting state resources toward converting struggling campuses into full-service community schools.[177]

c. **Specify firm guardrails on the authority of state-appointed boards and superintendents**: At present, the Texas Education Code sets no limits on the powers granted to appointed boards of managers and superintendents, enabling these unelected officials to impose changes that outlast their temporary appointment. Lawmakers should codify clear guardrails that specify domains where appointed leadership has full, partial, or no authority, especially in regard to the discontinuing of academic programs, the sale of district prop-

172 Brent, K. (2025, December). State takeover leaves Beaumont ISD leaders disappointed, shocked. *MSN.;* Sims, M. (2025, October 8). BISD remains at a standstill over TEA state takeover. *The Examiner.*; Carpenter, J., & Windes, I. (2020, January 16) Time out: Beaumont ISD leads state in suspensions, prompting promises of change. *Houston Chronicle*.

173 Lee, J. (2026, June 3). Will new school district takeovers follow the model - and 'chaos' - of Houston ISD? *The Texas Observer*.

174 Heath, K. (2026, August 13). Two Austin ISD middle schools trigger state takeover law, bringing TEA intervention. *Austin American-Statesman.*; Soebroto, A., Menchaca, M., & Nichols, T. (n.d.). Texas school takeover tracker. *Houston Chronicle* updated May 29, 2026.

175 TX SB1764. 2025-2026. 89th Legislature. (Tx. 2025).

176 Singer, J., Woulfin, S. L., Dawer, D. I., Lizarraga, L., Strunk, K. O., Harbatkin, E., & Chen, W. (2026). *Round 4 of the Partnership Model: 2024-25 Implementation Report.* Michigan Education Policy Innovation Collaborative and Michigan State University.

177 Germain, E., Maier, A., & Espinoza, D. (2025). *New Mexico community schools: Improving student opportunities and outcomes.* Learning Policy Institute.

erty, and closing schools. At a minimum, state-appointed superintendents should be required to hold active superintendent certification, have their salaries paid from state—not local—funding sources, and be immediately relieved of their duties if they violate state law.

d. **Establish local avenues for ending state intervention:** At present, the TEA commissioner possesses sole authority to determine whether and when a takeover ends, depriving local stakeholders of any avenues for holding state-appointed leaders accountable. Lawmakers should condition the continuation of state intervention on a local referendum, which would allow district stakeholders to determine whether a takeover should continue or end.

e. **Impose clear limits on the TEA commissioner's authority.** Even though the TEA commissioner is appointed by the governor, they still must follow state law. The TEA commissioner currently possesses broad discretion and authority to design the state's accountability system, launch special accreditation investigations, and determine the course of state interventions, with little, if any, public oversight. Lawmakers should clearly define the TEA commissioner's authority and jurisdiction in each of these areas by specifying procedures mandating diverse stakeholder engagement when enacting consequential policy decisions.

f. **Adequately fund public education in Texas**. Despite a large body of research demonstrating that increasing funding for public education is associated with improved student outcomes, Texas currently ranks 47th among the states in per-pupil funding, and the basic allotment has not been meaningfully increased since 2019. In addition to raising the basic allotment to match the actual cost of educating Texas students, lawmakers should calculate funding based on enrollment, not attendance, and tie future funding levels to inflation to ensure the basic allotment does not stagnate.

4. Conclusion

This report has documented many of the lived experiences of local communities whose schools have been taken over by state-appointed officials. It shows the detrimental consequences of the state takeover for parents, students, educators, schools, and democracy itself.

The takeover of HISD is not an isolated case. It is part of a national pattern by elected Republican officials to disempower marginalized communities and erode democracy and public education nationwide. Advancing this agenda, Houston has served as a testing ground for a new takeover playbook—one that paves the way for the antidemocratic privatization of public education as it rapidly spreads across Texas and beyond.

Yet Houstonians have vigorously refused to play by the state's rules. Despite effectively being excluded from influencing their local schools under state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles and the Board of Managers, they continue to fight for the return of local control and for a community-driven vision of public education. Their tireless efforts to expand educational opportunity under locally elected leadership and establish a more equitable, caring, and joyful learning environment in HISD reflect their beliefs in democracy and community. By refusing to accept the narrow vision of education imposed by the state, Houstonians have crafted an alternative playbook for elevating community voices and collective deliberation in pursuit of a just and equitable public education system.

Appendix A. Additional Details on the Formation of the Commission on the HISD Takeover

The Commission on the HISD Takeover has its origins in conversations between Colin Bossen, Dorcas Hand, Ruth Hoffman-Lach, and Ruth Kravetz. Concerned that the state-appointed district leadership, particularly Mike Miles, was not listening to students, parents, or teachers about the impact of the state takeover, they approached State Senator Molly Cook and State Representative Lauren Ashley Simmons and asked them to establish the Commission. With State Senator Cook and State Representative Simmons's help they then recruited leading education experts, community leaders, and parent and student representatives to serve on the Commission.

The Commission takes its inspiration from the traditions of shadow legislative hearings, citizens commissions, and people's tribunals. Shadow hearings are unofficial hearings conducted by elected members of a legislative body who belong to a minority party that does not have the power to call official hearings. In recent years, they have been used by the Democratic Party to investigate and document the Trump administration's dismantling of USAID, conduct in Afghanistan, and other matters.[178] Such hearings are not used to directly make policy or pass legislation. Instead, they lay the groundwork for policies that might be created and legislation that could be passed once legislative majorities change.

Citizen commissions and people's tribunals are grassroots bodies that community members form when elected representatives fail to represent community interests or seek to mask corruption or crimes conducted by state administrations, law enforcement, or military forces. Often, they investigate state sanctioned violence or war crimes. The most famous of such grassroots bodies is the International War Crimes Tribunal (also known as the Russell Tribunal). It was convened in 1966 by the philosopher Bertrand Russell to hear evidence into possible war crimes committed by the United States during the Vietnam War.[179] Since then both citizens commissions and people's tribunals have been held throughout the world to investigate other matters.[180]

All such entities are formed with the understanding that authority in a democratic society flows upward from community members and not downward from elected officials. When elected officials fail in their duties it is community members' responsibility to represent themselves. The Commission was formed for precisely this reason. Its members have worked to both document the impact of the state takeover and lay the groundwork for future policy. The hope is that by doing so we can help create conditions for the development of public-school systems that will empower students, parents, and teachers to thrive.

178 U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. (2025, March 25). *Shadow Hearing - Thrown into Chaos: The Dismantling of USAID and its Real-Life Consequences*. 119th Cong.; U. S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. (2026, February 10). *Kamlager-Dove, HFAC Dems hold shadow hearing on Trump's betrayal of Afghan allies*. [Press advisory].

179 Zunino, M. (2019, April). *Russell Tribunal*. Max Planck Encyclopedias of International Law. (Module: Max Planck Encyclopedia of International Procedural Law) Oxford Public International Law. Oxford University Press.

180 Fero, K., Bradshaw, J., & Patterson, S. (2026, July). Obstinate memory: The people's tribunal on police killings. *Race & Class*, *68*(1), 3–31.

Appendix B. Legal Violations Supported by the Commission's Findings Concerning HISD

Purpose

This Appendix identifies the legal duties implicated by the factual findings stated in the Commission's report and explains the legal significance of those findings. The report's findings implicate the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Texas special education law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Texas law governing services for emergent bilingual students, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA), and the Texas Educators' Code of Ethics.

Where the report relies on testimony rather than a final agency or court determination, the legally precise formulation is that the evidence "supports a finding," "reflects noncompliance," or "would constitute a violation if substantiated." The Commission may state an established violation without that qualification when citing a final TEA determination or other official finding.

Principal Findings in the Report

The Commission expressly finds that the New Education System (NES) model "compromised legally mandated accommodations" and that the district's uniform instructional model inhibited educators from meeting students' individual learning needs.[181] That general finding is supported by the following specific evidence:

- Failure to deliver Individual Education Plan (IEP) services: An educator reported that special education students were not receiving in-class support most weeks because one support provider was assigned across six math classes and repeatedly diverted to unrelated duties.[182]
- Disregard of disability-related accommodations: Educators reported that special education and Section 504 students were "not getting accommodations" because teachers were given "no time" to diversify lessons.[183]
- District directives preventing lawful implementation: The Commission finds that teachers were ordered to follow scripted lessons rather than provide mandatory accommodations to students with disabilities.[184] One educator testified that administrators attempted to force her to break special education law and that special education support was not occurring.[185]
- Punishment for exercising professional judgment: Educators reported threats of repercussions for failing to comply with district directives, fear of losing their jobs, and adverse employment consequences associated with the District's appraisal and monitoring systems. One educator further reported receiving a lower Spot evaluation and other adverse actions after raising concerns.[186]
- The educator section further describes strict enforcement through appraisals and threats to employment.

181 *See supra,* Diminishing Curriculum, § 2, 'The kids are suffering, and the law is being broken': Impacts on Special Populations and Programs.
182 *See supra,* Diminishing Curriculum, § 2.a, 'Special Education (SPED) Programs.'
183 *See supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1.b, 'Pick up the Pace'
184 *See supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1, 'We have to teach from a script': Devaluing Educators' Professional Knowledge.
185 *See supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1.b, 'Pick up the Pace.'
186 *See supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1.b, 'Pick up the Pace'; § 2, 'It's not about the kids': Surveilling and Controlling Instruction; and § 3.b, 'Suppression of Dissent and Retaliation.'

Legal Analysis

1. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The IDEA requires HISD to provide every eligible student a free appropriate public education consisting of special education and related services delivered in conformity with the student's IEP. 20 U.S.C. §§ 1401(9), 1412(a)(1)(A); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.17, 300.101. Once an IEP is developed, the district must ensure that it is accessible to each teacher and provider responsible for implementation and that each person is informed of his or her specific implementation responsibilities and the accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided. 34 C.F.R. § 300.323(d). The IEP must state the special education, related services, supplementary aids and services, program modifications, and supports to be provided. 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV); 34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)(4).

The Commission's findings support a systemic implementation violation. Withholding assigned in-class support, diverting special education personnel to unrelated duties, denying accommodations because the scripted curriculum leaves "no time" for them, and prohibiting teachers from modifying instruction to comply with an IEP are not merely instructional disagreements. They are failures to deliver services in conformity with the IEP. A districtwide curriculum or pacing directive cannot supersede an individual student's IEP.

> ***"My SPED students are not receiving in-class support most weeks"***[187]
>
> ***Teachers were "ordered to follow the structure of prescribed lessons rather than adapting content … [to] provide mandatory accommodations to students with disabilities."***[188]

2. Texas Education Code and Texas Special Education Rules

Texas law independently guarantees eligible students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education. Tex. Educ. Code § 29.003. It requires an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee composed of the persons required by the IDEA to develop the student's IEP. Tex. Educ. Code § 29.005(a). Texas further requires special education services to be provided in accordance with all applicable federal law and regulations, state statutes and rules, and the State Plan under Part B of the IDEA. 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.1001(a).

Accordingly, the same conduct identified above also constitutes noncompliance with Texas law: failure to provide services required by an IEP, assignment of special education personnel in a manner that makes delivery of required services impossible, and use of a rigid district curriculum to override ARD committee decisions. The report may cite Tex. Educ. Code §§ 29.001, 29.003, and 29.005, together with 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.1001(a), as the state-law basis for these conclusions.

187 *See supra,* Diminishing Curriculum, § 2.a, 'Special Education (SPED) Programs.'
188 *See supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1, 'We have to teach from a script': Devaluing Educators' Professional Knowledge.

3. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 504 prohibits a recipient of federal financial assistance from excluding a qualified student with a disability from participation in, denying the student the benefits of, or subjecting the student to discrimination under an education program. 29 U.S.C. § 794(a). A public school district must provide each qualified student with a disability a free appropriate public education through regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met. 34 C.F.R. § 104.33(a)–(b). Placement and services must be based on an individualized evaluation and a knowledgeable group decision. 34 C.F.R. § 104.35.

The Commission's finding that Section 504 students did not receive accommodations because the model allowed no time to provide them directly implicates § 104.33. The same is true where a timed, handwriting-dependent instructional system measures the effects of dysgraphia rather than the student's knowledge and the district refuses to modify the practice. A uniform instructional model cannot lawfully replace the individualized aids and services required by a student's Section 504 plan.

4. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act

Title II provides that no qualified individual with a disability may, by reason of disability, be excluded from participation in or denied the benefits of a public entity's services, programs, or activities, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination. 42 U.S.C. § 12132. A school district must make reasonable modifications to its policies, practices, and procedures when necessary to avoid disability discrimination unless it can demonstrate a fundamental alteration. 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7)(i). It also may not use criteria or methods of administration that have the effect of subjecting qualified individuals with disabilities to discrimination or substantially impairing accomplishment of the program's objectives for them. 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(3).

The report describes a districtwide method of administration that requires uniform pacing, timed written responses, standardized worksheets, and strict adherence to scripts while preventing disability-related modifications. Applied to students whose disabilities affect writing speed, processing, attention, communication, or other access needs, that practice denies meaningful access to instruction unless reasonable modifications are made. The reported refusal to permit those modifications, coupled with adverse consequences for teachers who attempt to provide them, supports a Title II violation in addition to the IDEA and Section 504 violations.

5. Texas Educators' Code of Ethics

The report also shows that district directives place certified educators in the untenable position of choosing between compliance with administrative orders and compliance with their professional legal and ethical duties. The following enforceable standards in 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 247.2 are directly implicated:

- Standard 1.6: An educator may not falsify records or direct or coerce others to do so. Asking staff to sign a blank IEP signature page or directing a teacher to change grades to show performance that did not occur would violate this standard if the resulting record is false.[189]

189 For example, *see supra*, Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1.b, 'Pick up the Pace.'

- Standard 1.7: An educator must comply with state regulations, local board policy, and state and federal law. Directing educators to disregard IEPs, Section 504 plans, or legally required accommodations pressures them to violate this standard.[190]
- Standard 2.6: An educator may not use coercive means to influence professional decisions or colleagues. Threatening negative appraisals, reassignment, or termination to compel teachers to follow unlawful directives or abandon required supports implicates this standard.[191]
- Standards 3.2 and 3.4: An educator may not knowingly or recklessly treat a student in a manner that adversely affects learning, mental health, or safety or deny a student program benefits on the basis of disability. Refusing disability-related supports while publicly identifying or humiliating students based on timed performance may implicate both standards.[192]

Summary and Conclusion

The Commission's evidence demonstrates that HISD's uniform instructional mandates have, in multiple instances, displaced the individualized services and accommodations required for students with disabilities. Educators reported that students did not receive IEP-mandated in-class support, that special education personnel were diverted to unrelated duties, and that teachers were denied the time and discretion necessary to implement IEP and Section 504 accommodations. If substantiated, these practices violate the IDEA and its implementing regulations, Texas Education Code Chapter 29, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Title II of the ADA. The evidence further indicates that educators were pressured to alter grades and disregard legally required student supports. Those directives also implicate the enforceable Texas Educators' Code of Ethics, including 19 Texas Administrative Code § 247.2, Standards 1.6, 1.7, 2.6, 3.2, and 3.4.

Texas law independently requires school districts to identify and appropriately serve emergent bilingual students through bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Tex. Educ. Code §§ 29.051–29.055; 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.1205. These programs must provide structured language instruction designed around the students' linguistic needs and learning experiences. Tex. Educ. Code § 29.055. The Commission received testimony that HISD instead provided emergent bilingual students with substantially the same curriculum used for native English speakers, with only limited pictures and vocabulary added, while prohibiting teachers from slowing the pace, translating content, or otherwise adapting instruction. These findings support the conclusion that HISD has failed to provide the bilingual or ESL instruction required by Texas law. They also implicate the Equal Educational Opportunities Act, which requires school districts to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede students' equal participation in instructional programs. 20 U.S.C. § 1703(f); Castañeda v. Pickard, 648 F.2d 989, 1009–10 (5th Cir. 1981).

190 For example, *see supra,* Diminishing Curriculum, § 2.a, 'Special Education (SPED) Programs'; Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1, 'We have to teach from a script': Devaluing Educators' Professional Knowledge; and § 2.a, 'Spot Observations.'
191 For example, s*ee supra,* Demeaning Professional Educators, § 1.b, 'Pick up the Pace'; § 2, 'It's not about the kids': Surveilling and Controlling Instruction; and § 3.b, 'Suppression of Dissent and Retaliation.'
192 For example, *see supra ,* Diminishing Curriculum, § 1.a, 'Militant, Test-Prep Curriculum Without Enrichment or Remediation.'

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Notes