



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on March 18, 2023

## Texas Will Take Over Failing Houston School District, Prompting Backlash

The education battle is not just a struggle of conservative versus liberal values in the classroom, although that is an important component of it and a reason for parents to remain vigilant. It is also about the quality of education.

In Texas, the state government is currently in a tug-of-war with one school district in a struggle over education quality in Houston, the state's most populous city.

As the [Texas Tribune](#) reports, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) confirmed that it's moving ahead with plans to remove the Houston Independent School District (ISD) school board and superintendent.



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Since the year 2000, TEA has made this move periodically with struggling school districts. But the decision to dissolve the school board for Houston ISD has shocked observers because of its scope — with 276 schools and 200,000 students, this will be the biggest school district TEA has ever taken over.

The change will officially take place on June 1, when the responsibility of managing the district will be assumed by a “board of managers.” The length of time that this takeover will last is determined by the TEA commissioner, who is currently Mike Morath — an appointee of Republican Governor Greg Abbott who previously served as a member of the Dallas Independent School District's board of trustees.

Previously these takeovers have lasted from two to six years.

In 2015, Texas enacted a law that mandates the state to take over a school district if the district as a whole or one of its campuses scores failing grades from TEA for five years straight. Phillis Wheatley High School met that criterion in 2019.

Morath says that under the law, he is required to either close the school or dissolve the school board. He chose the latter route, perhaps motivated in part by allegations that the school board is guilty of misconduct.

Morath has been fighting to realize the takeover since 2019, but Houston ISD pushed back, resulting in a legal battle that went all the way to the state Supreme Court — which issued a ruling in January greenlighting TEA to move ahead with the takeover.

In an interview with the *Tribune*, Morath said that “for parents whose students are not being served as well as they should, this intervention is designed to try to improve that situation and do it as quickly as possible.”

The outlet also briefly chronicled Houston ISD's efforts to improve its performance:

The far-reaching decision has put the agency in the spotlight, with supporters saying the



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state needed to fix the district's entrenched problems and opponents noting that Houston ISD has made improvements in the years since the lawsuit against TEA started.

The TEA, which grades schools and districts each year based on their academic achievement, gave Phillis Wheatley a grade of F in 2019. Last year, Phillis Wheatley got a C, and Houston ISD as a whole received a B. In the last 19 months, Houston ISD has made strides reducing the number of its campuses with a D or F rating from 50 to 10. Ninety-four percent of Houston ISD schools now earn a grade of A, B or C.

While student scores have improved, Morath said that doesn't change the fact that the school received failing grades in its accountability rating for five consecutive years — enough to require the agency to intervene.

The *Tribune* also discovered [documents](#) on the TEA website, which have since been taken down, showing that the agency is already set to appoint new leadership. Like Houston ISD's elected school board members, the members of the new board of managers will not be paid for their service.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner [stated](#) that TEA already has a new superintendent chosen, although he did not reveal a name.

This marks the eighth time TEA has taken control of a school district. Of the previous seven cases, five districts have been returned to local management. Marlin ISD and Shepherd ISD are still being run by the state.

The Houston ISD decision has prompted backlash from a number of groups, including the local teachers union, Houston Federation of Teachers.

"We will work night and day to make sure that students have access to specific programs and services that they need and deserve to receive a high-quality public education in Houston schools," said Jackie Anderson, the union's president.

Derrick Johnson, president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), [argued that](#) the move has "racist undertones" and compared it to similar actions in his hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, arguing that the end goal of such measures is to take local governance out of the hands of racial minorities.

While the validity of Johnson's racial argument is questionable, the Houston ISD case does raise questions about the role of state government in local education.

Constitutionally speaking, states have supremacy over localities. Nevertheless, most people desire local control of their communities, believing, with good reason, that this is more efficient and preserves the local voice of residents better.

But when local elected officials drop the ball and students stand to be affected by it, is there legitimate ground for the state to intervene?

Ultimately, this question may be decided by whether TEA is able to significantly raise the quality of Houston ISD or not.



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