



How to End a Takeover: Dispatches from the Resistance

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Background

Over the last **30 years**, there have been at least **140 state takeovers** of local school districts across the country.

As of 2017, at least **33 states** have laws allowing the state to take over local school districts.

Reasons for Takeovers

Common reasons for takeovers, as cited by state leaders:

- Fiscal challenges (68% of takeovers)
- Poor academic performance (46% of takeovers)
- Natural disasters

However, some scholars contend that state takeovers are really about race and political power.

Takeovers Don't Work...

Research shows that takeovers not only fail to make financial improvements, but there is also not evidence linking takeovers to any substantial effect on students' academic outcomes.

In fact, there is some evidence showing that takeovers are disruptive to reading achievement in the early years.



...and They Make Existing Problems Worse

Additional research shows that takeovers contribute to district destabilization by exacerbating existing problems.

This often results in high teacher and staff turnover and exclusion of parent and community engagement in district decision-making.

What Does this Look Like in HISD?

- Inadequate special education services and providers
- Loss of translation services for emergent bilingual students and in meetings with parents and guardians
- Retaliation against teachers who voice concerns
- Use of low-quality scripted curriculums
- Closure of school libraries
- High teacher turnover rates
- A pattern of authoritarian and undemocratic behavior by district officials

A Closer Look

Special Education

HISD is not providing adequate support for Special Education services under the New Education System (NES) model.

The scripted curriculum does not allow teachers the flexibility to implement accommodations and modifications, and HISD has eliminated special education staff as part of its district-wide restructuring plan.

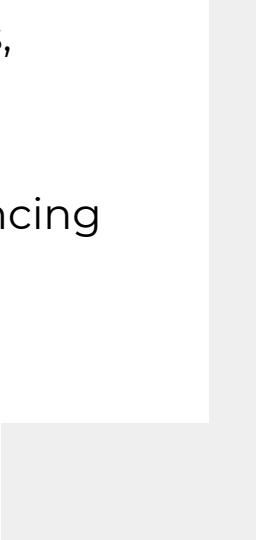
Dual Language Programs

Teachers at NES schools are reporting that emergent bilingual (EB) students are not receiving any language acquisition supports, small group instruction, or time to practice reading and phonics.

At some Dual Language schools, there are reports that students haven't received instruction in a language other than English since after Thanksgiving break.

Legal Options for Students, Families, and District Staff



- Parents, caregivers, and employees can pursue lawsuits or file federal complaints if their or their child's rights have been violated.
 - However there are drawbacks to legal routes, namely, the time and cost.
 - Additionally, these routes offer little relief for students, families, and staff who are experiencing harm on their school campuses every day.
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**What methods have
been successful at
ending state
takeovers?**





There are many factors that contribute to ending a takeover: social and political climate, public pressure, financial concerns, and more.

In instances in which school districts in large, urban areas have been taken over by the state, traditional legal routes (such as lawsuits and legal complaints) have typically not been the way local control is reestablished.

Instead, it is a combination of both **political advocacy** and **community organizing and activism**.

Case Study: Newark

- In 1995, the state of New Jersey took over the Newark Public School District in a hostile takeover that lasted for 25 years.
- In 2015 several events coalesced to create a “significant movement in the effort to regain local control” (Morel, 2018, p. 144).
- Those events included:
 - a group of students who organized a four-day sit-in in the district’s central office
 - a school walkout in which thousands of students participated and created significant traffic disruption
 - then-Governor Chris Christie’s desire to announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president



Source: [NJ.com](https://www.nj.com)

Case Study: Newark

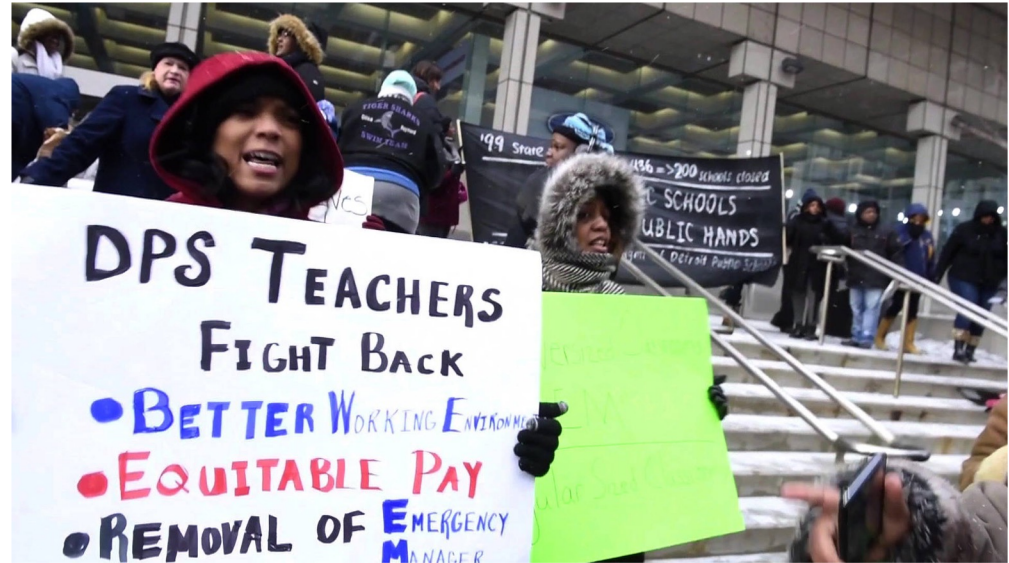
- In 2017, the district and state began talks about transitioning back to local governance.
- ***“If [return to local control] is achieved, it will be because of the political struggle of the community, which has involved the activism of students and community organizations, the role of the mayor, and the public resistance at school board meetings by parents and board members” (Morel, 2018, p. 145).***
- In 2020, the New Jersey State Board of Education voted unanimously to end state oversight of the district.



Source: [NJ.com](https://www.nj.com)

Case Study: Detroit

- Detroit Public Schools has been taken over twice: first from 1999–2005 and again from 2009–2016.
- At the time of the 1999 takeover, DPS had modestly increasing enrollment, a positive fund balance, and midrange scores on standard exams; under the reform board, the school district went from having a budget surplus to a \$200 million deficit.
- In 2004, Detroiters voted to end the takeover by a 2:1 margin.



Source: [Democracy Now!](#)

Case Study: Detroit

- In 2009, the state took control again.
- In 2012, more than 200 Detroit high school students were suspended for walking out of school to protest school conditions and closures.
- During the 2016 school year, teachers began protesting learning and working conditions with mass sickouts, effectively closing schools 14 different times.
- Teachers shut down 94 of Detroit's 97 public schools with these mass sickouts.
- At the time, teacher strikes were illegal under Michigan law. But in August 2016, a court ruled in the teachers' favor, saying the sickouts were politically motivated, and therefore protected under the First Amendment.



Source: [WSWS](#)

Case Study: Philadelphia

- Pennsylvania took control of the School District of Philadelphia in December 2001.
- State leaders cited financial distress and academic achievement as reasons for the takeover.
- However, in the years following the takeover, it was determined that “Part of the impetus for the state takeover was the opportunity for state leaders to test out market-based approaches to education, including charters, vouchers, and privatization” (Travers, 2003, p. 2).



Source: [The Nation](#).

Case Study: Philadelphia

- Under state control, there were thousands of layoffs—at one point including most or all secretaries, assistant principals, nurses, counselors, librarians, and classroom assistants—and dozens of neighborhood school closures.
- The district eliminated all sports, extracurricular and gifted programs, and money for books and supplies.
- This time period was also marked by a rapid expansion of charter schools. In the same year the district closed 24 schools, it expanded charter schools by more than 5,000 seats.



Source: [Streets Dept](#)

Case Study: Philadelphia

- In response to the takeover, there was a long campaign of resistance by Philadelphia citizens, including acts of civil disobedience by the Philadelphia Student Union.
- In 2016, a group of activists and community members created a coalition called Our City, Our Schools to pressure the mayor and governor to end the takeover.
- About 1,000 Philadelphia teachers staged a sickout in May 2016 to protest the fact that they had been working without a contract for more than four years under the district takeover.
- State control ended in November 2017, when the School Reform Commission (SRC) voted itself out of existence.



Source: [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

Advocacy Strategies



**Political
Advocacy**



**Grassroots
Organizing**

Grassroots Organizing

Students, families, and district staff in all of the case studies engaged in sustained, coordinated direct action campaigns.

In Houston, organizations such as HFT and Community Voices for Public Education (CVPE) are organizing students, families, teachers, and the community.

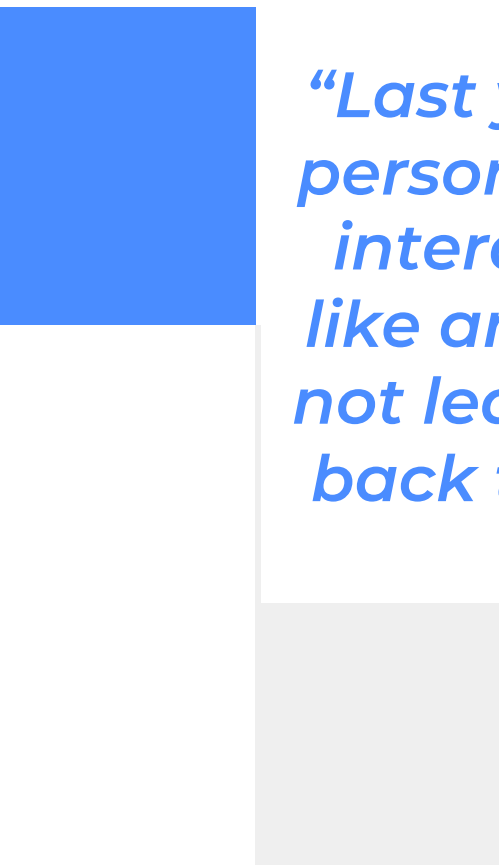
They have successfully organized protests, led social media campaigns, and raised public awareness about the negative impacts the takeover is having on Houston students and school staff.

Political Advocacy

In each of the three case studies, it was a combination of both community organizing **and** political advocacy that facilitated the ends of the takeovers.

Texas' next legislative session starts in January 2025, and there could be potential for legislation to limit or mitigate the powers of the Texas Education Agency to enact state takeovers of local districts.

There is hopeful news out of Tennessee, where state senators passed a bill that would remove the state's authority to take over schools. Although the bill ultimately didn't pass into law, it offers promise to communities around the country that legislative intervention is possible.



“Last year taught me how to be a better person. How to manage my time, how to interact with people better, how to act like an adult better. But this year, [...] I’m not learning anything. I just want it to go back to where I love school and want to be in school.”

—HISD High School Student

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