

The Last Hurrah

High-profile education-reform efforts to turn around big-city school districts have failed to produce lasting gains.

Will Houston be any different?

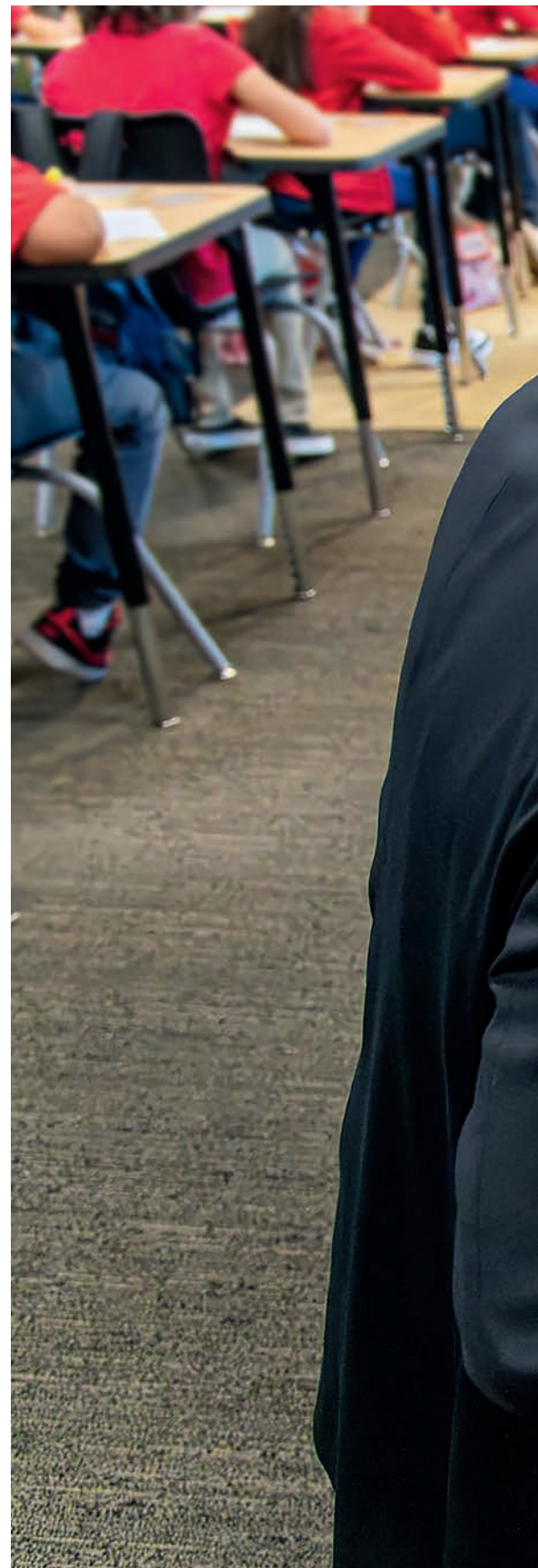
HOUSTON IS ED REFORM'S BETHLEHEM. Many of the most prominent efforts of the education reform movement, which for more than three decades has worked to reshape American public education, were born or nurtured there.

Some of the first Teach For America corps members were deployed to Houston, starting in 1991. Two years later, a pair of those early TFAers, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, opened their first KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) charter school. The KIPP network now runs 275 schools serving 120,000 students in 21 states and Washington, D.C.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, the signature education initiative of President George W. Bush, a former Texas governor, enshrined a federal mandate to hold schools accountable for student outcomes; since then, annual tests in reading and math have cast a long shadow over the public school experience of nearly every American child. Bush won the White House touting the "Texas miracle" in education, which he asserted had improved academic standards, test scores, and accountability in schools and led to higher graduation rates. Rod Paige, Bush's education secretary, was formerly the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District.

In sum, there's a Texas twang to much of the education reform movement. So, it was ironic, even a bit poignant,

By **ROBERT PONDISCIO**



HOUSTON ISD



Superintendent Mike Miles took the reins of Houston Independent School District in June 2023—to much fanfare and resistance—as part of a takeover by the Texas Education Agency.

to see it all come full circle with the announcement in March 2023, following years of legal wrangling, that the Texas Education Agency was ousting the Houston Independent School District's elected board and its superintendent, replacing them with nine new members and a leader appointed by Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath.

When the education reform movement was at its peak of power and prestige, an annual high point was the Broad Prize for Urban Education, established by philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad, who hoped to “restore America’s confidence in public schools, create an incentive to dramatically increase student achievement, and reward public school districts that are using innovative, results-oriented approaches to better educate students.” In addition to bragging rights as the best urban school system in America, the winning district received a million dollars to award college scholarships to graduating seniors.

The Houston ISD won the first-ever Broad Prize in 2002. Judges lauded the district for “using performance data to drive instruction and a commitment to supporting principals as strong instructional leaders.” In 2013, Houston won it again, this time for “increasing its graduation rate faster than other urban districts and improving college readiness.”

The following year the Broad Foundation announced it was suspending the competition because of “sluggish” academic progress. The judges couldn’t identify an urban school district anywhere in the nation that deserved the honor. A decade later its website says only that the Broad Prize for Urban Education is “taking a break.”

“Wholesale Systemic Reform”

There’s a reliable rhythm to big-city education reform. A high-profile figure is recruited, installed, and gets off to a strong start, shaking the bureaucracy from its indifference and complacency. Think Michelle Rhee in D.C., Cami Anderson in Newark, Denver’s Tom Boasberg, or Joel Klein in New York City, among others. But promising initial gains in student achievement prove evanescent or quickly plateau. Even when reform efforts succeed, conditions tend to regress to the mean under subsequent administrations.

“The rubber band almost always snaps back. Sadly, it is hard to think of a counterexample,” observes Chris Cerf, who was Klein’s chief transformation officer in New York City and later

Miles has no shortage of self-confidence, dismissing entirely the idea that big-city reform efforts are doomed to fail or fail to last.

the state-appointed superintendent of Newark Public Schools in New Jersey. “We made real progress in New York over the course of a decade. The same is unquestionably true in Newark. In both instances, however, the gains didn’t continue and many of the positive reforms were unwound.”

The man charged with breaking this gloomy pattern in Houston is F. Mike Miles. He boasts a glittering résumé, even by the standards of ed reform’s overachievers: West Point cadet, commissioned officer, and company commander with the elite Army Rangers. After leaving the military he joined the State Department as a Soviet analyst, served as a diplomat in Poland, and then became special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to Russia. He holds advanced degrees from Columbia and the University of California, Berkeley.

Switching to a career in education, Miles led the Dallas Independent School District for three years, the Harrison School District in Colorado Springs for six more, then founded and led Third Future Schools, a charter school network that specializes in turning around chronically struggling schools. It was there that Miles formed many of the ideas he’s now attempting to graft onto the Houston ISD, the nation’s eighth-largest public school district.

The phrase “hard-charging” has attached itself to Miles as a frozen epithet. His military background conjures an image of an intimidating drillmaster prone to barking orders at underlings. Yet, in public at least, he is soft-spoken, his demeanor almost courtly, not given to pounding the table or windy motivational speeches. He walked in the door on June 1, 2023, however, not to cajole, negotiate, or forge consensus for change among Houston’s administrators, principals, and teachers. Rather, he came to impose an instructional model built largely at Third Future onto a school district where 4th- and 8th-grade reading and math scores had fallen well behind

not just national and Texas state averages but also those posted by other large urban districts across the country.

The transition has been “very difficult,” one of his lieutenants acknowledged a few months into the 2023–24 school year. “Even for people who buy into the person of Mike Miles, the



Former big-district chiefs Michelle Rhee (D.C.), Cami Anderson (Newark), Tom Boasberg (Denver), and Joel Klein (New York) ushered in substantial school reforms, many of which did not endure.

(LEFT TO RIGHT) UPI/ALAMY/KEVIN DIETSCH, CAMI ANDERSON, GETTY IMAGES, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

model is unique. It requires a lot of change.” There’s also no small number of skeptics, critics, and district defectors who have *not* bought into Miles or his system, which he dubbed the “New Education System,” or NES. Between August 2023 and January 2024, 633 teachers resigned from Houston ISD, according to Houston Public Media, nearly double the rate of teacher resignations from that same time period in 2022–23. “I do believe that is because of the way that teachers are being treated,” said Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers.

Now in his late 60s, Miles is at least a decade older than many members of the best and brightest generation from ed reform’s early 2000s heyday, and twice the age at which many of them rose to prominence. But like those OG reformers, he has no shortage of self-confidence, dismissing entirely the idea

“autonomy without accountability” meant a school district that was hailed as a national model when some of its current high school juniors and seniors were in elementary school now had “no unifying vision for improving the quality of instruction.”

In March, the district held a two-day conference seemingly aimed at countering the negative publicity that has dogged Miles and the state takeover from day one. Addressing an invited audience of superintendents and chief academic officers from other Texas school districts, policy analysts, nonprofit executives, and leaders of civic organizations, Miles described at length his vision of “wholesale systemic reform.” His efforts have involved reorganizing central office support systems and Houston ISD’s school feeder patterns; revamping budgeting, transportation, and operations systems; expanding professional development for teachers; and creating a new “Principal Academy” to build an NES-aligned leadership pipeline.

While previous generations of big-city reformers have tended to favor merit pay for high-performing teachers, Miles uses what he calls the “hospital model” of differentiated pay based on roles.

“Not all doctors get paid the same. They bring a different value,” he explained. “A brain surgeon or heart surgeon gets paid much more than a general practitioner, and they should.” Similarly, a skilled 3rd-grade reading teacher adds more value than an electives teacher coaching basketball. “Nobody wants to say that,” Miles told the hand-picked conference attendees. “But I’m saying it.”

Accordingly, the starting salary for electives teachers in NES elementary schools is \$64,000.

A first-year 3rd-grade teacher of English language arts earns \$83,000; the highest starting elementary-school salary is \$86,000 for a special education teacher. High school math and English teachers can start as high as \$90,000. Teachers in NES schools also receive a \$10,000 stipend. “We’re trying to have a paradigm shift, very similar to Dallas,” a district that Miles previously ran, explains Monica Zdrojewski, Miles’s deputy chief of staff. The hospital model is the first shift; the second is performance pay tied to a teacher-evaluation system that potentially allows NES teachers to earn even more.

The staffing model also de-emphasizes the traditional focus on a master’s degree as a gateway to teaching. Miles notes the single biggest cost associated with NES schools is the large number of



Teachers, parents, and students like Elizabeth Rodriguez (holding sign) immediately protested the state’s takeover of Houston ISD and new superintendent Mike Miles’s agenda in June 2023.

that big-city reform efforts are doomed to fail or fail to last. Past turnaround efforts “weren’t wholesale systemic reform,” he insists. It’s a phrase he uses often, encompassing not just shifts in instructional approach but also a raft of changes in district systems, staffing, compensation, and teacher evaluation. In February 2024, amid declining student enrollment, Miles’s staff released an “efficiency report” detailing “wasteful spending,” “extreme overtime abuse,” repeated granting of outside contracts for work that might have been performed in house, and “dysfunctional” transportation and human resource systems. A press release accompanying the report criticized “a morass of curricula and programs that were not linked to any particular standards of quality.” Houston ISD’s culture of

“teacher apprentices” and “learning coaches” who have been hired—one teacher apprentice for every 100 students, one learning coach for every 75. Teacher apprentices routinely cover classroom-teacher absences. “Our staffing model is designed to make sure the kids get high-quality instruction every day,” Miles says. “You can’t do that without a ready substitute who knows the [NES] model, who knows the kids, who knows the instruction, who’s been there every day following along.” In fact, when he visits schools and there’s a “TA” leading the class, Miles says, “I don’t know the difference. I have to ask the principal, ‘Is that a TA, a teacher, or, in some cases, a learning coach?’”

For all of its disruption to systems, staffing, and compensation, the heart of the NES effort—and the source of some of the greatest friction—are the changes it’s imposed in curriculum and classroom instruction. For the 2023–24 school year, 28 chronically low-performing Houston ISD schools were obliged to follow the NES instructional model; another 57 voluntarily adopted it. In the 2024–25 academic year, another 45 are expected to join, bringing the total to 130 NES schools out of 274 schools under Houston ISD control—although even schools not adopting the model formally are transforming their instruction. On social media, nervous parent groups insist Miles intends to force every school, including high-performing high schools and magnet schools, to adopt the NES model, but district officials insist it’s not so. Zdrojewski has attended every monthly meeting Miles holds with the district’s 274 principals. “He’s been really clear in all of those conversations that NES is not the right model for everyone,” she says. “We have schools that are some of the top schools in the nation. We have no interest in trying to take any of their autonomy from them.”

But Houston, Miles says often, is a tale of two districts. “The number-one variable in raising student achievement is improving the quality of instruction,” says Sandi Massey, Houston ISD’s chief of leadership and professional development, on whom Miles leans heavily to drive the culture shift and to build the leadership and talent pipeline Houston will need if wholesale systemic change is to have its intended effect. Massey worked with Miles in Dallas, in Colorado, and at Third Future, where she was executive director and chief of schools. “I understand the Commander’s Intent,” she quips, employing a military metaphor and alluding to Miles’s C.V. It’s a concept developed by the U.S. Army in the 1980s, imported to the business world, and popularized by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in their 2007 bestseller *Made to Stick*, a guide to communicating ideas. “CI is a crisp, plain-talk statement that appears at the top of every order, specifying the plan’s goal, the desired end-state of an operation,” they wrote. “The CI never specifies so much detail that it risks being rendered obsolete by unpredictable events. . . . It align[s] the behavior of soldiers at all levels without requiring play-by-play instruction from their leaders.”

“Commander’s Intent” does not apply to schools operating under NES. Lessons are centrally prepared and distributed to

While previous generations of big-city reformers have tended to favor merit pay for high-performing teachers, Miles uses what he calls the “hospital model” of differentiated pay based on roles.

schools. Contrary to a common misperception, those lessons are not scripted, but they are prescriptive. Teachers can adapt and customize the district-provided PowerPoint slide decks, but they cannot change the lessons’ aims or lower the targeted standards. The pace of instruction is tightly managed. The first 45 minutes of an NES lesson is teacher-led direct instruction, followed by a 10-minute mini-assessment, or “demonstration of learning,” which everyone from Miles and Massey to classroom teachers shortens to DOL. Akin to an “exit ticket,” it’s intended to provide instant feedback to teachers about students’ grasp of a lesson’s goal. DOLs are logged by teachers daily and tracked by the district—offering a glimpse into how students are doing in nearly real time. In contrast, data from interim assessments or state tests can take weeks or months to return results that are already outdated by the time they’re received.

Based on their instant evaluation of the DOL, teachers sort students into skill-level groups for the next 35 minutes, according to a system dubbed LSAE: Students who are struggling to grasp the lesson objectives are said to be L for “learners.” The next level up is S, for students who either are “securing” (S1) or have “secured” (S2) the material. L and S students stay in the classroom for a reteach or additional help from the teacher. If a student scores at level A, or “accelerated,” it means “not only do I get it, but I could probably teach you about this concept,” Massey explains. E (enrichment) students are targeted for higher-level work. “It doesn’t happen often, but an E student could literally teach the concept to the class.” Once the teacher grades the DOL, the A and E students depart the classroom to spend the next 35 minutes in a school library or other room known as a “team center,” where they work alone or in pairs on higher-level material.

Teacher moves within NES lessons are similarly prescribed. When the system was rolled out, Miles and his team faced derision for requiring teachers to stop every four minutes to employ one of eight “multiple response strategies” (MRS) including a “table talk” discussing or debating with classmates, or a “think-pair-share” aimed at getting students talking to each other about the lesson content. Alternative techniques include asking students to write answers to questions or solve problems on individual response cards or whiteboards. MRS activities “keep the entire

class engaged,” Massey says. “It also forces us to know, as adults, ‘Do my students know the objective?’ If I’m having everyone write, everyone read, everyone think and talk, I have a better idea of which students in my class know the objective.”

Massey also asserts that discipline problems are down in NES schools. “The pace is fast. It keeps kids on track and keeps them from getting in trouble,” she says.

“We didn’t buy a program. We didn’t pay for a bunch of consultants. I don’t even think we did a lot of professional development around it,” Miles adds. “And lo and behold, our discipline is way down. Go figure.”

Miles and Massey speak often of their goal to ensure “high-quality instruction for every student, every day.” But the NES lesson architecture hints at another objective that goes largely unspoken: to ensure a basic level of teacher competence and a consistent student experience within and across Houston’s poorest-performing schools. The sophisticated-sounding language of “multiple response strategies” belies the fact that performing frequent checks for understanding is something competent teachers do constantly,

even reflexively. As Doug Lemov explains in his seminal manual, *Teach Like a Champion*, asking questions and calling on engaged students who raise their hands or asking, “Does everybody get it?” and moving on when students nod is typical teacher behavior, but it’s not necessarily effective. Student self-report, he writes, “is notoriously inaccurate,” particularly among novices who don’t know what they don’t know. Several of the demonstration-of-learning assessments or multiple response strategies baked into NES lessons are described in practice, if called by different names, in Lemov’s “taxonomy” of effective teaching techniques. The steady stream of MRS activities collectively increases the likelihood that teachers will be cognizant of student misapprehension and intervene appropriately. And while some teachers might bridle at having to implement centrally produced curricula, doing so guards against gaps and repetitions within and across grades—or even between schools, which is important since low-income urban students tend to be highly mobile.

Likewise, while it’s generally agreed that differentiated instruction helps boost student outcomes, it’s a practice more honored in



Houston ISD’s chief of leadership and professional development Sandi Massey is a veteran of Mike Miles’s military style of leadership, having worked with him in Dallas, Colorado, and at Third Future. She recognizes high-quality instruction as the “Commander’s Intent.”

the breach than the observance, particularly in low-performing schools where teachers might have poor classroom-management skills and where small-group work is an invitation to student misbehavior or non-effort. More than eight in 10 teachers responding to a national survey commissioned by the Fordham Institute, for example, said differentiated instruction was “very” or “somewhat” difficult to implement. In essence, the LSAE system operationalizes differentiated instruction, building it into the school day’s culture, structure, and schedule so it cannot be avoided or implemented half-heartedly.

When I asked Miles if the point of NES lessons isn’t simply to ensure a base level of instructional competence—no mean feat, particularly in low-performing schools—he cannot suppress a grin. “I’ve said similar things to the teachers and principals. ‘This is not really that new, guys. It’s how it’s put together that’s different.’” The effort to focus teacher time and energy and instruction and evaluation also means “taking away tasks from teachers that other people can do. They don’t make copies. We have people that make the lesson plans for them,” Miles says.

“I’m not really selling innovation. I’m selling wholesale systemic change.”

“2035 Competencies”

Some changes embedded in the NES system, however, are more speculative and stand on shakier empirical ground. Miles himself cites one significant exception to his claim of “selling change; not innovation”: a class imported directly from Third Future Schools called “The Art of Thinking.” While previous education reformers tended to talk up wage gaps and the imperative of college attendance, Miles seldom talks about college at all. But he speaks often and with zeal about workplace readiness; he invokes “2035 competencies” almost as often as wholesale systemic reform. “We don’t want to relegate them to a low-skills gig economy,” he says. “I don’t see the country doing much about that.” The Art of Thinking is central to his vision.

“This is the last generation of kids in America before the skills gap is locked in. I believe that,” Miles told the March conference attendees at the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center, Houston ISD’s headquarters. “We’ve always had an achievement gap in this country. Now they have an additional problem,” he said, noting that more than 80 percent of Houston’s students are Hispanic or Black. “They need information literacy, critical thinking, how to work in teams, how to work with AI [artificial intelligence]. Those are the things they’re going to need in 2035,” the year Houston’s current crop of 1st graders will graduate from high school.

Miles is not wrong to say that those who are able to think critically and solve problems will have an edge in the workplace. However, it’s less than certain that the “art of thinking” can be learned, practiced, and mastered. University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham has long noted that decades of research have pointed out that problem solving and critical

When the system was rolled out, Miles and his team faced derision for requiring teachers to stop every four minutes to employ one of eight “multiple response strategies.”

thinking can’t really be taught. They’re not transferable skills like riding a bike—once you learn how, you can ride nearly any bike. “The processes of thinking are intertwined with the content of thought,” Willingham explains. “If you remind a student to ‘look at an issue from multiple perspectives’ often enough, he will learn that he ought to do so, but if he doesn’t know much about an issue, he can’t think of it from multiple perspectives.”

The Art of Thinking, and Miles’s thinking about it, harkens back to the “21st Century Skills” movement, which was also framed as a necessary response to the changing landscape of the workforce and society. It emphasized the need for students to develop skills beyond traditional academic subjects, particularly in critical thinking and problem solving; communication; creativity and innovation; and collaboration and teamwork. While these attributes are attractive to employers and seem to offer a safe harbor to schools and teachers uncertain about the knowledge and skills students will need to thrive a decade or more from now, assessing them is challenging. Developing them is harder still.

Prioritizing these skills at the expense of foundational academic knowledge represents a significant risk, particularly since, Miles noted, class time for The Art of Thinking is coming at the expense of social studies and science. Neglecting core academic subjects, which provide essential building blocks for future learning and success, could paradoxically backfire, leaving students less able to solve problems and engage in higher-order thinking. At the March conference, I raised this issue with Miles, who answered that students in the early grades “don’t have enough content knowledge or experience. . . . But as you’re going along in life, you’re going to get that content knowledge, and if you can apply the critical thinking skills to that content, you’ll get practice in that skill.” He added that he didn’t know of “any research or anybody that has presented a good argument that we should not be doing this for kids.”

To be sure, Miles is not alone in his faith. At least two states, Delaware and New Jersey, have mandated instruction in “information literacy” for students, starting in kindergarten. The subject covers topics such as the research process, building critical thinking skills, and learning to discern “the difference between facts, points of view and opinions,” according to the New Jersey School Board Association. But there is good reason

to be skeptical about the value of such instruction.

Miles counters that we can't "keep doing what we did in the 1950s. The world has moved on. How about we think creatively and think differently? Maybe at least consider the changing world and what we do about it? This is a big bet, but it's the right bet for kids. Until some legislature tells me I can't, we're going to do this."

Climate Change

A significant difference, seldom commented on, between the takeover of the Houston ISD and previous high-profile attempts to pull big-city school districts out of their nosedives is the climate and conditions under which those efforts take place. Mayflies live longer than Mike Miles's honeymoon period with Houston

This year, "they're not relating to us at all," said one student. "This is not fun," said another. "I feel like I'm in prison." A former Houston ISD principal said Miles is instilling a "culture of fear." The district's largest teachers union mounted a picket to protest the reforms. At a September board meeting, members of the audience set alarms on their phones to go off every four minutes to mock the NES requirement that teachers stop every four minutes to do a multiple response strategy, which conjured up images of timers ringing on a fast-food deep fryer to goad a Pavlovian response from low-skill McTeachers. Nor did it help that the takeover was marked by what one former Houston ISD board member described as a series of unforced errors. Early on, district-made curriculum units were riddled with errors, and poor communications led to national news stories erroneously



YI-CHIN LEE / HOUSTON CHRONICLE VIA AP

At the district's board meeting in October 2023, attendees don fake Pinocchio noses in response to Miles's comments about principal evaluations. The month before, the audience set phone alarms to ring every four minutes in mockery of teachers' MRS requirements.

media, parents, and other stakeholders.

The Texas Education Agency took over Houston ISD on June 1, 2023. From day one, teachers, parents, and community leaders vocally opposed Miles and his agenda. A group calling itself Community Voices for Public Education organized protests, petitions, and testimonials from parents and teachers decrying what they saw as the "tired old script from 2012," and asserting that NES was leaving children "overwhelmed, crying, and complaining."

claiming that Miles was turning school libraries into detention centers for misbehaving students.

It's likely that Miles's NES approach would have received a warmer reception, or at least more forbearance, had it been launched a generation ago. There was a time, now increasingly a distant memory among the elder leaders of education reform, when the movement was perceived as a crusade led by nationally known figures whose halos shined brightly. At the zenith of its power, prestige, and moral authority, ed reform was *hot*.

Graduates of elite universities applied to Teach For America in boxcar numbers—more than 57,000 applicants at the program's high-water mark in 2013—eager to devote at least two years of their lives to inner city classrooms, even if it was just to burnish their law school applications or to help them stand out among corporate recruiters from McKinsey and Wall Street.

Ed reform embodied youthful energy and do-gooder earnestness and enjoyed bipartisan support buoyed up by national embarrassment over persistent achievement gaps between white children and students of color. There was a broad consensus that even as American education remained stuck in the doldrums, the performance of urban public schools had been so bad for so long that the only unthinkable course of action was inaction.

Media coverage of reform efforts and its leading figures was credulous, bordering on hagiography. *Time* magazine put D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee on its cover. Mike Wallace, the most fearsome and intimidating interviewer of his generation, hosted an effusive *60 Minutes* segment on KIPP's founders, Mike Feinberg and David Levin. When the duo were given a prime time spot at the 2000 Republican National Convention to show off their school and students, CBS re-aired the piece. Film critic Roger Ebert gave an enthusiastic "thumbs up" to the ed reform documentary *Waiting for Superman*, which he said showed "our schools don't work." If the U.S. would just spend less on war and prisons and more on education, Ebert wrote, "in 20 years, you would have more useful citizens, less crime, and no less national security. It's so simple."

The Clock Is Ticking

"I'm old and I don't care," responds Miles when asked about the unrelenting and often intemperate criticism he and his agenda have faced since he arrived last year. But occasionally the mask slips. Midway through the school year, I accompanied him on visits to several NES schools, including Bruce Elementary, which is led by Lauren Hooks, a 17-year veteran principal. She has traded her office for a wheeled cart piled with paperwork and her laptop computer, which she pushes through the halls while on instructional rounds. In one classroom, Miles and Hooks watched kids take their "DOLs" while a digital timer projected onto the whiteboard counted down the 10 minutes allotted for the assessment. Days before, a local TV reporter had challenged Miles about the timers and the pace of instruction in NES schools, which the reporter described as "a major concern" among students, parents, and teachers. "In one case a little girl tells me that she cries because she is afraid of failing. Are you going to address those pressures?" the reporter wanted to know. The exchange was clearly on Miles's mind as he and Hooks exited the classroom. "You don't see kids crying.

You don't see them stressed out," he said to no one in particular in the hallway. "I mean, that's silly." Regardless, he said, "DOLs are not going away."

The clock is also ticking for Mike Miles, whose time atop the district is tied to the fortunes of Texas governor Greg Abbott and his education commissioner Mike Morath. When Miles was the Dallas school superintendent, he was quoted in the paper saying he was going to die there. "He's not going to die in Houston. He knows that he's got a relatively short runway," says Dale Chu, a veteran ed reformer who consulted for Miles and Houston ISD shortly after the state takeover. "He wants to do as much as he can to change the direction of this aircraft carrier so that for the next person, OK, it may shift again, but hopefully not way off course like the past several years."

As the 2023–24 school year wound down, the pressure on



Lauren Hooks, principal of Bruce Elementary in Houston, is tasked with monitoring the progress of teachers and students who use Miles's NES approach.

Miles and his team appeared to be reaching a crescendo, even a breaking point. Democratic state lawmakers were demanding an investigation following news reports that alleged Miles's Third Future Schools funneled millions of dollars' worth of Texas state education funds to schools the organization ran in Colorado. In May, a storm caused power outages that closed schools for several days; when they reopened, parents complained that some campuses were without air conditioning as the temperature hit 90 degrees outside. Financial troubles loom: Houston ISD enrollment has declined by more than 14 percent since 2020 and federal Covid relief has ended, contributing to a revenue

A resolution from the Houston Federation of Teachers described the state takeover as “a politically motivated, irresponsible experiment that is worsening inequities and disenfranchising Houston voters.”

shortfall of more than half a billion dollars, as Miles and his team seek to increase spending on NES turnaround schools. They’ve proposed a multibillion-dollar bond package, Houston’s first in more than a decade, to enhance school security, replace portable classrooms, and improve the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems. “No trust, no bond,” responded Jackie Anderson, the president of Houston Federation of Teachers, whose members approved a vote of no confidence in Miles. The resolution described the state takeover as “a politically motivated, irresponsible experiment that is worsening inequities and disenfranchising Houston voters.”

In ed reform’s glory days, closing the achievement gap in places like New York, Boston, or New Orleans was catnip to a generation of leaders and framed as “the civil rights battle of our generation.” Big-city school reform wasn’t just big game, it was the only game. Charter schools were in their infancy. Vouchers were a boutique option existing mostly in the dreams of Milton Friedman acolytes. Homeschooling was a fringe pursuit. And who had even heard of a “microschool”? Today, nearly a dozen states have adopted universal education savings accounts, essentially vouchers that allow motivated parents to exit public school systems altogether and take most of their child’s share of state education dollars out the door with them. If Texas goes ESA, as Abbott has vowed, nearly a third of American families will have access to this novel form of public education finance and delivery. Among many red state Republicans, who often view traditional public schools as irredeemable cauldrons of “woke” indoctrination, ESAs have become the preferred remedy for public education. Democrats, meanwhile, have rekindled their long romance with public sector unions. They are eager to “support public schools” and teachers, but not necessarily hold them accountable for student outcomes. None of this bodes well for Houston or for the future of big-city school district reform, already uphill work. “There’s a conspiracy theory going around that Mike is deliberately torpedoing things so that it’ll increase the appetite for vouchers,” Chu told me. “It’s all part of Governor Abbott’s broader plan.”

When the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress scores were released, the average score for students in New York

City was not significantly different from the average in 2003, two years after Joel Klein became schools chancellor. Ditto Chicago. The percentage of Denver 8th graders scoring below basic has grown on each of the last three administrations of NAEP. Last September, only 19 percent of Newark 3rd graders passed the state’s reading exam, unchanged from the year before. Low-income Black and brown students may be better off today in D.C. and New Orleans than their parents were a generation ago, but sustained gains are mostly attributable to the rapid expansion of charter schools in those cities.

One would be hard-pressed to name a former ed reform hot spot, or any major urban public school system, in better shape today than 25 years ago. But the biggest problem for Mike Miles and his team, a problem resistant and perhaps even immune to wholesale systemic reform, is that quietly, persistently, almost imperceptibly, the consensus and constituency for big-city reform is disappearing. The loudest and most influential stakeholders are teachers, administrators, and well-off parents with significant political and social capital whose interests are mostly being served. The low-income families who comprise the majority of students and parents in the nation’s urban cores have the most at stake, but far less clout.

A few weeks before the end of the school year, the *Houston Chronicle*, the city’s largest newspaper, published an op-ed from a former Houston ISD board member and parent who said she “initially encouraged Houstonians to be open to the state takeover and its potential benefits.” But she stopped defending it after becoming convinced Miles and the state-appointed board are “wreaking havoc on schools that didn’t need fixing.” The op-ed ran in mid-May, after students sat for state reading and math tests, but weeks before the first test results under Mike Miles’s NES system would be known. The headline on the op-ed read, “We’ve seen enough.”

If parents, politicians, philanthropists, and the news media have grown impatient with urban public-school reform, not even waiting for measurable outcomes before pronouncing the entire enterprise a failure—too disruptive, too disrespectful of teachers, too stressful for children—who is the constituency left for big-city reform? Who is left to champion change for the vast majority of children who, even in an emerging era of increasing choice, are likely to remain in urban public schools and struggle to read or do math at a reasonable standard, limiting their future opportunities and life prospects? A senior member of Miles’s team, a veteran ed reformer, noted that the local business community is still strongly supportive of Miles and his NES agenda. But like other members of Miles’s leadership team, she sounded exhausted after the year of turmoil, backlash, and bitterness in the wake of the state takeover.

“There’s no grace for people doing hard things,” she said.

Robert Pondiscio is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of How the Other Half Learns (Avery, 2019).