



How to Run a School District Without Really Telling

*Despite Mike Miles's strong track record as an urban superintendent,
his book forgets to explain how he's done it*

By **FREDERICK M. HESS**



MIKE MILES HAS been superintendent of Houston Independent School District since 2023, when he was appointed following a state takeover. With earlier stints in Dallas and the Harrison School District in Colorado Springs, and some promising early results in HISD, Miles may be the closest thing we have to a superstar superintendent today. Now, he's ready to share the secrets of his success, which he has done in *By Design: How to Transform School Systems*.

Over the decades, urban education has boasted a parade of dynamic reformers promising transformational change. Since the turn of the century, observers have celebrated game-changing victories in locales including Atlanta, New York City, San Diego, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, Newark, Houston (pre-Miles), Washington, D.C., and others. Sadly, few of these “transformative” efforts ultimately delivered much transformation. Instead, the constant churning only fueled a weary cynicism about reform.

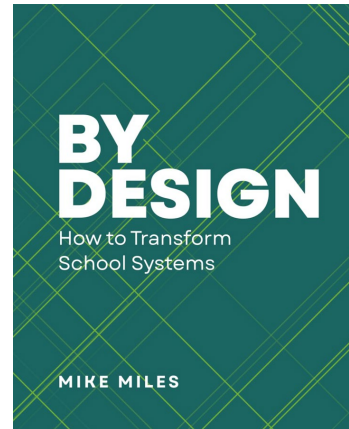
In *By Design*, Miles promises a path out of this dismal pattern. He confidently makes the case for the importance of all-at-once change, pointing to the stratagem he deployed upon landing at Houston as the proof point. But, while Miles's prescriptive changes have garnered much interest, *By Design* has little to say about them. It's heavier on principle than practice, making it tough to grasp how Miles's approach translates from the page.

For those seeking a sensible way to think about district leadership, Miles offers much to like. For starters, he's willing to call out the habitual reluctance of education leaders to anger constituencies or disturb routines. He laments that leaders "are trained to search for strategies, programs, and best practices" and argues for a more fundamental rethinking "about how systems themselves are designed to function." He points out that incremental change tends to yield "new expectations layered onto old designs" and that reformers are hobbled by "incentives built for stability rather than performance." He argues that the solution isn't a "secret sauce," "huge investments," or "heroics" but a "commitment to working systematically."

By Design is a manual for that systematic work, featuring clear prose, a textbook layout, and discussion questions. The advice is all sensible enough; it's just more conceptual than concrete. Miles's core contention is that leaders too often focus on operational changes instead of the kind of system transformation that would reset the organizational incentives shaping educational routines and culture. As he puts it, "operational changes focus on what people do: programs, schedules, tools, training, and processes" while "systemic change focuses on how the system works."

What does systematic—or, in Miles's terms, "whole-scale"—reform look like? In Houston, it has meant requiring 87 schools to immediately adopt comprehensive changes to "curriculum, instructional model, evaluation, compensation, instructional feedback, staffing, class schedule, oversight, operations, and accountability." Whew! Journalists who've visited those schools have described the scope and specificity of the prescribed changes. Unfortunately, none of that really comes through in *By Design*. Miles never offers much sense of what's changed in schools or classrooms. He alludes to templates, guidebooks, and implementation plans, but those aren't reproduced. Would-be imitators will be hard-pressed to determine just what the so-called design entails.

Rather than wade into details, Miles wants to stick to his conceptual message: Improvement requires establishing "foundational principles" of system behavior and design principles that can produce a paradigm shift in which "beliefs, assumptions, and mental models" change. For instance, in HISD, Miles's first principle was that "instructional quality would become the primary driver of student performance." This meant "standardiz[ing] expectations" and adopting "uniform procedures" over the objections of previously autonomous magnet schools. It involved clarifying leadership roles, making principal supervisors reapply for their jobs, providing on-the-job coaching, and monitoring performance. This all seems sensible, though the absence of any detail makes it tough to judge how different it really is from what many other districts have attempted.



By Design: How to Transform School Systems

by Mike Miles

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Miles does offer instructive examples of his approach in a couple instances. The year before he took over, 17 percent of Houston's teachers were chronically absent. In response, Miles and his team "clearly outlined attendance expectations for all staff." The district did away with the "docked-day practice," under which teachers were simply docked a day's pay if they exceeded their 10 allowable absences. HR started to cross-check staff attendance against principals' records, and the legal department got off the bench and into the game. Miles doesn't offer particulars on implementation or exactly what the lawyers started to do, but the sense of taking action leaves the reader feeling reasonably good about the approach.

Such concrete illustrations are sparse, however. That's a problem. After all, if Miles's charge is that leaders fail because they pursue change the wrong way, it's important to illustrate clearly what it means to apply his design principles the *right* way. Unfortunately, his recipe for escaping the "Pivot Lock Point" (where organizations value "adult comfort over student achievement") is frustratingly vague. For instance, he identifies 25 paradigm shifts that are at the heart of his work in Houston. These range from "transformation begins with systemic change" to "change must be pursued with urgency" to "compensation must be tied to what the organization values most."

The shifts all seem generally laudable. But it was unclear how to tell when a possible change would constitute an operational distraction Miles warns against as opposed to a crucial component of systematic change. For instance, Miles warns leaders not to lean too heavily on individuals at the expense of systems, but he also emphasizes the importance of hiring strong, aligned leaders. He says leaders shouldn't get distracted by small-ball changes to schedules and tools, but also that schedules and tools need to be aligned with institutional priorities in a systematic fashion. Presumably Miles has learned how to get this balance right, but it's not obvious that readers will come away similarly equipped.

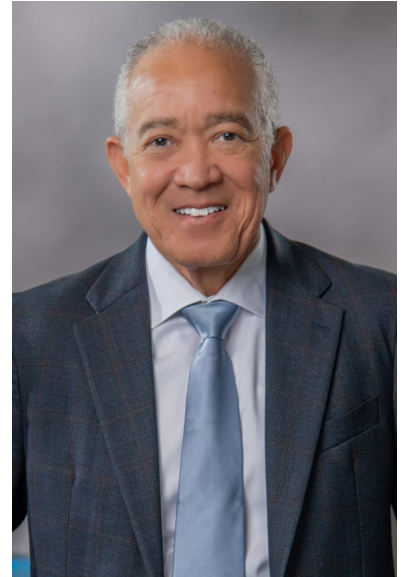
As a longtime student of school reform, I sometimes struggled to understand what Miles deems distinctive about his approach. He emphasizes the import of clear academic goals that can force hard decisions. Yet the goals he shares felt pretty familiar, including: "The district will significantly narrow achievement gaps," and "Students will graduate prepared for a Year 2035 world and workplace," and "Students will be prepared to work in a world where artificial intelligence is ubiquitous." I've known a *lot* of superintendents who articulated similar goals. So, what makes the *By Design* approach uniquely effective? While I appreciate *any* author urging education leaders to make tough decisions, it wasn't obvious how these goals help with that.

By Design reminded me of a once-prominent 2010 book by Michael Barber, who drew on his celebrated tenure as head of the British prime minister's "Delivery Unit" (and subsequent work as a consultant) to pen *Deliverology 101: A Field Guide For Educational Leaders*. Barber, too, had much to say about clear goals, coherence, incentives, and accountability. That book, touted by the likes of Joel Klein and Tony Blair, created a stir and benefited from prominent adherents in major districts—only later to join the annals of momentary enthusiasms since discarded. When reading *By Design*, I kept wanting to ask, "Is this *Deliverology 2.0*? Or is there something Barber got wrong that Miles is seeking to correct?" I never got an answer.

Many previous authors have sought to distill lessons from successful urban reform (Heather Zavadsky, Tony Bryk), to explain why reformers get stuck (Charles Payne, Jeff Henig, Richard Elmore), or to offer blueprints for transformation (Paul Hill, Linda Darling-Hammond). Miles never acknowledges or alludes

to any of this work, though, making it tough to know what he thinks his predecessors got wrong. I suppose he'd charge them with thinking operationally rather than systematically, but that's not an especially satisfying explanation for the futility of generations of acclaimed reformers.

Heck, a quarter-century ago, Don McAdams wrote the terrific *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools . . . and Winning!* about a bold reform push in [checks notes] Houston. That effort also emphasized clear goals, coherence, system alignment, and accountability. It produced some impressive results, won the Broad Prize for Urban Education, and helped make Superintendent Rod Paige the U.S. Secretary of Education. Other veteran reformers have offered first-hand lessons drawn from heralded efforts, including former New York City chancellor Joel Klein's *Lessons of Hope* and former San Diego supe Alan Bersin's *Tilting at Windmills*. Today, those once-lauded efforts are treated as momentary blips on the reform radar. Miles misses the chance not only to point out those earlier temporary successes but also to show readers why his are different—and more durable. That's unfortunate, because discussing it would've given Miles the opportunity to clarify precisely what makes his approach so different from all that came before.



Superintendent Mike Miles

Perhaps Miles has cracked the code. But he only assumed his post three years ago—too short an amount of time to assess whether his playbook really is game-changing. Readers will do well to ask how much stock to put in Houston's early outcomes; whether Miles's early success may be partly a product of the governance dynamic created by the state takeover; and if they've been presented a new path or more of a new vocabulary for a relatively familiar suite of strategies.

The abstraction makes it hard to know what Miles deems essential, what constitutes a “transformative” change in compensation or culture, or how leaders can make all the pieces of wholesale reform mesh together. It doesn't help that *By Design* elides the political and organizational challenges that have brought down so many prior reforms, with nothing to say about how Miles has surmounted them. Indeed, Miles flatly dismisses any notion that his bold agenda required the state takeover of Houston, asserting that it's simply a matter of mindset and can be replicated anywhere.

I have studied urban school reform for three decades and long ago concluded two things: (1) real improvement requires fundamentally rewiring these systems, and (2) wave upon wave of reformers have sought to do this rewiring, been lauded for their success, and then eventually seen those same systems implacably shrug off their efforts. Does *By Design* offer the solution? I hope so, but I'm not yet placing any bets. **E**

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