**Headline:** What a Podcast Killed by Houston Public Media Reveals About the State Takeover of the City’s Schools

**Teaser:** While “The Takeover” features balanced reporting, it largely frames the takeover of Houston schools as the latest iteration of the failed education reform movement.

By Jeff Bryant

**Author Bio:** This article was produced by [Our Schools](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/). Jeff Bryant is a writing fellow and chief correspondent for Our Schools. He is a communications consultant, freelance writer, advocacy journalist, and director of the Education Opportunity Network, a strategy and messaging center for progressive education policy. His award-winning commentary and reporting routinely appear in prominent online news outlets, and he speaks frequently at national events about public education policy. Follow him on BlueSky [@jeffbinnc](https://bsky.app/profile/jeffbinnc.bsky.social).

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**[Article Body:]**

A podcast about the state takeover of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), which Houston Public Media (HPM) produced, promoted, and then quietly [killed before it debuted](https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/shows/the-takeover/), has been shared with Our Schools. “The Takeover,” hosted by Dominic Walsh, an award-winning public education journalist, examines the takeover, the state’s installation of a new board and a controversial superintendent Mike Miles, and the subsequent series of reforms Miles rolled out that have frustrated and angered teachers, parents, and students.

Our Schools has thoroughly examined the recordings to ensure their authenticity and is reporting on the contents of each episode so that readers are better informed about the consequences of the state takeover of Texas’s largest school district—the eighth-largest district in the nation. We have decided not to make the podcast public for legal reasons.

In four episodes of what was meant to be Season One of the podcast, Walsh covers events that took place in the school year 2023-2024, beginning with the [secret ceremony](https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/texas/who-is-mike-miles/285-44ef62a0-d90d-44af-9071-3b9720f55b6c) in which Miles was sworn in to serve as superintendent in June 2023. Episode four culminates in March 2024 when [public outrage](https://houstonlanding.org/houston-isd-backtracks-on-contested-principal-ratings-possibly-due-to-legal-concern/) forced Miles to back down on an evaluation plan that could have potentially resulted in half of the district’s principals losing their jobs, including some who lead the district’s top-rated schools.

Walsh ended the Season by questioning whether widespread public anger at policies implemented by Miles could endanger a school bond referendum that voters eventually decided on during the November 2024 election. That bond referendum was [defeated](https://houstonlanding.org/election-2024-houston-isd-bond-trending-toward-defeat-early-results-show/), and the Houston Landing reported that Texas voters had never before rejected a proposed school bond measure “totaling $1 billion or more.” HPM [called the defeat](https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/education-news/hisd/2024/11/05/504770/houston-isd-bond-rejected-in-large-margin-by-voters-an-unofficial-referendum-of-state-takeover/) “an unofficial referendum of state takeover.”

Much of the airtime in “The Takeover” is taken up by interviews that are critical of what Miles has implemented, including those with parents, teachers, librarians, and students, many of whom bitterly complain about the new reforms. Walsh points out that state takeovers of local school districts almost never produce positive results, as [numerous](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/do-state-takeovers-of-school-districts-work/) [studies](https://inequality.org/great-divide/the-troubling-trend-of-state-takeovers-of-public-schools/) [have](https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/6/8/22524765/school-districts-state-takeovers-academic-success-research-studies/) [shown](https://hechingerreport.org/state-takeovers-of-failing-schools-are-increasing-but-with-little-evidence-they-help-students/).

Walsh has given ample time to takeover supporters on the podcast as well, including Miles; Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Morath, who appointed Miles; state-appointed Houston School Board President Audrey Momanaee; and Texas lawmakers, both Democratic and Republican, who support the takeover. He also speaks about positive developments since the takeover began, including [improved test scores](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/education/hisd/article/miles-map-scores-hisd-19906634.php) in math and science.

Yet, while Walsh’s reporting can be described as balanced, he largely frames the takeover and the new reforms Miles has imposed as the latest iteration of the decades-long education reform movement that Walsh negatively characterizes as being “top-down.” He further points out that the reforms are overly reliant on standardized testing with punitive accountability measures that often lead to schools being closed, teachers and school principals being fired, and parents feeling alienated.

A request for comment was sent to HPM station manager Joshua Adams, but Our Schools did not receive a response before the article was published on Friday.

Episode one of “The Takeover” is titled “School Reform, the Musical,” a reference to a musical skit Miles staged, and played the leading role in, to ease the district about his massive disruption efforts and to counter any criticisms. But the episode could easily have been called “Winners and Losers,” which is the theme Walsh keeps returning to while describing who gains in Miles’s new education system and who loses out.

The winners tend to be those school staff members who benefit from a tiered salary system Miles implemented and teachers who are comfortable with a centrally created and scripted curriculum. The losers? Parents who see their children’s favorite teachers being fired or leaving in frustration. Students who find the scripted curriculum less engaging. Librarians whose libraries are shuttered. Teachers who lament about losing their freedom to tailor instruction to students and miss the curriculum they felt most passionate about, like teaching the entire book in English Language Arts class.

A contrast Walsh repeatedly draws throughout the episode is Miles’s claims of knowing “the best way” to improve schools versus what Walsh observes as the “painful reality” on the ground when the reforms were rolled out.

Episode one, “School Reform, the Musical” states:

*“State installed superintendent Mike Miles says his plan will make schools better, raise test scores, and career readiness, especially in high poverty neighborhoods that need it the most. And who could argue with those goals. Everyone wants that. Right? But it’s complicated.”*

*—Dominic Walsh*

In episode two, “The Law,” Walsh begins by examining the law that made the state takeover possible and delves into the “conflicting philosophies” over public education and the rampant inequity in the education system. His reporting reveals that the law, [House Bill 1842](https://www.legis.state.tx.us/billlookup/BillSummary.aspx?LegSess=84R&Bill=HB1842), was mostly based on the low academic performance of just one school, which had started to improve just before the announcement of the takeover. Walsh questions whether the low performance in Houston schools might be due to a lack of resources and the rigid system Texas uses to assess its schools.

Another state [law](https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/texas-schools-charter-schools/texas-partnerships-sb-1882) the episode considers—passed in 2017—was an [attempt to incentivize](https://www.texastribune.org/2019/08/02/texas-school-districts-charters-work-non-profits/) school districts to partner with charter school management groups to operate their lowest-performing schools. This law kept the HISD and other districts with low-performing schools under constant pressure of being privatized. Walsh explains that Houston’s reform movement is based on strict accountability measures of schools, which were exported to the entire nation later on.

Episode two, “The Law” states:

*“This is a story about conflicting philosophies—deep-seated disagreements over the possibilities, potentials, and purpose of public education in a deeply unequal society.”*

*—Dominic Walsh*

Episode three, “The Texas Miracle,” goes back to the 1990s to explore the origin of top-down education reform in Texas under then-Governor George W. Bush and the so-called Texas miracle that became the inspiration for the [No Child Left Behind Act](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04), enacted in 2002 by then-President George W. Bush. These policies were furthered under the Barack Obama presidential administration, and, in Houston, under the leadership of former superintendent Terry Grier from 2009 to 2016. He was rewarded with school improvement grant money by Obama, which he used to force changes in some of the very same schools Miles is focused on today.

However, Walsh speaks with education researcher Julian Vasquez Heilig, who was an employee of HISD’s Office of Research and Accountability from 1999-2001. He explains that the acclaimed progress resulting from the Texas miracle was a “mirage.” In another interview, education historian Jack Schneider says that the positive results, of what he calls the “bipartisan, neoliberal” policy of NCLB and similar laws, have never really been achieved.

Nevertheless, Walsh explains that the reform agenda spawned a host of measures, to which Miles is devoted. In fact, as Walsh reports, the charter school network that Miles created and led, called the [Third Future Schools](https://thirdfuture.org/), uses an education approach almost identical to what Miles is trying to implement for Houston’s public schools system. Walsh notes that Third Future Schools struggled to meet all the progress measures in another Texas school district when the company was contracted to transform a school. Walsh concludes, “If Miles can pull this off in Houston, it will be a first.”

Episode three, “The Texas Miracle” states:

*“In the eyes of some researchers, if we have learned anything from the past two decades of education policy, it’s that this type of top-down, test-based school reform does not work, largely because of what it misses. But others think Mike Miles may have finally cracked the code.”*

*—Dominic Walsh*

The Takeover’s final episode, “Reconciliation,” largely focuses on the behind-the-scenes players who will determine the fate of Houston schools. These include the state-appointed board that Miles answers to—it mostly functions as a rubber stamp for Miles’s reform agenda, according to critics—the Texas Education Agency that initiated the takeover, and Texas state lawmakers, including the legislature and Governor Gregg Abbott, who determine state education policy. In reporting on each of these entities, Walsh finds various “contradictions” that are hard to reconcile.

Walsh interviews Audrey Momanaee about the takeover board and questions how the effort can align with the “visions and values of community,” as she claims while delivering “results,” like higher test scores and a narrowed curriculum, which don’t seem to be in line with the values of the local community. Walsh returns to this same contradiction in his interview with Morath in which Walsh notices how Morath’s emphasis on raising test scores clashes with his goal to raise “educated citizens.” Texas state lawmakers present an even starker contradiction, Walsh notes, as they pass laws that hold public schools to increasingly harsher accountability measures while attempting to pass a new voucher system that would redirect more education funding to private schools, which have no public accountability at all.

In the face of these contradictions, Walsh accuses leaders of the Houston takeover of “kind of operating as if they have blinders on” as they choose to ignore what education should be, instead, going for scripted curriculum, command and control managerial practices, and ever higher test scores. Walsh notes that Miles seems to waver from his agenda only when wealthier parents and representatives of the business community voice their dissatisfaction.

Episode four, “Reconciliation” states:

*“How the state measures success, how it decides when to intervene, and when this takeover will end, is actually up in the air. In fact, the whole public education system in Texas is in flux.”*

*—Dominic Walsh*

Why HPM decided to kill “The Takeover” before it had a chance to air is not immediately clear based on the content of the podcast.

According to a September 2024 article in the Texas Monthly, which [called](https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/why-takeover-podcast-houston-public-media-was-killed/) the decision to kill the podcast “head-scratching,” executives at the news organization pulled “The Takeover” the day before it was scheduled to debut when they learned that Walsh’s “long-term romantic relationship with an HISD teacher” presented, what they believed, was a “conflict of interest.” Through a series of public records requests, Texas Monthly reporters Michael Hardy and Forrest Wilder obtained copies of the podcast episodes and internal communications related to its cancellation.

In their investigation, Hardy and Wilder found “no evidence that HPM canceled the podcast because of external pressure, as some community members have speculated. No inaccuracies in Walsh’s reporting are identified in the internal communications we reviewed, and HPM executives did not respond to a question about whether they had identified any.”

Hardy and Wilder also note that “What constitutes a conflict of interest is a disputed subject among journalists.” They have interviewed experts on ethics in journalism who question HPM executives’ decision to cancel the podcast.

HPM still [archives](https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/staff/dominic-walsh/) Walsh’s education reporting on its website, with no disclaimer. Walsh, however, no longer covers education and seems to be reporting on other beats for HPM.

But it’s hard not to sense the irony as Walsh signs off his reporting in “The Takeover” saying, “Whatever happens we will be here. Stay tuned.”