



# Report on Providence Schools: Takeover Status and Future Governance

Alissa Simon and Rebecca Kislak  
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## Executive Summary

After decades of compounding problems and in the wake of the 2019 state takeover, the Providence Public School District (PPSD) has experienced rapid shifts in the landscape of administrative control with few clear answers about the future of K-12 education. This report seeks to explore the possibilities of various school governance structures, particularly community-based governance, and how such models might apply to Providence post-takeover.

The report first provides a brief history of how administrative control of Providence schools was transferred to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), summarizing existing state legislation on education and frameworks that have been used to measure progress in PPSD, before exploring pressing questions raised by the takeover about decision-making power in Providence's public schools. It then moves to reviewing a general history of school takeovers, using Lawrence, Massachusetts; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Jackson, Mississippi as case studies to observe how the choice to either implement or forgo takeovers has played out in districts across the nation. While each of these cases has a unique political context, there are multiple parallels to the current situation in Providence. This section identifies several characteristics common amongst successful schools that have little to do with whether or not they are under an active takeover, including the presence of federal funding, organized leadership, and active community involvement.

The report next looks at the governance of school districts — who the players are in a given governance model and who has historically wielded decision-making power or been excluded from the conversation. After looking at the current governance of PPSD, it summarizes key findings from researchers in education policy on what an effective governance system might look like.

Several key features of strong governance models repeatedly emerge in this literature:

- Decision-making structures are accessible and clearly defined
- Attention to racial equity
- Robust role for students, parents and other local stakeholders

This report and the research it contains is by no means a comprehensive account of the current situation in Providence. Rather, it identifies the major factors that brought about the takeover and the issues that have unfolded since it began. It delves into the stances of some of the most important stakeholders on the issue and seeks to provoke discussion about what the future of the district might look like once the takeover comes to an end — how the city might draw on existing, active voices in the Providence community to build a more equitable, engaged education system for PPSD students.

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## Providence Schools - Background

For many, the story of the Providence Public Schools takeover begins in 2019 with the [Johns Hopkins Report on PPSD](#), which was commissioned by Governor Gina Raimondo and Commissioner of Education Angélica Infante-Green. The report garnered [national attention](#), shocking audiences with its “searing” assessment of the “unusually deep, systemic dysfunctions” in Providence schools.<sup>1</sup> The report detailed crumbling infrastructure, demoralized teachers and staff, and high levels of student disengagement without proper professional support — as well as significant racial inequities in math and ELA proficiency at almost every grade level. However, while the Hopkins report may have been one of the factors that prompted the takeover, the conditions it outlined were not surprising to many PPSD faculty and families. A [1993 report](#) on Providence schools by the PROBE commission noted similar issues with teacher grievances, absenteeism, and racial inequity.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the takeover, the Office of Civil Rights of the US Department of Education was investigating PPSD for its failure to provide adequate support to English Language Learners (ELL) — who make up nearly 1/3 of students in Providence public schools. This investigation led to a settlement in 2018 requiring the district to provide “adequate English language services to all English Learner students.”<sup>3</sup> However, the development of ELL curricula and training of faculty rested largely within state jurisdiction, and this was an additional area noted in the Hopkins report where PPSD fell short.<sup>4</sup>



The takeover was formally established on October 15, 2019, with the publication of the [Decision Establishing Control over the Providence Public School District and Reconstituting Providence Public](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Dysfunctional Providence Schools Highlight the Challenges of Urban School Districts.” *USNews.com*, 28 June 2019,

<sup>2</sup> Eddy, Edward D. “Print ED365762.TIF (123 pages).” *ERIC*, 1993,

<sup>3</sup> Department of Justice. “United States Reaches Settlement with Providence Schools to Ensure Equal Opportunities for English Learner Students.” *Department of Justice*, 13 August 2018.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education. “English Learners DCL.” *Department of Education*, 7 January 2015,

[Schools](#).<sup>5</sup> Takeovers, a popular strategy for state governments dealing with low-performing school districts, are now facing a national reckoning as research continues to challenge their efficacy. It has proved exceedingly difficult to capture a clear image of the changes, within the setting of the state takeover, that are happening in Providence.

The [Turnaround Action Plan](#) (TAP) serves as the framework for how progress in student achievement and community engagement in Providence has been strategized and measured during the RIDE takeover.<sup>6</sup> The TAP was developed with the input of Community Design Teams (CDTs) which consist of “a diverse group of parents, students, and community leaders” who were appointed by RIDE. The original TAP document contains an appendix that lists the CDT’s recommendations in full, organized by committee, and these recommendations “represent a majority of the initiatives outlined later in the TAP.”<sup>7</sup>

The Providence Public Schools website publishes quarterly reports as well as annual updates on the progress made in accomplishing TAP goals in Engaged Communities, World-Class Talent, Excellence in Learning, and Efficient District Systems. The basic steps of the TAP, as outlined in a [March 2023 update](#), are as follows:

- Acknowledge the achievement gaps that need to be eliminated; community members and organizations identify goals for the district to pursue.
- Translate community goals into a series of “metrics” and “aspirational targets” with which to guide and measure the district’s work.
- Deploy a “backwards mapping” method where it uses the established community goals to construct a plan of action, “course corrections,” and “relentless progress monitoring.”

It is notable that the majority of the PPSD takeover thus far has overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes it even more difficult to evaluate the progress of the takeover independent from the nationwide setbacks in student progress as a result of school closures and virtual learning. Across the country, pre-existing racial and economic disparities in learning were only [exacerbated](#) by pandemic conditions.<sup>8</sup> More than three years into the takeover, many in the Providence community are left with unanswered questions about the efficacy of the takeover, current systems of accountability, and what

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<sup>5</sup> *Decision Establishing Control Over the Providence Public School District and Reconstituting Providence Public Schools*, 15 October 2019.

<sup>6</sup> “Turnaround Action Plan / Reimagining Providence Schools.” *Providence Public Schools*, June 2020.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Simon, Clea. “How COVID taught America about inequity in education.” *Harvard Gazette*, 9 July 2021.

solutions will ensure the future of their child’s education. Currently, power in PPSD remains with RIDE, although the school board maintains some advisory power and RIDE is required to provide updates to the board on the status of the Turnaround Action Plan.<sup>9</sup>

At every stage of PPSD’s history, community organizations have been key, not only in responding to the conditions in the Providence school system but also in shaping the ongoing discussion about the efficacy of the takeover and the needs of local stakeholders. These groups include parent-led organizations like [Parents Leading For Educational Equity](#) (PLEE) and the [Equity Institute](#), which works to uplift and train educators of color in Rhode Island. In Providence there are multiple youth-led organizations and their allies who work to center youth voice, Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education ([ARISE](#)), Providence Student Union ([PSU](#)), Providence Youth Student Movement ([PrYSM](#)), [Young Voices](#), and [Youth in Action](#) have become well-known advocates for student interests during the takeover. A number of these youth-led groups have joined together to found the OurSchoolsPVD coalition, which asserts an “asset-based, youth and community-driven vision for our public schools and communities.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Summary of Existing Legislation and Key Policy Documents*

In addition to the strategies pursued by community organizations and outlined in the TAP, the Providence takeover has been informed by a series of legislative decisions that can be traced over the past two decades:

- **1997:** Rhode Island passed the [Crowley Act](#), which enabled the state to take over a failing school district. This act was part of a series of takeover laws passed by state legislatures in the 1980s and 90s, although the district of Central Falls had previously sought out its own takeover in 1991.
- **May 2019:** [The Education Accountability Act](#) was passed as a measure to “[provide an increase in site-based management at the school level by broadening the responsibilities of the principal and school improvement teams \(SIT\).](#)”<sup>11 12</sup> The Education Accountability Act was primarily focused on developing accountability guidelines for local education agencies (LEAs) in Rhode Island. The act applies statewide and marks an increased focus on defining expectations for site-based management and student improvement for Rhode Island school districts. It also

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<sup>9</sup> Borg, Linda. “Latest version of the state takeover of Providence schools plan.” *The Providence Journal*, 22 June 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Providence Student Union. “Coalitions.” *Providence Student Union*.

<sup>11</sup> 2019 -- H 6084 SUBSTITUTE A STATE OF RHODE ISLAND.” *State of Rhode Island General Assembly*, 9 May 2019.

<sup>12</sup> *The Education Accountability Act: Site-Based Management*.



outlined the specific duties of school principals and transferred more power to the school or building level.

- **October 2019:** RIDE [formalized its decision](#) to take over PPSD. The department published a document that outlined its findings of fact and rationale for the takeover, as well as its plans for various levels of support and intervention.<sup>13</sup>
- **June 2022:** The legislature passed legislation to amend the Crowley Act with the PPSD takeover in mind. [Paul W. Crowley Rhode Island Student Investment Initiative](#).<sup>14</sup> This bill called upon the commissioner to update the takeover plan with measurable goals to better assess progress and promote accountability and transparency in RIDE and the district office.
- **January 2023:** The legislature passed additional requirements to require the RIDE K-12 board to review and ratify all collective bargaining contracts before they go into effect.

## I. BACKGROUND ON TAKEOVERS

### *What is a Takeover?*

As the community continues to monitor the status of the takeover and reflect on the path forward for PPSD, it is useful to consider a broader history of what a takeover intends to accomplish, and how such efforts have played out in similarly situated districts across the country. In the most straightforward sense, a school takeover is defined by researchers as state intervention in the governance of a local school system, where the state “[assumes] [control of a school district and \[replaces\] all, or part, of the locally elected school board or superintendent](#).”<sup>15</sup> There are a number of reasons state takeovers became popular strategies in the 2000s and 2010s to turn around performance in failing school districts. They offer a clear formula for state governments otherwise at a loss for how to manage underperforming schools, allowing states to wave a “[magic wand](#)” of policy, and access unprecedented levels of control and money with which to generate changes in governance.<sup>16</sup>

There are a number of benefits that can come with takeover reforms — for example, such processes often build in extra listening sessions with community members that can inform district wide policy changes. Additionally, the increased funding associated with takeovers allows for more opportunities to implement more programs. However, despite certain successful programs or instances of observed increases in test scores under a takeover system, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify the use of

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<sup>13</sup> *Decision Establishing Control Over the Providence Public School District and Reconstituting Providence Public Schools*, 15 October 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “Assembly passes bill for oversight, accountability for Providence schools takeover.” *State of Rhode Island General Assembly*, 30 June 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Dragone, Catherine. “Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?” *FutureEd*, 23 June 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Greene, Peter. “Five Reasons School Takeovers Fail.” *Forbes*, 28 May 2019.

state takeovers as long term governance solutions. In 2021, the Annenberg Institute of Brown University published a [comprehensive study](#) of 35 districts which underwent takeovers between 2011 and 2016, using difference-in-differences analysis to compare takeover districts to similarly achieving districts which did not experience takeovers in the same time frame.<sup>17</sup> This allowed for a more quantitative evaluation of the claim that state takeovers improve student achievement. Like Providence, many of the districts studied are small cities and composed of majority Black and Latino students.



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<sup>17</sup> Schueler, Beht E., and Joshua Bleiberg. “Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?” | EdWorkingPaper No. 21-411.”



### History of Takeovers in Rhode Island

The 2019 PPSD takeover is by far the most publicized and controversial in Rhode Island's history — but it is not the first. The state took over the district of Central Falls in 1991, and still maintains fiscal control and responsibility for its schools. Central Falls sought out its own takeover, as a district on “the brink of financial ruin” that could not afford to make educational reforms without support from the state. The Rhode Island government, amongst other measures, fired the all-white school board in Central Falls and the district experienced a marked improvement in the representation of Latino community members in school governance positions, better reflecting the demographics of the Central Falls student body, as noted by researchers like Domingo Morel. However, thirty years later, student proficiency in reading and math remains devastatingly low. Dan Lazieh, the mayor of Central Falls in 1991 who lobbied for the takeover reflected that “the state takeover of schools doesn't mean better quality,” and expressed serious doubts about RIDE's management capabilities in 2019.

In 2005, Rhode Island also took over Hope High School, one of the largest and worst-performing Providence schools in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with a high dropout rate, poor learning conditions, and low morale among staff. During the takeover, “Special Master” of the reform, Nicholas Donohue, split the school into three academies, hired new principals, and required all Hope teachers to re-apply for their positions. At first, the school saw marked improvements — the smaller academy sizes benefited and strengthened teacher leadership. However, in the years since, Hope High School has seen backsliding and challenges to much of its initial progress. Today, Central Falls and Providence, the two districts that have come under RIDE control, remain amongst the [lowest performing in the state](#), casting further doubt on the efficacy of takeovers.

The key finding of the study was that there is [“little evidence that districts see test scores rise as a result of being taken over.”](#)<sup>18</sup> And, in reality, [“state control had slightly negative effects on students.”](#)<sup>19</sup> This study cites school districts in Lawrence, Massachusetts and New Orleans, Louisiana as isolated examples of successful takeovers but gathers that, at large, they have little to no positive effects on either ELA or math scores.<sup>20</sup> Many of the districts that *did* see initial improvements, such as Lawrence and Camden, New Jersey, have since experienced backsliding. It is also difficult to isolate which factors impact the effectiveness of a takeover because of how differently districts operate post-takeover. Oftentimes, school systems fail to make meaningful changes to their governance or administrative

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<sup>18</sup> Barnum, Matt. “Struggling schools don't get a boost from state takeovers, study shows.” *Chalkbeat*, 8 June 2021.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

structures once control of the district is returned, undoing any benefits that might occur in the process and raising the question of how large a time frame is needed to fully assess a takeover's outcome.

Considerations of power, voice and accountability are a large part of the reason the Providence takeover is not just a matter of education policy, but also of racial equity and democratic governance. When it comes to measuring the impacts of state control, it is important to ask not only if takeovers are effective but also if they cause active harm to the communities that experience them. The Annenberg report identified a number of districts, including East St. Louis, Illinois and Beaumont, Texas, where ELA and math scores dropped dramatically after being taken over. However, the largest concern raised by critics of state takeovers is not their influence on test scores but their impact on local autonomy and community participation. The report notes a common criticism that “beyond the effects on student outcomes, takeover usurps transparent, local, democratic decision-making, representation, and often the economic and political power of communities of color.”<sup>21</sup> When a state Department of Education takes over a local district, it almost always lessens the power of school boards and forces [“the loss of democratic institutions, disproportionately in Black communities.”](#)<sup>22</sup>

### Equity Considerations

It is particularly concerning that school takeovers — measures that forcibly relocate decision-making power from local communities into the hands of the state — are not evenly applied across districts. The [Annenberg](#) study has shown that “race is playing an important role in the process of selection for takeover, above and beyond the academic performance of a given district, with majority-Black communities at greater risk of being taken over.”<sup>23</sup> Historically, school governance has been an important site of civic and democratic power for Black and Latino communities and school boards often offer career-building positions for future mayors, senators, and representatives. When this site of governance is interfered with by the state, there can be detrimental consequences for equitable representation in local politics. Political scientist Domingo Morel has done research on the negative effects of takeovers on a phenomenon known as [“descriptive representation”](#) — discovering that when takeovers happen in majority-Black districts, the representation of Black elected officials decreases significantly.<sup>24</sup> It is notable, however, that Morel observed the opposite effect in majority-Latino districts concerning Latino representation, including in Central Falls, Rhode Island.<sup>25</sup> The process of

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<sup>21</sup>Schueler, Beht E., and Joshua Bleiberg. “Evaluating Education Governance: Does State Takeover of School Districts Affect Student Achievement?” | EdWorkingPaper No. 21-411.” *The Annenberg Institute*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Breen, Audrey. “Q&A: When States Takeover Low-Performing School Districts.” *University of Virginia - School of Education and Human Development*, 27 March 2023.

<sup>25</sup>Morel, Domingo. *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

education — what is taught, how it is taught, and who is doing the teaching — is also tightly bound with political institutions such that the effects of the takeover can never be viewed as apolitical. In his book *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy*, Morel further highlights the importance of racial politics in past and present takeover efforts, noting that “in state takeovers of majority-white school districts, the takeover resulted in the abolishment of the locally elected school boards in only 4 percent of cases, compared with 33 percent in majority-Black districts.”<sup>26</sup> Morel’s research reminds us of the necessity of including race in conversations about school governance and community engagement. The school board has historically served as an important site of representation and political power for Latino and Black families, and that history is important to consider when takeovers strip a school board of its power.

## II. TAKEOVER CASE STUDIES

In order to better understand possible futures for PPSD, it is useful to turn towards examples of other school systems who have undergone takeovers, looking at their respective challenges and successes for reference while understanding that school districts across the country have different demographics, state legislatures, and financial capabilities which influence their takeover outcomes. This report delves into the background of three particularly informative takeover — Lawrence, New Orleans, and Jackson — but takeovers have been occurring across the nation, including in northeastern districts such as Holyoke and Southbridge, Massachusetts, as well as Bridgeport, Connecticut.

### *Lawrence, Massachusetts*

Much of Providence’s current takeover is modeled after the one that occurred in the Lawrence public school system starting in 2011, in part because of the demographic similarities between the two districts. Though Lawrence has only about half of Providence’s student population — [13,000 as opposed to 24,000](#) — both districts have a similarly high proportion of Latino students and English language learners.<sup>27</sup> Lawrence has a slightly higher proportion of students from low-income families, 90%, compared to 81.8% in PPSD.<sup>28</sup>

Massachusetts intervened in Lawrence amidst allegations of “mismanagement and corruption” alongside poor graduation rates and test performance scores from students. At the time of its takeover,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Borg, Linda. “Mass. city turned its school system around.” *The Providence Journal*, 31 July 2019.

<sup>28</sup> The Anne E. Casey Foundation. “Public School Enrollment of Low Income Students.” *KIDS COUNT Data Center*, 2021.

Lawrence ranked in the bottom 5% of school districts in Massachusetts. As the federal No Child Left Behind Act placed pressure on the state to improve student achievement, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law that enabled the state Department of Education to make “sweeping changes” to failing school districts, including by means of a takeover.<sup>29</sup> However much of this initial success is attributed not to the policies established by the state but to the influence of the district’s leader, Jeffrey Riley, whose experience with education reform policy informed his approach in Lawrence. Riley attended listening sessions with teachers and families before launching his plan and relied mainly on philanthropy and private funding to manage the costs of the takeover.

The takeover prioritized revamping school-level leadership, replacing 50% of principals while retaining 90% of teachers. Riley also replaced a seniority-based policy for raises with a merit scale, expanded annual in-school time by an additional 200 hours, and balanced a focus on test scores with arts and enrichment programs. Lawrence saw initial improvements in student performance post-takeover, and the district also experienced improvements in many building conditions and the establishment of new vacation academies.<sup>30</sup> Yet many of these gains are attributable to the circumstances of Lawrence rather than the takeover structure. In this sense, it’s questionable if the results seen in Lawrence can be replicated in another district — and the results themselves are not as clear-cut as they first appeared. Lawrence students have experienced a measured decline [in progress in recent years](#) and this backslide in student performance should give pause to legislators that point to Lawrence as evidence of the efficacy of takeovers. At the same time, Lawrence exemplifies how increasing investments in classrooms and curricular enrichment can support student achievement under any governance system.

### *New Orleans, Louisiana*

The state takeover of New Orleans public schools came at a distinct moment of crisis for the city. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans’ infrastructure and public schools were devastated and the subsequent transition to an all-charter system was a unique case of takeover as a form of disaster response — one that is not easily replicable elsewhere. Like in Lawrence, the result of the takeover and charter-school rebranding has generally been labeled as a success by the metric of student performance on standardized tests. However, also like Lawrence, the real picture of the takeover is more complicated. Doug Harris of the National Education Policy Center notes that the circumstances of New Orleans allowed for deep, structural changes that would be near-impossible to implement in any

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Lawrence Schools Make Rapid Improvements – RUMBO News.” *RUMBO News*, 23 September 2013.

other district, saying that [“New Orleans... was uniquely situated for these reforms to work.”](#)<sup>31</sup> Because of the clear consensus amongst the community on the need to overhaul the education system, it was possible for legislators to reach agreements and source funding, and for school leaders to implement bolder changes — such as charter reforms. In addition, the takeover was aided by a significant increase in per-student spending, due to an influx of disaster relief funding. However, the city also lowered staffing costs by hiring more inexperienced teachers without benefits, keeping expenses [“artificially low.”](#)<sup>32</sup> This surge of spending produced results, as the reforms instituted in the wake of Katrina “increased high school graduation rates by 9-13 percentage points and college completion by 2-3 points.”<sup>33</sup> However, additional [studies have found](#) similar levels of improvement in school districts that received increased funding *without* undergoing a takeover, further implying that it is access to money and not the takeover structure that correlates to student achievement.<sup>34</sup>

The New Orleans takeover also had some more troubling effects. The district saw a [decline in teachers of color](#) — the percentage of educators who identified as Black plunged from [71% to just 49%](#) between 2004 and 2014.<sup>35</sup> Public school [student demographics](#) changed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, suggesting that some of the takeover results could simply be attributable to higher levels of household income in many schools, not to changes in governance or curriculum that benefit *all* students. These facts considered, the New Orleans takeover, despite its initial positive reception, cannot be viewed unequivocally as progress, because the root issue of unequal opportunities in education was never fully addressed and, in many ways, became further entrenched in the system.

### *Jackson, Mississippi*

Jackson, Mississippi presents a unique case study where a takeover was avoided through the collaboration of city and state government. In 2017, the Mississippi Department of Education conducted an audit of the Jackson Public School system (JPS) and found the district in [“violation of 75% of state accreditation standards.”](#)<sup>36</sup> According to the [full report](#), Jackson schools fell short on instructional time, graduation requirements, and licensed teachers.<sup>37</sup> In light of its findings, the Department of Education recommended a takeover, but the measure required Governor Phil Bryant’s

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<sup>31</sup> Strauss, Valerie, et al. “Analysis | The real story of New Orleans and its charter schools.” *The Washington Post*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Barnum, Matt. “Struggling schools don’t get a boost from state takeovers, study shows.” *Chalkbeat*, 8 June 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Strauss, Valerie, et al. “Analysis | The real story of New Orleans and its charter schools.” *The Washington Post*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Neason, Alexandria. *New Orleans needs more black teachers and knows it. Why is progress so slow?*, 5 June 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Skinner, Kayleigh. “Jackson Schools still in Ed. Dept doghouse.” *Mississippi Today*, 31 August 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



approval. After the publication of the audit, parents and student ambassadors gathered to protest a potential takeover which would “[[cut\] out community voice and input in local schools.](#)”<sup>38</sup> One JPS alum [said](#) that handing control of Jackson schools to the state would be “giving somebody else another chance to do something that we’ve already seen people fail at.”<sup>39</sup>

In the end, community advocacy paid off. Later that month, the district announced that it would avoid a takeover through a collaboration between Republican Governor Bryant and Jackson’s newly-elected Democratic mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba. Bryant and Lumumba developed an alternative approach, with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, to maintain local control of Jackson schools. The mayor, governor, and foundation each appointed five members to a new oversight commission that would develop criteria for an [“outside evaluation of the school district.”](#)<sup>40</sup> This commission held listening sessions where state, national, and local partners met with the community. Bryant and Lumumba sought out the expertise of the Kellogg Foundation in part because of its involvement in a reform effort in the Battle Creek Public School system in Michigan, a transformation that was notable because it was tasked with the explicit goal of addressing [“low academic performance tied to racial inequity.”](#)<sup>41</sup> During this process, every member of the JPS Board of Trustees resigned, which allowed for the district office to proceed with a fresh start that maintains local control and enacts new policies without a state takeover.

The story of JPS is far from over. Jackson is still technically eligible for takeover. And, while in 2022, the Jackson Public School district received a [‘C’ accountability rating](#), the first time it wasn’t classified as low-performing since 2014, additional time is still needed to determine whether the current plan of action will result in sustainable change.<sup>42</sup> The plans developed by the city are far from a comprehensive solution to JPS’s problems — they deal more with constructing a framework for outside evaluation rather than the policy changes that must eventually happen within the system. Still, this development is significant for the community and serves as an example of how underperforming districts can engage with tough questions of accountability without proceeding immediately to a takeover scenario.

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<sup>38</sup> OurJPS. “Tell Governor Bryant: No State Takeover of Jackson Public Schools!” *#SupportOurJPS*.

<sup>39</sup> Edinger, Marie. “Students speak out against state takeover of Jackson Public Schools.” *WLBT3*, 10 October 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Skinner, Kayleigh. “Jackson Public Schools avoid takeover; Gov. Bryant orders independent review.” *Mississippi Today*, 26 October 2017.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> James, Julia. “Jackson Public Schools receives ‘C’ rating.” *Mississippi Today*, 10 October 2022.

### III. GOVERNANCE

#### *Introduction to the Wider Importance of Governance*

What is a school takeover really — a specific framework for a series of decision making processes and a very specific form of governance. “[School Governance](#)” is defined by the ACLU as the “complex web of federal, state, and local policy” that determines the resources, structure, and goals of primary and secondary schools in any given community.<sup>43</sup> During a takeover, governance and decision making is often moved from a locally elected or appointed board to a single receiver or state entity. In the case of the Providence Public School Department (PPSD) takeover, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) has governance authority over the schools, although the city retains ownership and control over the school buildings. As the state and city consider when control will return to the city, they might consider what the governance of the schools will look like when they return to city control.

#### *Overview of Stakeholders in School Governance Systems*

**Parents:** Parents act as advocates for their children and are often the sole representatives of student and family interests during teacher conferences, legislative hearings, and school board meetings. But the ability of parents to participate in governance and school policy deliberations can also be severely constrained based on the accessibility of public meetings. In Providence, advocacy organizations like Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE) provide parents with space and resources to advocate for better outcomes for students and families of color in PPSD.

**Students:** Though legislators and district officials all name students as the center of any education policy, there has been increasing recognition of students themselves as critical stakeholders who should exercise greater power in their school communities. In Providence there are multiple youth-led organizations and their allies who work to center youth voice, including [Our Schools PVD](#), a coalition of several organizations, Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education ([ARISE](#)), Providence Student Union ([PSU](#)), Providence Youth Student Movement ([PrYSM](#)), [Young Voices](#), and [Youth in Action](#) have become well-known advocates for student interests during the takeover. However, visibility doesn’t always translate to formal power, and student organizations often face challenges gaining recognition in legislative processes, particularly because they (usually) cannot hold any elected office. In 2019 before the takeover was instituted, a group of students presented a proposal for youth and parent involvement in school decision making that was rejected by Rhode Island’s governor and state education commissioner. State legislators have introduced legislation, such as [House Bill 5547](#), and [Senate Bill 484](#) that would provide the student representative on the Council of

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<sup>43</sup> ACLU. “School Governance 101 | American Civil Liberties Union.” *ACLU*, American Civil Liberties Union.

Elementary and Secondary Education equal voting powers as the council’s adult members; these measures did not pass and were opposed by RIDE.

**Teachers:** Alongside students, teachers are the stakeholders most deeply embedded in the day-to-day reality of school life. The classrooms, the curricula, all of it would be impossible without the work of the dedicated professionals who often have as great, if not a greater, impact on students as the entire administrative system designed to support them. In Providence, it is impossible to talk about teachers without talking about the Providence Teachers Union (PTU). It is a group with enormous political power. Unions are important mechanisms for representing and advocating for teacher voices. Unfortunately, in the case of school decision-making, these unions are often perceived to block actions that will benefit parents and student learning. The PPSD takeover is particularly entangled with the history of the city’s teacher’s union which is tasked with representing teachers, as advocates for their students but also as a specific group of professionals with their own interests at stake.

#### *Overview of 50 State Systems of School Governance*

In an education system as decentralized as the United States’ where policy recommendations and state-level leadership change rapidly, it can be difficult to judge the national attitude towards any issue in the field, let alone one as complex as local school governance. Yet, just as with curriculum and testing requirements, there are always states that follow the example of others, creating a few distinct trends shaping the current education policy landscape.

Aiming to track these patterns, The Education Commission of the States recently published a [50-State Comparison](#) on dozens of education policy and governance topics, including the powers of state legislature, governors, and school boards in setting policy, as well as term limits and guidelines for appointed versus elected positions.<sup>44</sup> The commission also created a dashboard that distinguishes between common K-12 governance models, designating four different approaches. For example, Rhode Island is categorized as one of twelve “Model II” states, meaning the elected governor appoints the state board of education which then appoints the chief state school officer. Generally, state laws acknowledge the importance of local school boards and other community institutions. The report notes that only half of all state constitutions detail a formal role on education for their governor, but most states have statutory provisions on outlining the authority of their local school boards. In Rhode Island law, city-wide school committees have the “[responsibility for the care and control of local schools](#)” and the ability “to approve a master plan defining goals and objectives of the school system.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> ECS. “Resource Title: 50-State Comparison: K-12 Governance.” *Education Commission of the States*, 10 November 2020.

<sup>45</sup> ECS. “K-12 Governance: School Boards.” *ESC: 50 State Comparison*, November 2020.

### Existing Governance Structures in PPSD

There are multiple groups designed to foster community in Providence's school system, many of which create opportunities for local families to share ideas and feedback about school policy at the building and district level, meeting the recognized need for community engagement in school governance processes. These meetings could, in many cases, be better publicized, have greater membership recruitment, and ensure that what happens in one forum could be discussed or carried over into others in order to achieve PPSD's goals as effectively as possible.

- **Providence School Board:** The Providence School Board is responsible for guiding the superintendent, advising on large-scale administrative decisions within PPSD, and monitoring the district's progress on its stated goals. Through the takeover, the role of the School Board has been severely reduced, with much of its power being redistributed to RIDE and state-level administrators. While the school board maintains only advisory authority, during the decennial 2022 charter review, the city decided to move from a board entirely appointed by the mayor to a half-appointed and half-elected board.
- **RIDE Board of Education:** The RIDE K-12 Board sets education policy across the state of Rhode Island, including standards for K-12 curriculum, teacher certification, special education, across all school districts in the state. The RIDE Board gained additional control of PPSD-level policymaking processes in 2019 through the state takeover.
- **Community Advisory Boards (CABs):** The PPSD Community Advisory Boards are school-level bodies within Providence tasked with "provid[ing] progress monitoring and accountability to schools with comprehensive school improvement plans" or CISPs and reporting progress annually to RIDE.<sup>46</sup> Some schools are 3-4 years into their CISPs while others are undergoing redesigns.
- **Parent Advisory Council (PAC):** The Parent Advisory Council is responsible for soliciting feedback from the community and communicating information about turnaround efforts. Like the CABs, the PAC is concerned with establishing accountability and platforms for feedback. However the PAC operates on the district level as opposed to within individual schools.
- **Student Advisory Council (SAC):** Each high school in Rhode Island can elect one student to sit on the SAC, which holds monthly meetings and provides feedback to RIDE administrators.
- **District-Wide Advisory Council (DWAC):** The District-Wide Advisory Council, formed during the takeover as a part of the TAP, holds many of the same responsibilities as the PAC, but focuses more explicitly on connecting school staff and parents to state-level administrators at RIDE. However, information on the DWAC is not easily accessible, limiting its efficacy and influence on the community.
- **School Improvement Teams (SITs):** School Improvement Teams meet monthly to "support schools in developing their annual comprehensive school improvement plan."<sup>47</sup> They are formed by school principals and faculty, as well as parents, students, and a community representative. SITs also collaborate with local CABs to form Comprehensive School Improvement Teams (CSITs) for schools that are chronically underperforming.

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<sup>46</sup> Providence Public Schools. "2021-2022 Community Advisory Board Handbook [Updated]." *Prov. Public Sch.*, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Providence Public Schools. "School Improvement Team / School Improvement Teams." *Prov. Public Schools*, 2021.

### Zooming In: Chicago School-Level Governance

Amidst these prevailing national trends, certain school districts are pursuing alternative approaches to school governance. One particularly interesting example of alternate governance and community engagement structures are the Local School Councils (LSCs) in the Chicago public school system. The LSC model is notable for the ways in which it diverts power from the district and central office and disseminates it amongst specific school communities. Every Chicago school has its own LSC, each with twelve seats filled by parents, community members, and educational staff — in addition to student representatives.

The [LSCs originally emerged from a parent and community reform movement](#) in 1988 aiming to increase participatory democracy amongst Chicago school communities. But their implementation must also be understood as a product of Chicago's unique political environment — one with a long and robust history of grassroots organizing that is not easily replicable elsewhere. The councils are granted an [immense amount of power](#) by the city, with the ability to hire, fire, and renew contracts for school principals, as well as approve their school's academic plan, and budgetary resources.

In the 25 years since their inception, some notable issues have emerged with LSCs. Tensions have emerged between the councils and various Chicago mayors over the question of how centralized or decentralized school governance in the city should be. Participation in the elections has also waxed and waned, as has funding from supporting nonprofits. However, despite these challenges, there is still a compelling argument for this level of community involvement in establishing the environment and of a single school. The exact effectiveness of LSCs can vary school-by-school, but [research shows](#) that 50-60% of LSCs are “high functioning” and graduation rates have steadily risen under the more decentralized system. The longevity of LSCs also means that the councils are now so embedded in the governance of Chicago public schools that, for many, “[it is hard to imagine the system without them.](#)”

### Rethinking School & Community Governance

Whenever a district faces a moment of reorganization, there is an opportunity to rethink how we govern school districts and how such governments can draw new voices into decision-making. The [“Community Engagement Governance”](#) framework developed by Nonprofit Solutions Associates focuses on non-profits instead of school systems but is still a useful example of an alternate method that might be used to rethink the role of community in a school district.<sup>48</sup> Traditional governance is defined as a system where leadership keeps the powers of governance focused inwards instead of on the people who are most directly connected to the issue at hand. On the other hand, a community

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<sup>48</sup> Freiwirth, Judy, et al. “Community-Engagement Governance: Systems-Wide Governance in Action - Non Profit News.” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 9 May 2011.



engagement model invites community members to treat “governance as a function rather than a structure” and fully prioritizes tangible outcomes and stakeholder feedback over executive organization.<sup>49</sup>

Sustainable community governance structures must include built-in self-assessment mechanisms, create frameworks for developing and enacting policy that can withstand changes in leadership, and center equity and anti-racism as a core of the governance model, not just a side feature. There is a growing consensus amongst researchers in education



policy organizations, such as Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), that decision-making bodies in school districts should not only take input from a select number of representatives or organizations, but make ongoing community conversations integral to their functioning. A publication by the IDRA proposes that existing roles remain in school governance systems, but there should also be added positions and opportunities for leadership within the parent community. This kind of co-ownership is important for establishing power and stakes in a collective outcome.<sup>50</sup> Town halls and public meetings are critical tools of governance *and* community participation on education-related issues — the most well-known of which is the school board. School boards have historically served as important sites of public debate and deliberation, though their legacy is complicated. School boards make voting on education-related issues more accessible for many community members, and critical for consolidating political power as Morel has found, but they can also be anti-democratic in other ways. For instance, undocumented parents with stakes in their children’s education don’t get to vote. Additionally, many parents cannot take time off work to participate in school board proceedings or allocate the funds needed to campaign for a seat on the board, meaning that there are many districts where the board does not properly reflect the school community. School boards often lose power when districts are taken over and, according to the IDRA, “districts governed by and serving a majority Black population are 11 times more likely to have the local school board abolished.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Villarreal, Abelardo. “Expanding School Governance through Participatory Community Engagement.” *IDRA*, March 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, Terrence, and Chloe Latham Sikes. “State Takeovers of School Districts Don’t Work.” *IDRA*, May 2020.

A [recent report](#) by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) on the state of K-12 education in Rhode Island and potential pathways to reform included a proposal for a new legislative commission to “study and make recommendations for the effective administration of K-16 public education governance” and for the consolidation of the fragmented sources of authority in the PPSD system.<sup>52</sup>

Jonathan Collins, a professor of Education, Political Science, and International & Public Affairs at Brown University has done [extensive research](#) on the subject of school governance and school boards. He found that “the preference for school board governance grows stronger once participants are exposed to school board meetings where there is public deliberation.”<sup>53</sup> But not all community meetings are created equal. In a report on meeting style, [Collins](#) suggests that changing meetings’ structure can make them more accessible and effective amongst members of a particular school community —incorporating more “face-to-face small group discussions” in larger board meetings, for example.<sup>54</sup>

Collins introduces the idea of “[deliberative culture](#)” — an environment where districts make a “commitment to routine deliberation with the public”<sup>55</sup> in his publication “[Do Teachers Want Democracy?](#)” where he explores how teachers evaluate their own districts and form political behaviors accordingly. In the report, Collins gives a broad overview of the issues facing teachers today: extreme levels of professional dissatisfaction as well as the antagonistic relationships between teacher unions and school districts. However, in “deliberative culture” districts, he notes that teachers have more positive perceptions of school performance and are more likely to be involved in decision making alongside students at the school level.

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<sup>52</sup> Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council. “Improving Rhode Island's K-12 Schools: Where Do We Go From Here?” *Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council*, October 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Collins, Jonathan. “Should School Boards Be in Charge? The Effects of Exposure to Participatory and Deliberative School Board Meetings.” *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2021, pp. 341-355.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Collins, Jonathan. “Do Teachers Want Democracy? Deliberative Culture and Teachers ...” *Jonathan Collins*, Urban Affairs Review, 2020.

## Possibilities for PPSD

As the city emerges from the immediate effects of COVID-19 and moves into a new stage of the takeover, Providence now has the opportunity to decide what it wants its school governance to look like, and what policies would best support that vision. There are a number of considerations for the district and local community to take into account: whether PPSD should have an elected or appointed school board, whether the roles and responsibilities of the existing PPSD advisory boards should change, and whether representatives should be elected at the school level, amongst many others. Providence must also consider how existing structures, like the DWAC, might be reformed to better accomplish the intended goals of the Turnaround Action Plan. While the specifics of how or where change will happen first are yet undetermined, what *is* clear is that reforms in governance, communication, and the distribution of power in PPSD will be the key to reforming every element of education in Providence, from kindergarten curriculum to college prep.

Education researchers and local advocates alike have proven that governance grounded in community engagement, one that continually involves the deliberative voices of parents, students, and teachers and prioritizes equity alongside efficiency, is at the heart of what makes our education systems function for the — and must be a central part of whatever pathway PPSD pursues in the years to come.