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If Texas takes over Fort Worth schools, here's one thing it must do | Opinion

By **The Fort Worth Star-Telegram Editorial Board**

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Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath's decision about the fate of the Fort Worth school district's leadership could come any day now. There's increasingly an expectation that he'll pull the trigger on state intervention.

We remain skeptical that a takeover is appropriate, especially now that there are some signs of progress after years of academic stagnation. But if Morath decides to replace the elected school board, he and the new appointees should keep Superintendent Karen Molinar in place.

Molinar, who's been on the job for a little over a year, has moved swiftly and with purpose in response to nightmarish statistics about how few young students can read or understand math at the appropriate grade level. She moved some administrative staff into classrooms to triage the crisis. The district will have "demo teachers" who both coach other educators and have their own classes, an attempt to improve the workforce by having teachers observe top co-workers. She streamlined reading instruction and boosted resources for it.

Molinar has also added time to the school year for some of the worst-performing campuses, with a focus on reading and math. There may be no bigger factor for catching students up than simply extending their hours in school.

Spring STAAR scores showed elementary- and middle-schoolers made modest progress toward meeting grade level in most subjects. It's too soon to tell if the tide has really turned, but there are enough signs of progress that scrapping Molinar's work and starting over yet again would represent a significant setback.

Molinar has also won the backing of community leaders and parents who sounded the alarm on years of underperformance and finally prompted the school board to act. A newly appointed conservator would have to start from scratch to get buy-in from city, county, business and philanthropic leaders.

It's important to look past the political machinations and remember why this matters: Fort Worth risks consigning entire generations of children to the cycle of poor education and poverty. When students do not master the basics early on — experts generally consider third grade vital for reading — it drags on the rest of their education and their earning power for the rest of their lives. For nearly a decade, about 3 in 10 district third-graders met the threshold in reading.

If that continues, the cities FWISD serves will lag in producing the kind of workers needed in a rapidly changing economy. And that endangers the ongoing growth that should fuel an economic powerhouse and improve quality of life for all.

Texas education chief Mike Morath says action required on Fort Worth schools

Morath has said that the law requires him to intervene after one campus, the Leadership Academy at Forest Oak Sixth Grade, was rated a failure for five straight years. The options are to close the campus or take over management of the district. But the district already closed the academy.

If Morath believes he must act, there's really only one option.



State Education Commissioner Mike Morath fist bumps Oziel Leyva while visiting his eighth grade math class at William James Middle School on Thursday, Aug. 28, 2025. Amanda McCoy amccoy@star-telegram.com

A takeover would last for a minimum of two years. Morath could extend state control if certain academic benchmarks aren't met.

Replacing the trustees whom voters chose to manage the district is a serious step, especially under these criteria. Overriding election results should never be done lightly. But the current school board was slow to act despite evidence of a clear crisis for years. It has improved since Mayor Mattie Parker led an urgent call for reform, but concerns remain about whether the board is up to the task at hand.

For instance, when the district agreed to part ways with Molinar's predecessor, Angélica Ramsey, it handed the keys to Molinar, a longtime employee. Trustees waited months to hire her permanently but conducted no serious search for other candidates.

We say this while acknowledging that hiring Molinar turned out to be the right step. But processes matter, and we're not convinced the board has good ones for governance.

In this case, perhaps the voters need a jolt. Even with the reading and math crisis out in the open, elections for five trustee spots this year drew little competition, and voter turnout was again pathetic. If the voters won't shake the foundation a little, perhaps Morath should.

Results of the Houston school district takeover

The most important question, of course: Will it work?

The takeover of the largest district in Texas, the Houston ISD, should provide some guidance. But the results are decidedly mixed. Morath made a splash with his hire of Superintendent Mike Miles, once the leader of Dallas' district.

Test scores have inched up, particularly at the most troubled schools. But concerns remain that economically disadvantaged students are not progressing. Parents and community leaders complain about communication and public input. Teachers have decried Miles' rigid style. And governance issues, including budget shortfalls and a failed bond initiative, still plague HISD.

Fort Worth needs deeply seated, meaningful progress across the board, not a report card buffed up with temporary fixes. That's why keeping Molinar on the job is the best compromise. A new leader will feel compelled to launch initiatives, make a slew of hires and change priorities.

State oversight can't last forever. But community leaders and parent groups here must take the opportunity of a reset to get serious about cultivating good trustee candidates and engaging more voters in matters that affect the future of the tens of thousands of children in the district.

What no one should want is a temporary fix that fades when the political spotlight shifts. These children all deserve better.

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