



School District Accountability Cannot Compromise Community Input and Engagement

IDRA Testimony against Senate Bill 1365: Relating to public school organization, accountability, and fiscal management, submitted by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., to the Senate Education Committee, March 25, 2021

Dear Chairman Taylor and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes, and I serve as the Deputy Director of Policy at IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association). We are an independent, non-partisan, education non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. We respectfully oppose Senate Bill 1365.

SB 1365 would limit local communities' ability to engage in accountability investigations of their school districts. The bill broadens the commissioner of education's authority to initiate investigations and impose sanctions on school districts for any number of fiscal, academic or other claims. If a district faces accountability sanctions, it is unable to appeal any judicial or other decision. This undermines community input, engagement and oversight of their local schools.

State agencies typically levy accountability sanctions against public school districts for declining academic achievement and fiscal mismanagement. Yet, studies show **that state takeovers do not lead to increased academic achievement** and even further destabilize school districts.¹ This turmoil can **result in greater teacher and staff turnover**² and create barriers to community engagement in district decision-making.

Moreover, state-issued accountability sanctions to remove the local boards of school districts tend to exacerbate racial segregation and are overly used against school boards governed by a majority of trustees of color.³ About 85% of state takeovers across the country affect majority Black and majority Latino school districts.⁴

School districts should be held accountable by their communities and the state education agency to effectively and responsibly serve their students. However, instead of broadening the reach of the commissioner to take any sanctioning action against a school district as SB 1365 allows, school districts with struggling campuses should be able to engage in community-based

¹Wong, K., & Shen, F.X. (2005). "When Mayors Lead Urban Schools: Assessing the Effects of Takeover." In W. Howell (Ed.) *Besieged*. The Brookings Institution; Zimmer, R., Henry, G.T., & Kho, A. (2017). "The Effects of School Turnaround in Tennessee's Achievement School District and Innovation Zones," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(4), 670-696; Morel, D. (2018). *Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

² Greenblatt, A. (2018). "The Problem with School Takeovers," *Governing*. <https://www.governing.com/topics/education/gov-school-takeovers-newark-new-jersey.html>

³ Barnum, M. (2018). "[When states take over school districts, they say it's about academics. This political scientist says it's about race and power.](#)" *Chalkbeat*; Harris (2019); Morel (2018).

⁴ Morel (2018).

turnaround efforts. Additionally, school districts should be able to maintain options for legal recourse and judicial appeals if their communities feel they have been unduly sanctioned.

Recommendations

- Promote community input and engagement by opposing SB 1365; and
- Adopt community-based turnaround efforts – instead of state takeovers or private partnerships – that support holistic, wraparound services to support schools that face multiple challenges.

Public schools must remain accountable to the public, not a single official. Community input and engagement in school progress, improvement efforts, and the accountability system should be upheld as a cornerstone of public schools.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., IDRA Deputy Director of Policy, at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

Resource

Wilson, T., & Latham Sikes, C. (May 2020). State Takeovers of School Districts Don't Work, IDRA Newsletter. <https://idra.news/May20b>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.