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MSCS board proposes alternative to state takeover. What to know

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Memphis-Shelby County Schools and a collection of local partners are proposing an accountability plan to counter a potential state takeover.

The school district, which has struggled with poor academic performance for years, came under fire last year after the ousting of the former superintendent. Marie Feagins, who was selected as the MSCS superintendent after a nearly two-year search, was fired from her position after 9 months. Her firing prompted state lawmakers to, yet again, propose a state takeover.

The district on March 6 announced the "Local Accountability and Transformation Plan," which aims to establish the "structure, oversight and urgency" of the state proposed takeover. Lawmakers from across the county were present at the announcement, from Memphis City Councilman JB Smiley Jr. to Congressman Steve Cohen.

The plan, according to MSCS board chairwoman Natalie McKinney, would comprise four components: governance and accountability, academic success, operational stability and fiscal transparency and data-driven facilities lblueprint. McKinney said over the last year, the school district has seen progress and growth with local leadership in place already.

The plan, according to McKinney, keeps the local board in place with an accountability board in place, while not under state control.

"Simply put, this plan offers a local solution for strengthening our schools while keeping leadership and decision making here in Memphis and Shelby County," McKinney said.

What is in the MSCS plan?

The first component of the plan focuses on governance and accountability through an established council. The council would be made up of school board members, members of the Memphis City Council and Shelby County Commission, both city and county mayors and state lawmakers.

The body, called the Intergovernmental Transformation Council, would collaborate with MSCS on academic, fiscal and operational goals. The council would be an advisory committee, and not usurp power from the locally elected board.

"Improving the school district does not happen in isolation," McKinney said.

The board would also include "strategic stakeholders," from both teachers unions, parents, students, the Greater Memphis Chamber, the Tennessee Department of Education and the superintendent.

According to the district, in addition to establishing goals for the district, the council will:

- "Identify MSCS' most critical education challenges,
- Assess current strategies,
- Provide data-driven recommendations for addressing identified gaps and needed resourses,
- Provide quarterly reports to the public and the Shelby County Delegation."

Other interventions will also be a part of the governance plan, like:

- A Parent Advisory Council
- Reviewing the state forensic audit report
- Implementation of a data dashboard
- Various community engagement opportunities

"This is what co-governance looks like," said Tikeila Rucker, organizer at Memphis For All.

The district will implement an academic plan that will be developed in collaboration with the new oversight council and the Council of Great City Schools. According to the district, curriculum, instruction, professional learning and leadership actions would be aligned across the district.

School closures, in accordance with the plan, would be the new norm for the next three years. According to the plan, the district would plan to close three to five schools annually.

There will also be a "student-centered" framework to "consolidate or close underutilized facilities, to (reinvest) savings into the modernization of fewer, stronger sites and the creation of state of the art learning environments."

Republican lawmaker says state takeover will still happen

During the press conference, leaders from around the county said that Republican lawmakers asked Superintendent Roderick Richmond to propose an alternative to the takeover. The plan, according to leaders, is the alternative.

McKinney said GOP lawmakers asked for the plan to be "something (the district) could live with."

Republican State Sen. Brent Taylor was not present at the press conference but arrived shortly after its conclusion. Taylor said he had not seen the plan, but did say Richmond was asked to draft the plan, but that Taylor did not hear back about it.

As of March 6, legislation for the state takeover has been stuck in a conference committee. The state legislature passed different versions of the bill in both chambers last legislative session, so a meeting among lawmakers is required to come to a decision as to what the state wants to do.

There has been little movement on the conference committee, but Taylor said the state legislature is waiting to have results from the state-funded forensic audit.

He said the state takeover would not be withdrawn in place of the plan drafted by the district.

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