

# Research: Takeovers of urban districts like JCPS usually don't work

[Mandy McLaren](#) Updated 7:52 a.m. ET May 31, 2018

Protesters from the #OurJCPS coalition gathered outside of JCPS headquarters to rally against a possible state takeover [Courier Journal](#)

Kentucky education officials are considering a state takeover of Jefferson County Public Schools despite a lack of evidence that such moves transform academic achievement across large, urban districts.

"If people are expecting quick results and miraculous returns ... they are going to be disappointed," said Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education policy think tank based in Washington, D.C.

Since the late 1980s, states have taken over more than 100 school districts, including several in Kentucky that were small and rural.

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Most research shows takeovers are generally successful when used to fix dysfunctional central offices, especially in cases involving nepotism or financial malfeasance. But at least half a dozen studies examined by [Courier Journal](#) show that when it comes to boosting achievement for those most often claimed to be the beneficiaries of a power grab — students of color or from low-income households — takeovers typically disappoint.

"If you look at the full breadth of state takeovers where you're trying to turn around the performance of the district, the track record is not very good," said Petrilli, who has studied takeovers.

Domingo Morel, a political science professor at Rutgers University Newark and author of the book "Takeover: Race, Education, and American Democracy," said that even if takeovers do lead to higher test scores, it comes at a cost to the local community.

"The school board, which has always been the foundation of a community's political empowerment, essentially does not exist anymore," Morel told Courier Journal.

## **Wayne Lewis' task under a takeover**

The Jefferson County school board, which would be stripped of its power under a takeover, [voted Tuesday night to challenge a recommendation](#) handed down last month for the state to take control of the district.

If the district's appeal fails, a takeover of JCPS — with nearly 101,000 students and a budget of \$1.6 billion — would be the largest such undertaking in Kentucky's history.

Interim Education Commissioner Wayne Lewis has said a takeover is the only way to fix the district's problems, which he said include "unconscionable" test scores, achievement gaps and a student-assignment plan that ["has a distinct, negative impact on the most vulnerable populations of JCPS students."](#)

Takeover critics have questioned his motives, charging that he and a state education board handpicked by Republican Gov. Matt Bevin want to dismantle public education — especially in liberal Louisville.

But Petrilli, of the Fordham Institute, said it's also important to question whether Lewis and the Kentucky Education Department have the experience to pull off a successful takeover.

### **JCPS appeal of state takeover: [How does the process work?](#)**

Most takeovers fail because "the state doesn't necessarily know what to do to improve low-performing schools any better than the local school district does," Petrilli said.

Lewis, who is a University of Kentucky professor and former policy adviser in Bevin's Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, has never governed a school district.

Under a takeover, Lewis has said Superintendent Marty Pollio would continue running the district's day-to-day operations, while locally elected school board members would be demoted to advisers.

But ultimately, Lewis would have control over JCPS' operations, finances and personnel.

## **Other districts' experiences**

When other large, urban districts have been seized by their respective states, it has taken years to see results that are often underwhelming, research shows.

Newark Public Schools, for example, recently regained local control after being under state management for 22 years.

When New Jersey took control of the district in 1995, student achievement initially worsened, with scores continuing to flounder into the new millennium. After a controversial influx of cash from Facebook founder Mark

Zuckerberg in 2010, Newark students improved significantly in English but showed no growth in math, [according to a Harvard study](#).

In more recent takeovers, states have opted for a "portfolio" approach under which they pass off operation of underperforming schools to different entities, including charter school organizations.



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Again, the results have been uneven.

After taking over Philadelphia public schools in 2002, Pennsylvania transferred nearly 50 struggling schools to private operators. But students

who remained behind in schools that were overhauled by the district fared better academically than those who attended the privately managed schools, according to [a 2007 study by the RAND Corp., a nonprofit think tank based in California](#).

Tennessee's Achievement School District took a similar approach, with the state in 2010 either taking over low-performing schools or passing that responsibility to charter operators. At the same time, the state also created "iZones," district-run schools given greater autonomy. [A 2015 Vanderbilt University study](#) found that while students in the iZone schools still under district control made substantial academic gains, achievement at schools managed by the state remained flat.

## **No exact plan for JCPS**

It's unclear what approach Lewis and the Kentucky Department of Education would pursue should a takeover of JCPS be finalized.

Lewis said he doesn't have an exact plan for what state management would look like, [according to several lawmakers who met with him in May](#).

But takeover supporters, including a group of local faith leaders called the Kentucky Pastors in Action Coalition, [have said they hope state management will hasten the opening of charter schools in Jefferson County](#).

Charter schools, which are funded by taxpayer dollars but independently managed, would provide more options for students assigned to JCPS' underperforming schools, the pastor group has said.

Takeover supporters often point to New Orleans' public school system — which today is comprised entirely of charter schools — as proof that state intervention can work.

**JCPS teacher contract:** [What would happen under a state takeover?](#)

Though Louisiana's Recovery School District district was created two years before Hurricane Katrina, it's best known for scooping up a majority of New Orleans' public schools after the 2005 storm.

Before the hurricane, New Orleans students performed far below the statewide average on standardized tests. And after the takeover, their scores rose steadily, with New Orleans students posting faster gains than their peers in other districts also hit by the storm, [according to a 2015 study](#) from the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.

But New Orleans' rapid improvement likely wouldn't have been possible if the city hadn't first been ravaged by the storm, which with mass displacement and shattered infrastructure paved the way for an overhaul of the school district.

A takeover of Jefferson County's 155 public schools would occur in a completely different context and face different challenges, experts warn.

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Morel, the Rutgers professor, said takeovers can be costly in the community.

Before Katrina, New Orleans' teaching force was predominantly made up of black, veteran teachers. More than a decade later, the teaching force is now comprised of many young, white teachers with relatively little experience.

Under a state takeover, New Orleans transformed into an all-charter school district, essentially eliminating neighborhood schools and making it more difficult for working-class parents to be closely involved in their kids' education, critics say.



"To bring about the economic and political decay of a community, all to say there are some gains in reading and math test scores, it just kind of boggles my mind," Morel said.

## Are there consequences?

Other urban districts, including Washington, D.C., and Denver, have seen test scores rise under state management. But controversial reforms in those cities have been met with community resistance and have not reversed persistent achievement gaps.

In Jefferson County, critics say they are wary of the consequences of a takeover, with many speculating that state officials would try to erode teacher protections and parent input.

Critics also charge that a takeover could lead to the re-segregation of Jefferson County's public schools. Under a takeover, Lewis would have the power to scrap the district's student-assignment plan, which strives to create diverse schools.

Lewis also would have the power to authorize charter schools in the district — a reform measure that almost always comes hand-in-hand with takeovers of urban districts.

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While charter supporters say they will expand opportunities for historically disadvantaged students, critics say they will siphon money from already under-resourced traditional public schools.

Petrilli, of the Fordham Institute, said the "big question" for Jefferson County is "not just who should be in charge, it's also what is the reform strategy that is going to get dramatically better results."

Jefferson County residents may not learn what changes a takeover will bring until after state control is finalized. A hearing before the state education board is expected to take place in late June.

If the district's appeal fails, it could take the battle to court.

Having observed takeovers in other states, Petrilli urged Jefferson County and the state to "come together around a reform plan and stick with it."

"The adults need to stop all the bickering and get stuff done," he said.

On the backside of Churchill Downs, Gov. Matt Bevin talks about the state takeover of JCPS. Matt Stone, Louisville Courier Journal

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