

Few see Mayor as Dallas Schools Chief

09:11 AM CST on Tuesday, February 24, 2009

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Some city and state leaders are calling the possibility that Mayor Tom Leppert could take over the Dallas school district a long shot, though he is still not discussing whether he has considered it.

"That would be a dramatic change from governance models we've had in Texas," said Dan Branch, R-Dallas, co-chairman of the Dallas delegation to the Legislature.

Branch said no area lawmakers are expected to file bills to give the mayor control of the district. He added that the delegation is looking to Superintendent Michael Hinojosa and a new chief financial officer to get things fixed at DISD.

It's unclear how serious Leppert was when he asked a state senator to sponsor such a bill a couple of months ago, or when word got to a high-level business leader that the mayor was interested in taking over the struggling district. Whether it's a real plan, a test of the political waters or something he's no longer pursuing, Leppert has not taken the opportunity on multiple occasions in recent days to stop the conversation.

"We don't have anything more to say," said Leppert's chief of staff, Chris Heinbaugh. Asked if the mayor intends to publicly discuss the matter, Heinbaugh replied, "Not at this point." He added that the mayor hasn't created a formal proposal for controlling or overseeing DISD.

Although most area leaders have shunned the idea, a few say Dallas should consider it.

Former Mayor Ron Kirk and a Stanford University expert on the subject say the possibility should be explored.

Kirk open to it

Kirk, nominated by President Barack Obama to be U.S. trade representative, said Monday that Texas should undertake an "honest assessment" of how public schools are governed, even if it means dismantling elected school boards, which he says lack the financial and technical skills needed to oversee troubled urban districts.

"Good for the mayor," Kirk said. "I understand his frustration. A mayor spends half his time talking about the state of public schools. ... Whether there's a legal nexus or not, people look toward the mayor for help."

Few knew of idea

The Dallas Morning News reported Sunday that Leppert had talked to Sen. Royce West about writing a bill allowing the mayor to assert control over the district, according to the senator. A prominent business leader confirmed knowing about the mayor's interest in such a plan.

But many lawmakers, City Council members, school board trustees, the city manager and Hinojosa said they were not aware of Leppert's idea until the article appeared.

Five lawmakers contacted Monday expressed doubt that the Legislature would allow the mayor to take over the DISD or that Texas Education Agency Commissioner Robert Scott would appoint him conservator.

Scott did not address the conservatorship issue in a written statement he issued Monday. He stated that he'll continue working with DISD to ensure that it addresses its budget shortfall. DISD is projecting a \$30 million deficit, even after making significant program changes and laying off more than 500 employees, most of them teachers.

"I have certainly had conversations with legislators, as well as city leaders, about the status of Dallas ISD, but I have nothing further to announce at this time," Scott said in the statement.

Rep. Roberto Alonzo, the Democratic co-chairman of the delegation, said he didn't see either scenario occurring.

"Some legislators have met with Scott," Alonzo said. "He knows that there has been progress made in DISD and that kind of action is not necessary."

Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, a former school trustee, said that as far as he knows, Leppert hasn't approached anyone in the House about taking over the district.

He doubts the issue will be debated this session.

"It's getting late in the game," Anchia said.

He had no comment about the merits of the idea.

Some educators who have studied mayoral takeovers of school districts said there are advantages and disadvantages. Urban school districts in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Chicago are overseen by mayors.

Michael Kirst, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, said districts taken over by mayors have shown incremental academic gains and leadership stability.

He said DISD's history of problems appears to make it a candidate for some type of mayoral oversight.

But the downside, Kirst said, is that districts swap grass-roots democratic representation of an elected school board for executive leadership.

"You decide as a city that you're willing to make that trade-off," Kirst said. "There's no question, all of these mayoral systems have shaken up the system. If what you want is change, you're more than likely to get it through the mayor."

Kirst also said mayoral control works better when a city has a strong-mayor form of government, in which the mayor has more power and autonomy than other council members. The mayor's post in Dallas is largely ceremonial.

Logistics uncertain

It's unclear whether a city charter amendment would be required for Leppert to take control of the district.

Dallas Mayor Pro Tem Elba Garcia, the city's second-ranking elected official, said Monday that she would never support a mayoral takeover and doesn't see "too much future" in such a plan.

"The city charter is very specific about our functions as mayor and council members, and the school district isn't part of it," Garcia said. "We'd have to go to the voters about this. You are talking about changing the whole way the city does business."

"And I have not had a conversation with the mayor about this, which surprises me, because the mayor is usually a good communicator with the council."

Other council members said they are waiting to hear from the mayor on the issue.

"The ball is in the mayor's court," District 14 council member Angela Hunt said. "I'm not going to dismiss this idea outright. I don't think any of us feel DISD is the school district we want it to be. But ... I'm not sure city government is in the best position to exact change in the school district when we don't have our house entirely in order."

Some groups upset

Some outside groups also are weighing in – and questioning the mayor's silence.

"A lot of people in the Hispanic community are infuriated that we would not be notified of the mayor wanting to do this," said Michael Gonzales, chairman of the Hispanic Leadership Forum. "We want to know why this wasn't brought to the community. The only times we seem to get called by the city is when they want our help to pass a bond program."

Gonzales plans a meeting with some community leaders Wednesday to discuss the issue.

Rena Honea, president of the Alliance-AFT teachers association in Dallas, thinks it would be terrible for Leppert to control DISD. "It's scary, extremely scary," she said. "The man is a businessman; he's not an educator."

Staff writer Kent Fischer contributed to this report.