

NEWS // EDUCATION

Help wanted: Texas' superintendent posts becoming political pressure cooker

New Fort Worth schools chief faced backlash even before taking the post.

By **Meghan Mangrum**

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Gift Article



New Fort Worth ISD Superintendent Dr. Angelica Ramsey addresses the media after signing her contract in Fort Worth, Texas on September 20, 2022. (Robert W. Hart/Special Contributor)

Robert W. Hart

Even before the new Fort Worth superintendent's name was announced, skeptics had already combed through Angélica Ramsey's background and attacked her across social media.

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They decried her for pushing a "Latina critical race theory" agenda, alleging she would promote progressive ideals since her doctoral dissertation referenced CRT - despite the fact she earned that degree from the conservative Liberty University founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell.

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Community members packed [the board meeting in late August](#) when trustees named Ramsey the sole finalist for the district's top job.

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Many criticized the decision and warned of the impending consequences if she ushered in "woke" policies.

This is the climate facing many new school district leaders. The superintendent job has always required political finesse but is now consumed by [deeply divisive culture war fights](#) on top of major classroom challenges, such as teacher fatigue and widespread student learning losses due to the pandemic.

Many superintendents increasingly find themselves under attack as local and national conservative groups target school board seats, and communities get riled up over book bans and how history is taught. So why would anyone want the job?

To focus on students, Ramsey said.

"The noise is the noise, but what is most important is what we are delivering to children," she said. "We have to push back on the rhetoric."



Dr. Angelica Ramsey is surrounded by Fort Worth ISD Board of Education members from left, Dr. Camille Rodriguez, Wallace Bridges, Dr. Michael Ryan and Quinton 'Q' Phillips after signing her contract to become Fort Worth ISD superintendent in Fort Worth, Texas on September 20, 2022. (Robert W. Hart/Special Contributor)

Political polarization and mounting challenges brought on by the pandemic are contributing to leadership turnover. At least 10 North Texas superintendents have stepped down in the past year.

Nationally, the annual turnover rate for superintendents was about 15% in recent years, but estimates suggest about a quarter of superintendents had left their positions by the end of the last two school years, according to the American Association of School Administrators.

On average, superintendents stay on the job for about five to six years, according to the group. A pre-pandemic survey by the Texas Association of School Boards found that superintendents in the state had been in their roles for about four years as of 2018.

Overall, Texas has more than 40 superintendent vacancies, according to TexasISD.com, a website that tracks the openings statewide.

Now Grapevine-Colleyville is among the latest districts seeking a new leader.

Some worry politics pushed out GCISD superintendent Robin Ryan after 13 years leading the district. Ryan [announced recently that he was retiring by the end of the year](#).

A wave of new school board members in several area districts - [elected with the money and support of conservative political action committees and big donors](#) - have ushered in swift changes and divided communities, including in Grapevine-Colleyville.

A new conservative majority on GCISD's board quickly ushered in [a wave of new policies](#) impacting how teachers can talk about race and gender, what bathrooms transgender students can use and giving trustees more say over what books are available to students early this school year.

Trustees are already butting heads, with one longtime trustee recently [arguing she is the target of a "political witch hunt"](#) by some fellow board members after she criticized the new policies.

But Robin didn't address the infighting when he announced his retirement.

In a [Sept. 23 statement](#) announcing his decision, the outgoing superintendent credited the "incredible level of community and district support" as the hallmark of the district's success but also said that leadership could bring new ideas to the table.

North Texas isn't a stranger to culture war fights.

Last year in Richardson, for example, school leaders faced months of criticism over the district's [mask mandate](#) and [efforts to address inequities in classrooms](#), which some conflated as critical race theory - an academic framework predominantly taught in graduate school that probes the way policies and laws uphold systemic racism, such as in education, housing or criminal justice.

By December, the rising tensions culminated in the resignations of both the [school board president](#) and Superintendent Jeannie Stone.

When Tabitha Branum began her tenure as Richardson's new superintendent in August, she intentionally made her priorities clear.

"Instead of allowing the divisive rhetoric and narrative to be something that consumes us, we were going to shift that narrative to focusing on what we do want and how we can move together to unite around things for kids," Branum said during a recent panel.



Richardson ISD superintendent Tabitha Branum (right) speaks alongside Dallas ISD superintendent Stephanie Elizalde during the Dallas Regional Chamber's 2022 State of Public Education at the Moody Performance Hall, Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022 in Dallas.

Eliás Valverde II/Staff Photographer

Being a superintendent isn't an easy job, said Kevin Brown, executive director of the Texas Association of School Administrators.

Between managing staff, ensuring students are being educated and working with the community, the skill set required of superintendents is the same as for CEOs of large companies, said Brown, a former superintendent.

"You sign up for it because you want to make a difference in the lives of children. You want to help communities grow," he said. But sometimes, "that becomes impossible because the local community is so divided on issues that no matter what you do, you're in somebody's crosshairs."

Taking on challenges

The challenges of the job attracted Ramsey to Fort Worth.

The 75,000-student district is predominantly made up of Latino and Black families with about a third of its students learning English. Ramsey saw FWISD as a place where the Army veteran could work with a diverse community and help improve outcomes for students that she was once very much like.

Growing up in a Mexican household in California, Ramsey started school speaking Spanish and having to navigate classes in a new language.

After serving in the Army, she took an alternative route to become an educator - similar to many teachers across the state. She started as a classroom aide before becoming a teacher, then a principal.

In her previous West Texas district, Ramsey led the 26,000-student Midland ISD for a year before taking the job in Fort Worth.

"I lean into challenges, and I don't like being bored," Ramsey said. As she read what the district needed in a new leader - transparency, a willingness to collaborate and listen, visible in schools - she said she thought, "I can do this. And not only can I do this, but I'm going to have a lot of fun doing it."

The critics didn't deter her. And the detractors have been plentiful.

The familiar scenes at Fort Worth ISD board meetings over the past two years have included [protesting parents and heated fights](#) over masks, critical race theory and what children are reading in schools.



Parents fill the room at Fort Worth Independent School District's meeting in Fort Worth, Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. Parents rallied with signs protesting the teaching of critical race theory and asking Superintendent Kent Scribner to resign.

Rebecca Slezak/Staff Photographer

Jennifer Treger, one of four parents who was a plaintiff in a lawsuit fighting the district's mask mandate during the pandemic, also spoke out against Ramsey's hiring.

During the Aug. 30 meeting when the board announced Ramsey as its sole finalist, Treger joined several other speakers expressing concern about Ramsey's priorities and track record in Midland.

"Clearly this new superintendent is very passionate about CRT, as her thesis was on this very subject," Treger told trustees. "CRT is very divisive, and I really hope we can keep the focus on reading, writing and arithmetic."

Ramsey said she's spent hours watching past FWISD board meetings, acknowledging that one could get a sense that the community doesn't support what's happening in the district.

"And yet, for every one negative email or negative comment someone put on social media, I've gotten three or five positive ones," she noted.

Pat Linares, a former interim superintendent in Fort Worth who now is a consultant conducting leadership searches for Texas districts, said that swell of support could be due to Ramsey addressing criticism head on.

Ramsey has said - in no uncertain terms - that Fort Worth schools do not teach critical race theory. [It is against state law](#). As for her dissertation, the new school chief has said she spent time studying the work of 10 Latina principals in two states while obtaining her doctorate degree to examine changing demographics and what positive impacts Latina leaders can have in schools.

Ramsey said it is important to allow families and community members to share their opinions and to be heard.

But if the negativity and criticism continues against public schools, and if she can bear the brunt of it to shield her teachers, that is what she'll do, she said.

'The politics have gotten meaner'

Leading a school district wasn't always like this, though school leaders have always had detractors, some experts say.

But the politics have gotten meaner, Linares said.

"The politics of education has gotten exponentially worse," she said. "That has helped to make certain people decide, 'I'm too old for this.'"

Brown worries that the stress is running talented people out of the profession.

"You see that through teacher shortages, you see that through principal shortages. They're either retiring, stepping aside, or in some cases, being fired," he said. That hurts the talent pipeline for future superintendents.

And frequent turnover at the top can be incredibly disruptive to a school district, [affecting teacher retention](#) and, ultimately, student achievement.

Some leaders are able to avoid the crossfire. But that is only possible when superintendents and their trustees work together as a team on a clear path forward so sustainable progress can be made, Brown said.

"It's very easy to tear something down, but it takes years of sustained effort to build something up," he said.

When relationships turn bad, superintendents can have trouble getting buy-in for new programs or might find trustees questioning their every move, experts say.

When those relationships become dysfunctional - like has played out in some Texas school districts recently - "then we've really lost our way," Brown added.

The superintendents of Richardson, Dallas and Mesquite all started their new roles within the past few months. All three of the leaders essentially had risen through the ranks of their respective districts.

At a recent event, the three emphasized the importance of a well-functioning, supportive board to ensure they can do their jobs.

Mesquite's Angel Rivera said that despite the challenges schools face today, he and the trustees stay united.

"We're not divisive, and we are focusing on what's best for students in Mesquite ISD," he said.

Though trustees have different experiences and might have an empathetic ear to some of Fort Worth ISD's loudest critics, Ramsey said she feels supported by her new board.



New Fort Worth ISD Superintendent Dr. Angelica Ramsey addresses Fort Worth ISD members and the public after signing her contract in Fort Worth, Texas on September 20, 2022. (Robert W. Hart/Special Contributor)

Robert W. Hart

Ramsey knows it will take time to learn what is important to all Fort Worth ISD stakeholders as such things that aren't always reflected during the often contentious school board meetings.

During her first 100 days, Ramsey plans to meet with different district administrators, teachers and community partners.

"I want real, authentic stakeholder engagement," she said. "In essence, I'm asking everyone the same two questions: What do we do well here in FWISD, and what do we need to change?"

It is her hope to "create alliances" and find places where everyone can agree.

"The entire community, regardless of where you are, even with the conversations that political pundits are having, I don't think there is one person who would say 'I want the children of FWISD to fail,'" she said.

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Meghan Mangrum