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DALLAS — What exactly is the Home Rule debate about at the Dallas Independent School District?

Who is pushing it... and why?

It could be the hottest topic in the City of Dallas right now, but the most difficult question to answer.

The idea appears to have come from Dallas ISD trustee Mike Morath, and one of the biggest proponents of Home Rule is Mayor Mike Rawlings.

While the campaign to push for Home Rule is gathering steam, so is the push to kill it.

In short, Home Rule is a provision in state law that would let DISD break away from state governance; the citizens of Dallas would create their own governing body.

The DISD school board as we know it would likely go away.

Home Rule would start with collection of about 25,000 signatures, which would trigger the formation of a committee to draft a new DISD education charter. Twenty-five percent of eligible voters would have to approve that charter.

But that's where the details end, and even DISD board Member Mike Morath, a key proponent, admits it.

"Nobody really knows what that commission is going to write," Morath said. "I have a whole host of ideas that would be great to include in there, but I don't think I'm going to be one of the Commission members."

Another key proponent, Mayor Mike Rawlings, is also short on specifics.

"I believe we can create a situation where the kids are, the best is demanded of them, the best is taught them, and we have a sense of accountability," the mayor told a group of Latino city leaders at a small gathering. "You say, 'Well, tell me how exactly that would happen?' I don't know, but we will talk about it."

But minutes later, after some of the attendees began asking unfriendly questions, Rawlings abruptly ended the meeting and walked out.

It was the first major indication that the Home Rule campaign is off to a shaky start. That's especially true since many school trustees — and some city leaders — say they have no idea what's being promoted.

"The thing that bothers me is not really the merits of the Home Rule discussion; it's the sort of secretive way it's been handled," said City Council member Phillip Kingston.

Kingston says a conversation he had with Trustee Mike Morath left him with the impression the goal is to replace a historically divisive DISD board with the mayor himself.

"But what he is saying is, we need this governance change in order to affect a move to mayoral control, which is something he was advocating," Kingston said.

Opposition is also building over the involvement of a mystery figure, Houston billionaire and former DISD graduate John Arnold, who is reportedly helping bankroll the Home Rule campaign.

"Dallas does not need a former Enron trader and hedge-fund manager from Houston to remove our democratically-elected trustees and replace them with hand-picked appointees," said Michael McNaughton of Dallas Friends of Public Education.

Rawlings said he walked out of the meeting last week because things were getting a little out of hand, but that he still wants an open dialogue.

The general public will be invited to join that Home Rule dialogue for the first time at a town hall meeting set for 7 p.m.

Thursday at the Preston Royal library, 5626 Royal Lane.

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