

### **The Columbus Dispatch: GOP Sets Sights on Public Education**

On balance, the GOP initiatives on public education are more troublesome than helpful.

The Universal Voucher Bill—HB290—is particularly troubling: a full-scale assault on the system of common schools required by the Ohio Constitution.

The constitutional challenge to the EdChoice voucher program is the only path public school advocates have to stop this insidious movement.

**GOP sets sights on public education**

**Bills would create systemic change in Ohio**

**Anna Staver**

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It seems like every Republican lawmaker is sponsoring an education bill in this General Assembly.

From expanding school vouchers to posting curriculums online and restricting how districts can raise local dollars, the Ohio Legislature is awash in education reform ideas.

Taken separately some of the bills seem like small, incremental tweaks. But viewed together they represent a fundamental remaking of Ohio's public education system.

"When you look at all these bills together, I think this paints a really clear picture that there is an attack happening on public education," Ohio Federation of Teachers President Melissa Cropper said. "The right wing is trying to divide us and pass bills to create a culture war."

But Chad Aldis, a school choice advocate and vice president of Ohio's Fordham Foundation, thinks that a lot of these bills are simply trial balloons or conversation starters: interesting, but ultimately unlikely to pass.

"I think the smart money is on there not being much going on until next January when there's a new General Assembly in place," Aldis said. "Nothing seems to be moving rapidly through either chamber related to education."

Here's a look at eight of those proposed changes and what they would do.

#### **Universal vouchers (House Bill 290)**

The biggest potential change lurking in the legislature is the "backpack bill." If passed, every school-aged child would be eligible for either a \$5,500 (K-8 grade) or \$7,500 (9-12 grade) voucher.

Parents could spend these dollars on private school tuition, homeschool supplies, advanced placement testing or education therapies.

"HB 290 would create a true money follows the child approach to education funding," bill sponsor Rep. Riordan McClain, R-Upper Sandusky, said when he introduced the idea in October.

The bill had its first hearing in February and one of the biggest outstanding questions was how much could this cost Ohio.

"I can't imagine a fiscal note of less than \$1 billion if you are going to give all current private and home school students a voucher," Aldis said.

And that's what worries many Democrats and public school advocates.

Ohio doesn't have \$1 billion to spare in its budget. Nor can the state shave that money from its education funds without making serious cuts.

"It's about providing tuition subsidies to people who have already chosen not to go to public school," said Steve Dyer, the director of government relations for the Ohio Education Association.

### **Teaching "divisive concepts" (House Bills 322 and 327)**

One of the biggest issues in education over the last year has been the debate over how schools teach about racism, slavery and other "divisive concepts."

Supporters believe a set of rules outlining the parameters of these discussions will protect the "accurate" teaching of American history and keep teachers from pushing "dangerous" and "divisive" ideologies onto students. Opponents say the laws are designed to "whitewash" history, intimidate teachers and keep kids from participating in the political process.

Lawmakers haven't voted on either, but House Bill 327 has had five committee hearings and multiple amendments. The sponsors say they are working hard to find consensus around language that can pass.

### **Posting curriculums online (House Bill 529)**

Republican Rep. Brett Hillyer proposed a way to "tone down" the heated rhetoric around "divisive concepts" by mandating teachers post their curriculums online.

"I don't have to get into the minutia of what is being taught," Hillyer said when introducing the idea in January. "I can just say 'Hey, let's make it available to parents.'" The Tuscarawas County

Republican didn't think his plan would create extra work for educators either. Ohio law already requires schools to provide course material upon request.

But Heather Stambaugh, a history teacher from Greenon Local School District, said it's not about the work so much as the message.

"It's the implication of 'Look, they are hiding something,' " she said.

### **Transgender student-athletes (House Bill 61 and Senate Bill 132)**

Ohio joined the international debate about how transgender athletes compete in high school and college sports with the introduction of two bills last year.

Both pieces of legislation were fairly straightforward: Transgender girls couldn't play on female sports teams. And schools could face civil lawsuits for knowingly violating the rules.

The sponsors said it was about fairness, but LGBTQ advocates called it discrimination.

House Bill 61 hasn't had a hearing since June 2021. Rep. Jena Powell, R-Arcanum, tried to attach the idea to another piece of legislation shortly after that second hearing but was unsuccessful.

As for Senate Bill 132, Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, called it a priority for the fall of 2021, but the bill – and many others – quickly took a backseat to redistricting.

Neither bill has received a vote.

### **Increasing school voucher amounts and eligibility (House Bill 110)**

One change that has already become law during this General Assembly is an expansion of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship programs.

When the state's two-year budget passed in June, it included about \$1,000 extra for each voucher recipient. The scholarship amounts went to \$5,500 for K-8 and \$7,500 per year for high school students.

The budget also funded school vouchers directly instead of asking local districts to pay the private schools, and it tied future increases to the school funding formula. That means the Ed-Choice amounts will increase when the base cost per public school pupil goes up.

Aldis was pleased with all these changes, saying they help parents make better choices for their children's education. But Cropper called the scholarship increases just another way to cut funding for public schools.

### **Eliminate appointed members on State Board of Education (House Bill 298)**

Ohio's State Board of Education sets the curriculum standards for public schools, revokes the licenses of disgraced teachers and helps create the broad direction for education.

And the board is made up of 19 members, but only 11 are elected. The other eight are appointed by the governor.

House Bill 298 would eliminate those appointments and shrink the board down to 11 members.

"There is no standard for accountability here," Rep. Adam Bird, R-New Richmond, said. "There are no voters back home they have to answer to."

Public school advocates have largely remained neutral on the bill, but the Ohio School Boards Association came out in support of the change.

Still, some Democrats worry that this is another way to make the state board more ideologically conservative.

Seven appointed members voted for an anti-racism resolution back in the summer of 2020, and two of them refused to repeal it after it became a lightning rod for conservatives around the state.

Gov. Mike DeWine asked those two of the appointed members to resign in October.

House Bill 298 has had three committee hearings but none since October 2021.

### **Restricting school district roles in local development (House Bill 123)**

When a local government wants to lure a new business to town, it can create a community investment area.

What these areas do is exempt the area from property taxes for a certain period of time, and they can be designated for residential, commercial or industrial development projects.

Schools traditionally get to object if the tax exemptions would cost them more than 50%. House Bill 123 would raise that threshold to a 75% loss.

And when an agreement can't be reached, the bill increases the amount of new employee payroll a company has to generate before a local municipality must make annual payments to the district.

Republican Rep. Mark Fraizer says these and other changes will simplify what he sees as an overly bureaucratic process that has "unnecessary impacts and limitations to economic and workforce development."

But Guillermo Bermejillo, a fellow with Policy Matters Ohio, said the bill prioritizes “hypothetical outside investors over the flesh and blood children of Ohio.”

“This bill will incentivize careless investment practices while limiting the ability of local school boards to have a say in decisions that affect school revenue,” he added.

HB 123 passed the House in May 2021 and recently had its third hearing in the Senate.

#### **Board of revision (House Bill 126)**

Ohio is one of a handful of states that lets public school districts legally challenge the value of any home or parcel in their area.

Republicans think the practice has gotten out of hand. Districts are hiring attorneys and squeezing homeowners for more money.

But public school districts such as Columbus say businesses regularly exploit loopholes in code that let them avoid paying property taxes; they argue these cases make sure everyone pays their fair share.

It’s not so much about the money for teachers like Stambaugh though. It’s about the message it sends to districts like hers that lack money for simple things.

“We haven’t purchased textbooks in history in almost a decade,” Stambaugh said. “Those are the real issues education faces.”

House Bill 126 passed both chambers, but changes made in the Senate still need to be approved by the House.

*Anna Staver is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau, which serves the Columbus Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer, Akron Beacon Journal and 18 other affiliated news organizations across Ohio.*