

Recent Cleveland Plain Dealer Editorial Regarding the Legislature's Stampede to Remove the Operation of the State Education Agency to the Governor's Office.

Ohioans in 1953 removed the State Education agency from the Governor's office to a State Board of Education via a constitutional amendment. This 134th General Assembly in a matter of hours has attempted to trample on the Constitution by passing SB178 in a lame duck session. This General Assembly has no shame, no integrity.

The editorial states:

A curious thing happened on Nov. 8. Amid a stampede of Republican victories in Ohio, voters in state education board districts ousted two GOP incumbents in favor of Democrats and elected another Democrat in a contested district previously held by a Republican. While the races were officially nonpartisan, the outcome gave board members who'd campaigned to take culture-war issues off the table at the State Board of Education a much larger voice.

The 19-member board includes 11 elected board members and eight appointed by the governor. In recent years, the board has turned into a hotbed of culture-war debates over racism-related instruction and LGBTQ student rights.

But after the election, another curious thing happened. In response to this clear expression of voter concern that the State Board of Education needed to refocus on the nuts and bolts of educating Ohio children, a substitute bill gutting the board and transferring most of its key powers to an extensively revamped state education bureaucracy emerged in the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

Virtually overnight, one-page Senate Bill 178 suddenly became 2,144-page Substitute Senate Bill 178. By way of comparison, the state's two-year budget bill that passed last year -- after months of debate and revision -- was only 2,438 pages long.

Sub. SB 178 doesn't just gut the State Board of Education. It completely reorganizes the Ohio Department of Education and creates a new chain of command for education policy in Ohio. It will take key policymaking out of the hands of a state board subject to Sunshine Law rules and with required public input, and give it to a new Director of Education and Workforce named by the governor with the advice and consent of the state Senate.

That's a radical rewrite of education policy in Ohio. From the adoption of minimum educational standards, development of model curricula and academic standards to the administration of state scholarship programs, it transfers key policymaking from a public board into the bowels of a state bureaucracy. And those are only among the bill's highlights. What else lurks in those 2,000-plus pages of legislation?

Yet, this Wednesday, just a day after hearing from the bill's opponents, the committee voted 5-1 to push the bill out for a full floor vote, and the Senate immediately passed Sub. SB 178 on a lopsided 22-7 vote, sending it to the House.

Cleveland's Dale Martin, appointed to finish out the term of resigned state Sen. Sandra Williams, cast the lone Democratic "yes" vote, while two Republican state senators -- Kristina Roegner of Hudson and Niraj Antani of Montgomery County -- voted "no" with Democrats. Discouragingly, several local state senators -- including Matt Dolan of Chagrin Falls, Nathan H. Manning of North Ridgeville, and Jerry Cirino of Kirtland -- voted in favor of a bill so clearly designed to suppress the public's voice in state education policy.

The Ohio House should say "no" to Sub. SB 178, if only on the wise principle that radical revisions to how Ohio oversees education policy and provides for public input into same should not be made with only days to review 2,144 pages of legal minutiae.

It has to be said, in fairness, that the State Board of Education has not covered itself in glory, bogging down in culture-war battles and failing to name a new state superintendent of public instruction. The job has been vacant for 15 months, not counting the 11 days that Steve Dackin spent in the office before resigning under an ethical cloud.

But the State Board of Education provides Ohioans with benefits, too, including transparency in educational policy discussions and voter input into the choice of most board members. Successive governors have tried to squeeze the board's powers and the voters' voice on its members, but without being able to gain full control.

Last January, Gov. Mike DeWine redistricted State Board of Education districts in ways that appeared to target some of the elected board members who'd opposed him on last year's repeal of the board's anti-racism resolution.

Voters then turned around and elected three new board members who campaigned on returning the board to educational policy pursuits. That expression of the voters' will shouldn't have prompted a frontal assault on the State Board of Education itself, supported by Gov. DeWine. But it appears it has.

Now it's up to the Ohio House to shut the door on misguided Substitute Senate Bill 178, and let newly elected lawmakers debate in a new legislative session next year whether or what kind of State Board of Education reforms are needed.

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