

Marilou Johaneck: Ohio Republicans hellbent on turning state's public education system into political rubber stamp

The March 7 [Ohio Capital Journal](#) commentary by Marilou Johaneck is spot-on regarding the legislation that transfers the functions of the State Board of Education to the governor's office. The issue is control, not improvement of educational opportunities for students.

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Dishonest and dangerous. No other way to describe Matt Huffman's fever dream to wrest control of educational policymaking from educators at the Ohio Department of Education and the state school board. The Ohio Senate president is hellbent on turning the state's independent public education system into a political entity that he and other Republican lawmakers can align with their anti-public school agenda. Period.

The legislative vehicle to execute Huffman's goal is Senate Bill 1, which was passed and sent to the Ohio House last week. The measure puts the governor in charge of the ODE and downgrades the duties of the education board to busy work. Apparently, it's not enough for GOP autocrats in the Statehouse that the Republican governor already controls eight out of 19 board members that he appoints.

Huffman wants tight partisan management of all education matters in the state with compliant leadership in the executive branch subject to confirmation and coercion by Senate Republicans. Then Katy bar the door for the beginning of the end of Ohio's constitutional system of common schools. Senate Bill 1 is a blatant power grab to privatize public education in Ohio to such a degree that public schools cease to exist.

Hyperbole? Not when the Lima Republican driving the take-over of ODE and diminishment of a duly elected statewide board is also driving passage of universal school vouchers destined to deplete funding and resources for public education. The GOP ploy to inject partisanship and politics into Ohio's nonpartisan public school system has been framed as "historic" reform by Huffman to "improve transparency, accountability and outcomes for our children."

Nope. Not even close. The truth is Senate Bill 1 shifts oversight of the education department to the Republican governor to *replace* accountability with administration spin. The Senate Republican who chairs the education committee had the audacity to submit that legislators — who gerrymandered themselves into safe districts to avoid accountability — could be trusted to ensure responsible stewardship of their education overhaul scheme.

"I believe that if we put the executive branch in charge of the department," said state Sen. Andrew Brenner, "we help as members of the General Assembly hold him [gubernatorial lackey anointed education czar] and the department accountable through checks and balances." Right. When hell freezes over. Supersized Republican majorities in the legislature (thanks to gerrymandering) answer to no one and aim to keep it that way.

Back to the sham that is Senate Bill 1. Far from improving transparency about educational policymaking from a political appointee who reports to the governor who reports to Huffman, the seismic shift from professional educators to power-hungry ideologues offers zero help to improve academic outcomes for 90% of Ohio students in public school districts.

Transferring a state education agency — serving a broad constituency of teachers, administrators, parents, students, local communities, etc. — to the governor's office won't address the challenges of economically disadvantaged students in Ohio. Seizing control of ODE and neutralizing the state school board won't level the educational playing field for 46.4% of public school kids dealing with abject poverty and everything from housing and hunger to domestic violence and drug abuse.

There is no compelling evidence that Ohio Senate leaders have any outcome-based strategy to give impoverished students a fighting chance to succeed. But there *is* plenty of proof they have a plan to enhance government giveaways for parochial school students who never attended public schools and to emphasize more support for charter schools. The governor's budget-heavy priorities on charters and vouchers are Exhibit A.

Proponents of Senate Bill 1 bloviate about "abysmal" test scores, poor proficiency levels and a dysfunctional ed board as reason to rob Ohio voters of power and give it to the governor. Their political smokescreen is meant to obscure the legislature's own dismal, dysfunctional, sluggish response to low-performance districts, notorious charter scandals, and schools desperate for more funding.

"If the legislature wanted to do something to improve education," said retired state education official (and relentless public school advocate) Bill Phillis, "they would have started 25 years ago, they would have complied with the Ohio Supreme Court decision and funded education to the constitutional level of being thorough and efficient. The issue is sufficient resources to accommodate the needs of kids."

But sufficiently providing *all* public school students with opportunities to thrive is not the objective of Senate Bill 1. "It has nothing to do with improving educational opportunities or expanding career tech opportunities and everything to do with control," Phillis bemoaned. "It has everything to do with privatizing the public system."

The former teacher, principal, and superintendent notes that a majority of Ohio voters passed a constitutional amendment (in 1953) to *remove* the state education agency from the governor's partisan grip and establish an independent board of education *precisely to avoid what's happening now with the politically-motivated Senate Bill 1*. Huffman, never one to let a constitutional amendment get in his way, (redistricting) aims to arbitrarily change the rules under the ruse of rescue.

That's dangerous and deceitful. The people of Ohio, not legislators, ought to decide whether the state education agency should be transferred back to the governor's office, argues Phillis. He's right. If only we had a functioning democracy in the state to teach our Columbus overlords about representative government.