

Heights Coalition for Public Education weighs-in on Representative Jamie Callender's outrageous HB671—the Bully Bill.

The Coalition/Vouchers Hurt Ohio litigation effort needs more legislative proposals like HB671 to be introduced. This bill highlights the untoward spirit of some of the leaders in the General Assembly.

The practice of punishing anyone who challenges their autocratic authority is alive and well at Capital Square in Columbus.

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The Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District (CH-UH) is a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of private-school tuition vouchers. State Rep. Jamie Callender (R-Lake County) introduced House Bill 671 last month to punish participating school districts by withholding state funding until they renounce support for the litigation.

It's blackmail.

Ohio provides about \$2,400 for each student in the Heights schools. This legislation, if enacted, would strip more than \$10.6 million from the district's already-stretched budget, and we are not alone. When the suit was filed in 2021, it was supported by 100 school districts. Now more than 330 are involved. All are at risk of losing precious state financial support.

Former state legislator Stephen Dyer, a member of the steering committee for the lawsuit, projected that the misguided legislation would strip more than \$4.3 billion from the plaintiff districts. It would undermine the education available to about 700,000 students in 78 of Ohio's 88 counties.

Can you imagine the quality of public education in Ohio if more than half the school districts had to operate without state funds? Public education is a right, and the legislature is obligated by the Ohio Constitution to fund a thorough and efficient system of common schools that is open to everyone and available everywhere. End of story.

The state legislature has authority to establish education standards but has no business distributing funds to those districts that are silent over those who exercise their right to use the courts to challenge laws they find harmful to their students.

School districts must meet state-imposed standards and regulations designed to ensure that children are safe and that quality education is available in all public schools, no matter where they are located. These regulations support education goals. The proposed regulation is about control. It threatens districts into silence. It suppresses school districts' ability to challenge policies that damage education. Even worse, it retreats from full commitment to public education as a right and requirement of a free society. It plays into the privatizers' goal of not just weakening public education but dismantling it.

This legislation is extortion, a part of the lawlessness that appears to have taken over the statehouse.

Callender's bill weaponizes public funds. Money would be used to hold school boards hostage to lawmaker ideology. It is a state-level repeat of the Trump administration's illegal compliance tactic that tied receipt of federal dollars to districts swearing to abandon equity goals and honesty.

This law would make access to funds that are mandated by the state constitution contingent upon accepting state laws that prioritize private education.

The vouchers lawsuit has already gone to trial and Judge Jaiza Page has ruled that vouchers are unconstitutional. Her ruling is now being appealed. It's hard to understand why Callender chose this moment to propose his version of a loyalty oath since the horse has already left the barn.

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If approved, the law would infringe on the rights of all 600+ school districts and every local government in Ohio that receives state funding. It would have a chilling effect on the freedom of all public entities to challenge unconstitutional laws, and it would make a mockery of local control, a stronghold of democratic self-governance.

Fortunately, last year the CH-UH district did not cave to Trump's outrageous federal demand, and won. I expect it won't cave if this despicable misuse of the law gets traction. Threats like those found in HB 671 are unethical and a serious misuse of legislative authority. They are corruption at its core.

We all have to say no.