The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce is seeking control of so-called low-performing school districts via charter schools.

A September 1 Columbus Dispatch article addresses a Department of Education proposal to eliminate local citizen control of so-called low-performing school districts. Most districts that are in the "low performing" category are making valiant efforts to educate a student body that is comprised of a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities.

Some state and federal officials are orchestrating a grand scheme to privatize public education. They don't trust local folks to manage school affairs. They don't believe in democracy. Democracy gets in their way to privatize public functions.

Evidence that these officials are scheming to eliminate public education abounds. Subsequent to citizens' approval of a constitutional amendment to establish a State Board of Education and Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1953, state officials established the framework for an elected State Board of Education that provided public education leadership from 1956 to the mid-1990s.

In the mid-1990s the legislature, at the behest of Governor George Voinovich, altered State Board membership to include appointed members. In recent years the primary functions of the constitutionally-required State Board of Education have been transferred to the Governor's office. The voice of citizens has been shut out. Now the Governor's Department of Education is determined to privatize a high number of school districts.

School districts are being grossly underfunded due to billions of state tax dollars being allocated to private voucher schools and mostly unregulated charter schools. Some state officials believe that starving school districts of state funds will improve education outcomes.

The State of Indiana recently privatized the entire Indianapolis school district. Some Ohio politicians are trying to set the stage for the privatization of more than 100 school districts in Ohio.

Ohio seeks power over failing schools

State sends proposed education changes

to federal officials

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Chronically struggling public schools could be converted into charter schools, have their leadership replaced or be forced to close, according to proposed changes Ohio wants federal education officials to approve.

The proposal lists 16 ways to improve the state's lowest-performing schools, which include high schools where at least a third of students do not graduate. But Ohio school leaders worry that the changes go too far and weren't properly vetted.

Under the new rules, schools stuck on a list of underperforming buildings for more than three years would face a range of actions, starting with methods like replacing instructional materials and undergoing a comprehensive academic review, before moving on to more controversial tactics.

Those methods include converting the traditional public school into a charter school, handing over management to a third party or closing the school.

Dozens of schools could face what the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce calls 'more rigorous interventions.' Ohio's list of its 117 lowest-performing traditional schools includes five in Akron, three in Canton, six in Cincinnati and 15 in Columbus. Across the state, 34 schools have been on the list since 2018, according to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

Local education officials say the list of interventions looks suspiciously similar to language removed from Senate Bill 127, a proposed law to overhaul low-performing schools, and previously scrapped school takeover plans tried during Gov. John Kasich's tenure.

The new methods are included in Ohio's request for more flexibility in how it spends federal education dollars. Ohio must obtain a waiver to deviate from requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind. President Donald Trump's administration is expected to approve Ohio's changes.

'This waiver revives provisions from Senate Bill 127 that were removed after strong opposition, raising serious concerns about transparency and accountability,' said Jeff Talbert, co-chair of the Ohio 8 Coalition and superintendent of Canton City Schools. 'True school improvement requires sustained investment, experienced educators and strong local partnerships − not unproven models that risk undermining public education and community control.'

What ultimately happens to a struggling school will be 'dependent on local context' and conversations between state and local officials, according to Ohio's waiver request. But the state will have the final say.

That's concerning to Ohio Education Association President Jeff Wensing, who watched the state's attempts to take over Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland schools.

'When you take away the educator voice and local control of the school, I mean, it didn't go well,' Wensing said. 'The state didn't go in there, and all of a sudden wave a magic wand and everything was hunky-dory.'

While educators worry about school closures and takeovers, others say that drastic times call for drastic measures.

'When you get into a failing school for the better part of a decade, it's pretty clear that local control has failed,' said Aaron Churchill, Ohio research director at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a conservative education policy think tank that sponsors charter schools. 'The state has an obligation to help the kids in that school.'

But Akron Public Schools Board of Education President Barbara Sykes doubts that charter schools can manage Ohio's students better.

'How did you determine that the charter school would have a better outcome than the public school?' Sykes asked. Instead, she'd rather state lawmakers spend more on traditional public schools. 'For the last three years, we're having to cut staff and services, which affect how well we're able to produce, how well we're able to teach our children.'

Groups like the Ohio School Boards Association and Ohio 8 Coalition are worried about the loss of local control over schools without a change in state law. 'There's not really been legislative approval for this list,' said Jennifer Hogue, OSBA's director of legislative services.

State Rep. Sean Patrick Brennan, D-Parma, expressed concerns that any overhaul of education policy should go through the state Legislature, not the state education department.

'Decisions as significant as school closures, charter conversions, staffing mandates and curriculum requirements should be debated openly through the legislative process − not implemented

administratively through a federal waiver request,' Brennan wrote in a letter to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.

Churchill said it would be beneficial for lawmakers to sign off on these changes, but it’s not necessary. 'The Department of Education does have authority to go in and do interventions in low-performing schools,' he said.

The Department of Education and Workforce has revised and softened its language since the initial plan was announced, Cleveland.com first reported. But local education officials are still concerned about what happens to struggling schools and how they get off this list of low performers.

For now, Ohio is awaiting a decision from the Trump administration on whether it can move forward with these changes. In recent months, the U.S. Department of Education has approved 'Returning Education to the States' waivers for Indiana, Iowa and others.

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