

House speaker supports Kasich's education re-organization plan; Senate less receptive

It started with an opinion editorial written by former Kasich senior advisor, Jai Chabria, proposing a restructuring that would give Ohio's governor control over K-12 public education by making the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) a cabinet agency.

Kasich then announced his plans to propose legislation to merge ODE and the Department of Higher Education. Under his proposal, the scope of the State Board of Education – composed of eight gubernatorial appointees and 11 elected members – would be significantly reduced.

On Feb. 14, Rep. Bill Reineke (R-Tiffin) introduced H.B. 512, which would establish the Department of Learning and Achievement, and abolish the Department of Higher Education, the position of the chancellor of higher education and the Ohio Board of Regents. It would also transfer – with some exceptions – responsibility for the administration of primary and secondary education programs and all duties related to the administration of higher education programs to the new “mega” department, which would also take on the functions of the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation. Under the bill, certain duties associated with educator licensure, charter school sponsorship and other education programs would be the responsibility of the State Board, Superintendent of Public Instruction and ODE.



House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger (R-Clarksville) – who sees improving Ohio's education system as part of the effort to battle the Buckeye State's opiate crisis – supports H.B. 512 and plans to bring it up for a vote before the House prior to the legislature's summer break.

“I really believe in this bill,” he said. “I believe it's a huge piece to help continue strengthening Ohio's foundation.”

The Senate appears out of alignment with the House, with Senate Education Committee Chair Peggy Lehner (R-Kettering) voicing objection to a lack of broad stakeholder involvement in drafting H.B. 512.

“Instead of just talking to those who might govern, we should be talking to those who are being served and who are engaged in the education system,” she said in an interview with Gongwer News Service. “I don't think that they've been adequately pulled into this process. I'm not opposed to making a major change, but I'm opposed to making a major change that doesn't include all of the interested stakeholders.”

Lehner has also expressed concern regarding the timing of the debate, pointing out that, if passed this year, H.B. 512 would be enacted under a new governor elected in November. “Who knows who's going to be the next governor, and it seems like they should be involved somehow in this discussion of a complete, dramatic change in the education world,” she said.

State Rep. Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo), who serves as the ranking minority member of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, believes that the plan would further politicize education.

State Sen. Joe Schiavoni (D-Boardman), who hopes to be Ohio's next governor, called it a “power grab.” His running mate, Stephanie Dodd, serves on the State Board as an elected member, is also critical of the proposal.

The Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA), the Buckeye Association of School Administrators (BASA) and the Ohio Association of School Business Officials (OASBO) also oppose the bill, as does the state's largest teachers union.

But others, including the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC), are supportive. Its position: “While OACC needs to carefully review this proposal to better understand how it impacts our colleges and the K-12 and higher education systems, we believe that improved alignment of the educational and career training opportunities to help both traditional and working adult students succeed is a conversation worth having.”