

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## House GOP plan would merge state education departments

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A proposal to combine three state agencies into one department focused on getting students ready for the workforce or higher education will be a top priority this year, House Republicans said today.

The Department of Education, Department of Higher Education and the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation would be joined into one cabinet-level agency under the governor's control.

"This legislation aligns our education systems in Ohio to better-prepare our students for the workforce of today and tomorrow," said Rep. Bill Reineke, R-Tiffin, the bill sponsor.

One goal is to get 65 percent of Ohioans by 2025 to have some type of certificate or higher education degree, Reineke said.

"To do that, we need to repurpose our educational system," he said. "We are not properly preparing students for the workforce."

He said the bill would take about 80 percent of what the state Department of Education currently does and place it with the new Ohio Department of Learning and Achievement. The education department currently performs a wide variety of tasks, including distributing billions in funding to schools, compiling school report cards, and overseeing graduation requirements.

While educational policy-making would be handed by the new department, the Department of Education would retain a number of non-policy making functions. They include handling teacher licensing, the ability to revoke or approve a school charter, make territory dispute determinations, handle administrative duties of charter schools and their sponsors, determine the permanent expulsion of students, sponsor charter schools when needed, and oversee the state schools for the deaf and blind.

Reineke says he thinks the bill would cut back state government's role in education. Asked about how the bill would improve upon the current Department of Education, he said schools would get answers more quickly.

"The school districts have a lot of issues out where it takes time to get answers," he said. "It should be speeded up."

As an example, he said his city school district was not aware of the state WorkKeys curriculum aimed at getting certain students workplace skills.

"We're told all schools know about it. They don't," he said.

The Ohio Board of Education's role would change to largely focus on teacher licensing and discipline, rather than develop rules and implement laws passed by the legislature. The bill does not propose changing the current makeup of the board, and the state superintendent would continue to report to the board.

"I think there needs to be better synchronization across these three agencies," said Rep. Rick Carfagna, R-Westerville, a bill co-sponsor. "How do we make sure everything is streamlined and everything is flowing the way it should?"

He pointed to a number of statistics, including two-thirds of eighth graders not proficient in math and 60 percent not proficient in science, and 31 percent of students entering college are enrolled in remedial courses.

He said that by 2020, 64 percent of jobs in Ohio will require post-secondary education, but only 54 percent of adults have that level of education.

"We've got to come up with a better plan," Carfagna said.

"We're not tinkering with education policy at all in this legislation. This is a restructuring at the state level with regards to workforce and education. There should be zero impact of this bill upon our local districts."

House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger, R-Clarksville, said the bill is going to be the House's mission for the rest of the year, along with trying to address the continuing opioid crisis.

Rep. Teresa Fedor, D-Toledo, called the bill another bad education idea from GOP leaders.

“A bigger, mega-department of education will mean a tangled web of unresponsive, unaccountable appointed officials can more easily put special interests ahead of our children’s best interests,” she said. “If Ohioans think the state of education can’t get any worse, this proposal is a sobering reminder that it can.”

The proposal would ensure the governor is fully responsible for educational results and can be held accountable by voters, said Chad Aldis, vice president for Ohio policy and advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“As gubernatorial candidates talk about their visions for education, these changes would ensure that our next governor will truly have the ability to shape the direction of education and should result in more coherent policies and greater continuity,” he said.

Gary Barber, superintendent of Tiffin City Schools, said the realignment would prioritize career readiness push schools to focus on students’ career goals.

“No longer are we in a position to graduate our students, wish them well and hope they discover their passions,” he said. “It’s our responsibility to ensure that our students have a successful transition.”

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