

GOP Sets Sights on Public EducationCurrent Legislation Pending

By Tom Moscovic- Legislative Chair

Universal vouchers (House Bill 290)

The biggest potential change lurking in the legislature is the “backpack bill.” If passed, every school-aged child would be eligible for either a \$5,500 (K-8 grade) or \$7,500 (9-12 grade) voucher.

Parents could spend these dollars on private school tuition, homeschool supplies, advanced placement testing or education therapies.

“HB 290 would create a true money follows the child approach to education funding,” bill sponsor Rep. Riordan McClain, R-Upper Sandusky, said when he introduced the idea in October. The bill had its first hearing in February and one of the biggest outstanding questions was how much could this cost Ohio.

“I can’t imagine a fiscal note of less than \$1 billion if you are going to give all current private and home school students a voucher,” Aldis said.

And that’s what worries many Democrats and public school advocates.

Ohio doesn’t have \$1 billion to spare in its budget. Nor can the state shave that money from its education funds without making serious cuts.

“It’s about providing tuition subsidies to people who have already chosen not to go to public school,” said Steve Dyer, the director of government relations for the Ohio Education Association.

Teaching “divisive concepts” (House Bills 322 and 327)

One of the biggest issues in education over the last year has been the debate over how schools teach about racism, slavery and other “divisive concepts.”

Supporters believe a set of rules outlining the parameters of these discussions will protect the “accurate” teaching of American history and keep teachers from pushing “dangerous” and “divisive” ideologies onto students. Opponents say the laws are designed to “whitewash” history, intimidate teachers and keep kids from participating in the political process.

Lawmakers haven’t voted on either, but House Bill 327 has had five committee hearings and multiple amendments. The sponsors say they are working hard to find consensus around language that can pass.

Posting curriculums online (House Bill 529)

Republican Rep. Brett Hillyer proposed a way to “tone down” the heated rhetoric around “divisive concepts” by mandating teachers post their curriculums online.

“I don’t have to get into the minutia of what is being taught,” Hillyer said when introducing the idea in January. “I can just say ‘Hey, let’s make it available to parents.’” The Tuscarawas County Republican didn’t think his plan would create extra work for educators either. Ohio law already requires schools to provide course material upon request.

But Heather Stambaugh, a history teacher from Greenon Local School District, said it’s not about the work so much as the message.

“It’s the implication of ‘Look, they are hiding something,’ “ she said.

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Board Continues Discussion of Possible Benefit Improvements; Aims to Vote In March

At the February meeting of the State Teachers Retirement Board, actuarial consultant Cheiron provided further analysis of potential benefit improvements designed to benefit both active and retired members of the system. The board expressed interest in various options that include a one-time cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for eligible benefit recipients and a change to the current age and service eligibility requirements for active members, which would allow teachers with 35 years of service to retire at any age (eliminating the age 60 requirement set to be put in place in 2026). The board is also considering a reduction in the member contribution rate to 13% from 14%. Cheiron will complete its analysis of the financial impact of the proposed changes at the March board meeting now that its five-year experience review has concluded (see story below).

A one-time simple COLA increase would result in a higher benefit in all future years but does not commit to additional COLA increases each year. Cheiron estimates the cost to provide a one-time 2% COLA is about \$1 billion. With investment returns expected to be muted over the next decade and negative cash flow of about \$4 billion annually (paying out about \$7.4 billion in benefits versus collecting \$3.4 billion in contributions), Cheiron is advising the retirement system to proceed cautiously with benefit changes. The board is expected to vote on benefit changes at its March meeting.