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Initiative for schools slammed

Proposed ballot issue tries to fix funding system

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Even before its official unveiling today, a proposed statewide school-funding issue is drawing heavy fire for removing legislative control and lacking specifics on costs that likely would total hundreds of millions of dollars.

Undeterred after nearly a year of closeddoor meetings, a consortium of education advocates say they have come up with the long-awaited fix for Ohio's unconstitutional school-funding system.

The proposed constitutional amendment aims to guarantee students a high-quality education based on what is needed in the classroom, not what is available in the state budget. It would shift much of the tax burden for schools from local property owners to the state but does not specify how those dollars would be raised.

Critics, including business leaders and state and local officials, have a laundry list of concerns.

How much would it cost? Would taxes have to be increased or other areas of the state budget slashed to finance education? Would it invite more litigation? Does it divert too much money to wealthy districts? Is there enough accountability?

"This proposal is a dagger aimed at the heart of the poor, elderly and most needy of Ohioans," Sen. Jeff Jacobson, R-Vandalia, said, referring to potential budget cuts needed to fund the plan.

Jacobson, the No. 2 Senate leader who has played a key role in drafting recent schoolfunding formulas, said the plan offers no relief for taxpayers and would funnel the bulk of new money to wealthy school districts impacted by "phantom revenue," in which the state funding formula assumes a district collects more local money than it actually does.

"It leaves others to take the brunt of the massive funding increase this calls for," Jacobson said, adding that if education groups did not assume this would trigger budget cuts, they would not have singled out higher education and cities for protection.

DOCUMENT

- [Read the full text of the proposed Ohio school funding-amendment \(PDF\)](#)

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- [Highlights](#)
- [Analysis: Plan might shortchange other services](#)
- [State budget](#)

Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman, who along with other big-city mayors contributed to the plan, said yesterday that he asked sponsors to delay it.

"If this is an all-or-none proposal, the current version is one that would be hard for me to support at this time," he said. "It just needs further debate."

Although supporting the elevation of education to a "fundamental right" for Ohio schoolchildren, Coleman said backers of the amendment must provide Ohioans with more information before beginning a petition drive to put the measure on the November ballot.

"The public has the right to know the cost associated with it," Coleman said. "They need to make a proposal obviously that can be paid for. We can't really have a situation that could be perceived as a blank check.

"What this does is say the State Board of Education establishes criteria for a quality education in the state of Ohio and then sends it to the legislature and say, 'You fund it.' Well, how much is that? What's the public voting on? "

Supporters of the proposal yesterday declined to comment, saying they would wait until a news conference scheduled for this morning in Columbus. They plan to submit the proposed constitutional amendment to the attorney general today for a required review of petition language before gathering the 400,000-plus valid signatures of registered Ohio voters necessary to get it on the ballot.

Defending legislative schoolfunding efforts, House Speaker Jon A. Husted, R-Kettering, said he is withholding judgment on the plan until he sees what Gov. Ted Strickland proposes.

"In this long-running discussion about school funding, I have always asked the school groups to put together their proposal," he said. "I give them credit for proposing a plan. As soon as we have Gov. Strickland's plan, we can look at what's best for Ohio."

Strickland, who has vowed to fix the state's school-funding system, said yesterday he is concerned that the ballot proposal delegates too much authority to the State Board of Education.

"I don't want to criticize the folks who are putting forth this (amendment) because I think it reflects concern and hopefully a good-faith effort to do something positive with education in Ohio, but at this point, I'm not willing to sign on as a supporter," he said.

Likewise, business leaders commended education advocates for putting forth a "unified and concrete proposal" but said they could not support it.

The plan says too little about student performance and student outcomes and "focuses almost entirely on inputs to schools," said Richard A. Stoff, president of the Ohio Business Roundtable.

"The proposed amendment appears to abrogate legislative authority and effectively creates a new quasi-legislative body (the state board and an advisory commission) to decide on educational funding."

Education advocates have long complained that legislators have not done enough to fix the school-funding system despite four rulings by the Ohio Supreme Court over the past decade that it is unconstitutional.

Most local school district officials said they knew little about the proposed amendment and were eager to hear how it would impact them.

Bexley Treasurer Chris Essman said he hoped the concept that "nothing should restrict schools from going above the minimum" is protected.

Likewise, Jonathan Boyd, treasurer and chief financial officer of Worthington schools, said he is concerned that lowering the local tax contribution to 20 mills could adversely impact programs voters have supported. Dispatch Senior Editor Joe Hallett and reporters Mark Niquette and Jennifer Smith Richards contributed to this story.
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ANALYSIS

Plan might shortchange other services

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A ballot proposal to fix school funding in Ohio shrewdly attempts to create powerful allies of university officials and mayors by mandating more state money annually for higher education and local governments.

But advocates for poor children and the elderly who rely on Medicaid and other state programs worry that the proposed school-funding ballot initiative could mean less money for them. Then, too, there are concerns that fewer dollars for Ohio's 32 prisons could cause unwanted consequences, including furloughs for some of the 46,800 inmates housed in them.

Those questions and many others remain to be answered by proponents of the ballot initiative to be unveiled today.

The plan would further embed primary and secondary education as state government's highest spending priority. But the state spends billions more on many other services that, among other things, ensure that the mentally ill and mentally retarded can receive care and that state parks are open and clean.

If the state constitution is amended to mandate higher spending on schools, universities and local governments, will there be enough in the state's \$51 billion biennial budget to adequately fund other services that citizens want?

"Whatever approach is taken, it has to be fair, balanced, diversified and equitable," said Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, executive director of the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, which relies partially on state funding to supply 12 food banks.

"We can't do this by de-funding other basic services that are necessary to people. There are other very, very important things that government provides."

Gayle Channing Tennenbaum, legislative director for the Public Human Services Association of Ohio, a nonprofit child-advocacy group, said the school-funding plan could handcuff the governor and legislature, keeping them from providing more funding for health care and other services.

"One of the situations you don't want to be in is pitting our elderly, our people with mental illness and other needy populations against our children who need a first-class education," Tennenbaum said.

Graphic

• State budget

Mayor Michael B. Coleman said the provision providing increases for local government spending "is a good part of the plan," but he asked backers of the amendment to delay going forth and "step back and look at it in total."

Along with the millions more that would flow to Ohio's 614 school districts, the proposed amendment singles out higher education and the local government trust fund as automatic recipients of more state money, requiring that their annual allocations grow by the same percentage as Ohio's personal income.

Latest available statistics show that between 2004 and 2005, personal income grew by 3.7 percent; for the past 10 years, the average annual growth has been 3.8 percent. If applied to the current fiscal year's \$2.6 billion higher-education allotment, a 3.7 percent bump would mean \$95.7 million more. For local governments, which will receive about \$1.2 billion this fiscal year from three separate state funds, 3.7 percent would add \$44.9 million.

The ballot initiative also offers a carrot to a crucial voting bloc — senior citizens. It would exempt anyone 65 or older from paying property taxes on the first \$40,000 of market value of his or her home.

Spending for primary and secondary education already accounts for the biggest chunk of the state's current two-year budget at \$16.8 billion, or 39 percent. State funding for human services, including Medicaid, ranks second, accounting for \$12 billion or 28 percent.

Medicaid is the federal-state health insurance program for poor people.

If the plan encounters overwhelming opposition, it is possible that backers could defer to Gov. Ted Strickland, who has made fixing the school-funding system a top priority.

Strickland said yesterday that he is not working in cooperation with any group or individual but admitted he could benefit by having other proposals aired before he acts.

"That perhaps would be the result, but I can tell you absolutely that that has not been a part of any planning or collusion or discussions with any individual or any group in that regard," he said.

Dispatch reporter Mark Niquette contributed to this story.

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