

Aaron Churchill: Let governors lead on education
Should Ohio boost governor's education power? Yes: Current fractured system falls short
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This November, voters across Ohio will head to the polls to elect our next governor. As the state's chief executive, he or she will be expected to lead initiatives that aim to improve the livelihoods of Ohioans and secure the prosperity of the Buckeye State.

Nothing is more important to our future than a robust and effective education system. A well-educated citizenry is vital for economic growth and a flourishing democracy. So it's no surprise that Ohio's governors have pursued a variety of reforms meant to strengthen that system. These initiatives include adopting challenging academic standards and student expectations, developing world-class educators and providing high-quality school choice options. The overarching goal has been to ensure that students exit high school ready for their next steps in life, whether that's college, career or military and public service.

Despite all the commitment and hard work, however, Ohio has fallen short in its efforts to transform public schools. One big reason is a fractured education-governance structure that often thwarts successful implementation of even the wisest policies. To get things done, governors not only need to work with state legislators, but must also gain cooperation from a state board of education over which they have little control as well as a quasi-independent state department of education.

This dysfunctional structure often yields disappointment. Consider Ohio's ambitious early-literacy initiative: Based on research showing that kids who fail to read proficiently by the end of third grade are more likely to drop out of high school, Gov. John Kasich pushed to require that schools give struggling readers more help before promoting them to fourth grade. To his credit, Kasich wanted a rigorous bar — true reading proficiency. But the state board has set passing scores so low that a remarkable 94 percent of third graders meet the promotion threshold, even though just 64 percent actually read on grade level.

Situations like these cry out for a restructuring. Governors of both parties have sought changes, knowing that they'll be held accountable for educational outcomes yet not having all the tools needed to ensure vigorous implementation.

Fortunately, there's some promising light at the end of this tunnel.

Observing the flaws in the current structure, several legislators recently introduced a bill that would give governors the leadership authority they deserve. House Bill 512 calls upon future governors to appoint a cabinet-level director who would be responsible for carrying out policies in K-12, higher education and workforce development. This would put Ohio more in line with other states where governors directly oversee the execution of K-12 education policy.

To create this clearer chain of command, the proposal would curtail the policymaking role of the state board. Along with the state superintendent, this body would shift its primary focus instead to educator licensure. Traditional checks and balances would be maintained with the legislature continuing to restrain executive authority. And Ohio voters would ultimately hold governors to account through the ballot box.

It's time to reboot Ohio education governance to place the chief executive clearly at the K-12 helm.

Governor Kasich will leave office in January, and the fall election promises to be hotly contested. While passing HB 512 alone is unlikely to resolve every challenge in public education, it would create a stronger, more coherent governing structure. Most important, it would finally allow governors — Democrat or Republican — to lead and take full responsibility for initiatives aimed at preparing young people for college and the workforce.

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