



## Week of December 16, 2024

### Huffman in, Stephens out: Tumultuous legislative session comes to a close

At 2:13 a.m. on Thursday morning, outgoing House Speaker **Jason Stephens** adjourned his final session as speaker, marking both the end of a one-term speakership and a historic 135th General Assembly, marred by infighting, dysfunction, and, at times, a lack of productivity. In January 2023, the sophomore Republican from Lawrence County secured the speakership in a surprise move by aligning with 32 Democrats and 21 Republicans – only one-third of his fellow House Republicans – to narrowly edge the once-presumed Speaker Rep. **Derek Merrin** by a vote of 54-43. Since then, both **Stephens'** tenure as speaker and his legislative agenda were mired in a political quagmire never before seen in Ohio politics. Facing the prospect of dwindling support to be reelected speaker in 2025, Stephens resigned from the speaker's race in November, leaving the powerful post to incoming House member and term-limited Senate President **Matt Huffman**, who returns to the House after serving four terms from 2007 to 2014. Not since the days of the late Rep. **Vern Riffe**, who reigned as speaker for 20 years in a pre-term limit era, has Ohio had a speaker who can serve for eight consecutive years like Huffman can.

The 136th General Assembly commences on Monday, January 6, during which all 99 representatives and 33 senators will be sworn in to begin a new session, as well by the official votes for House Speaker and Senate President. Lawmakers will be tasked with enacting an operating budget in their first six months of work, amid declining tax revenues, requests to fully fund the Cupp-Patterson school-funding formula and calls for property tax and pension reform and cuts to the income tax, among others.

### Education bills headed to DeWine

The General Assembly on Wednesday sent to Gov. Mike DeWine the following bills, all of which are expected to be signed into law:

- [HB 8](#) – Parents Bill of Rights and the “LifeWise bill;”
- [HB 206](#) – expanded expulsion authority for superintendents and temporary reprieve for charter school closure;
- [SB 208](#) – open enrollment for military families and other omnibus changes;
- [HB 315](#) – required assessments by school districts for foster children who are placed in residential facilities; and
- [SB 163](#) – license plate creation for Dublin City Schools and Hilliard City Schools.

### Key education bills receive modifications before passage

After a 17-hour day of House and Senate sessions and committees on Wednesday, the General Assembly sent Gov. **Mike DeWine** [HB 8](#) and [HB 206](#) for his signature, among others. Both bills were substantially amended in committee to smooth the path for House concurrence votes. [HB 8](#), was modified with the following changes:

- requiring districts to collaborate with the sponsoring entity of a released time course in religious instruction to identify a time for the course to be offered during the school day;
- authorizing districts to require a criminal records check of any instructors or volunteers of the sponsoring entity; and
- allowing a student who is excused from instruction that includes “sexuality content” to participate in an alternative assignment.

[HB 206](#), which expands the expulsion authority for superintendents, was amended with the following

changes:

- requiring districts to report data on expelled students to the Department of Education and Workforce (DEW), including the reason for and duration of the expulsion, the total number of expelled students, and demographic information on expelled students;
- clarifying that extensions of an expulsion must include written notice and other due process requirements prescribed under the bill and continuing law;
- appropriating \$4.14 million to support DEW's internal administration of the state scholarship programs;
- creating a temporary safe harbor for charter schools on the brink of the state's automatic closure policy; and
- allowing public and private schools to store seizure medication in easily accessible locations, allowing students to possess such medication, and allowing school staff and other individuals to administer the medication if the student's physician approves such practice and training has been completed in the administration of the medicine.

### **Education bills run out of steam**

While many bills saw movement in the final days of lame duck, not all crossed the proverbial finish line. The following expired and would need to be reintroduced in the following session:

- School bus safety and a school bus safety equipment grant program ([HB 279](#), [HB 518](#), and [SB 329](#));
- private school accountability ([HB 407](#));
- discrimination prohibition against students due to race-related traits, including hair ([SB 32](#))
- limitations on ability to file property tax complaints ([SB 39](#))
- automatic closure and restructuring requirements for public and charter schools ([SB 295](#));
- a transportation proposal, which would have modified impracticality determinations and transportation for students with disabilities; and
- a rumored territory transfer amendment, which would have allowed residents in certain poor-performing school districts (currently only Jefferson Township Local Schools) to transfer their territory to an adjacent district.

### **Alliance member testifies before Senate committee on education and workforce issues**

**Craig Heath**, superintendent of Alliance member Mentor City Schools, [testified this week](#) before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee on workforce development initiatives between the district and Lakeland Community College and Lake County Board of Commissioners. Superintendent Heath's testimony can be accessed by [clicking here](#).

### **Heard around the Statehouse**

"We're giving (schools) a viable alternative to keep kids in our traditional public schools, and that's still not good enough. Eventually, as a colleague said, "school districts are going to try to figure out a workaround." I heard one of my colleagues say, "try us." I won't use bad language, but I'll put it in letters: F.A.F.O. If we need to step up again, we will. If we want to make it mandatory to have a specific policy, we will. We're trying to give local school districts the option to decide how best to fit it into their school day and make it fit for that school district, but we're not going to stand here and try to infringe on our parents' right to raise their children inside the home and inside the classroom." – Republican Rep. **Josh Williams**, [speaking on the House floor in support of the "LifeWise bill"](#) and warning schools not to misuse their policy authorities in the new era of a mandatory religious release time environment.