

Schools worry about proposed state takeover

Changes would bring greater power to intervene

Kelli Weir Akron Beacon Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK



Baganda Maliga, 18, and Laela Price, 17, look for figs on the vine that were grown at Garfield Community Learning Center's geodome greenhouse on Sept. 24. LISA SCALFARO/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Garfield Community Learning Center should have been released from state academic oversight this year after posting better state report card scores for the past two years. ● Instead, the state in April gave Akron Public Schools a choice: Garfield could exit state oversight, but it would lose the associated additional state funding and guidance. Or Garfield could stay in comprehensive support and

improvement school status and complete a few extra requirements, such as possibly selecting a new English Language Arts strategy from an approved list.

District and school officials chose to keep Garfield under state oversight so the school would not lose its after-school, summer and credit recovery programs that have been supported by the additional state funds, which have ranged from \$140,000 to \$260,000 a year.

They now regret that decision. Unbeknownst to them, state education leaders were seeking to change Ohio's federal education plan around the same time they agreed to keep Garfield in state oversight status.

The proposed federal changes would give the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce greater power to intervene when underperforming schools fail to exit state oversight over multiple years. The state could seek to close or take over the chronically struggling school under the proposed changes.

Akron Public Schools Superintendent Mary Outley said she believes the district was misled.

"Our (school) board is accountable to the Akron community."

Pat Shipe

President of the Akron Education Association

"In hindsight, we would have not accepted the \$200,000-plus," Outley said. "We know moving forward, we would not. We are hopeful that when people tell us there are no consequences, there would not be any. But we see now how things change very quickly."

Advertisement

Proposed education changes could affect hundreds of Ohio public schools

Roughly 230 schools appear on the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's most recent list of comprehensive support and improvement schools, including 117 traditional public schools, 75 dropout prevention and recovery schools, 38 charter schools and one science, technology, engineering and math-focused school. Nearly 130 of the schools have been on the list since 2022 and would be subject to the state's proposed corrective actions immediately if the changes are approved.

The proposed changes would apply only to schools that receive federal Title I funds, which provides additional funding to schools and districts serving large numbers of students from low-income families. Private and religious schools would not be subject to the proposed changes.

Ohio's proposed federal education changes also could affect Akron Public Schools' Akron Alternative Academy and some Summit County dropout prevention and recovery schools, including Akron Career Tech High School, Cascade Career Prep High School, Schnee Learning Center, Steel Academy and Towpath Trail High School. Each of the schools has been designated a state comprehensive support and improvement school for at least four years.



Carrie Soful, energy and environmental protections career pathway instructor, and Jennifer Morales, culinary arts chef, look for food to harvest inside Garfield Community Learning Center's geodome greenhouse. LISA SCALFARO/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Akron Public Schools' Leggett Community Learning Center, Mason Community Learning Center and Pfeiffer Elementary could be impacted within the next few years if they do not improve their report card scores.

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce has submitted three other amendments to its federal education plan that seek to update the measures used in its federal report card and update its 21st Century Community Learning Center program that funds afterschool activities.

Advertisement

The department is also seeking a waiver to add flexibility in how it spends federal education funds that it believes would help reduce unnecessary administrative burdens and help focus resources to priority areas of need. Some public education advocates say the proposed waiver risks shifting funding away from Ohio's most vulnerable learners.

The federal education department must approve or deny the waiver request by December, but there is no stated deadline for how soon the federal agency must take action on Ohio's proposed amendments. It took the federal agency a year to approve Ohio's last requested amendment changes.

Why is Ohio seeking to change its federal education plan?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is the nation's primary education law for elementary, middle and high schools, requires states to routinely identify low-performing schools and take steps to improve them.



**The Schnee Learning Center is a dropout prevention and recovery school at
800 Tallmadge Road in Cuyahoga Falls. KELLI WEIR/AKRON BEACON
JOURNAL**

Under Ohio's current federal education plan, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce identifies lowperforming schools as schools with graduation rates below 67% and schools ranked in the bottom 5% of Title I served schools statewide based on their overall state report card scores or their chronic absenteeism rate.

Identified schools are placed in comprehensive support and improvement status and receive additional state help and funding to help improve their scores. Schools can exit CSI status by posting higher report card scores for two consecutive years.

If a school fails to improve within three years, Ohio's current federal plan requires the state to provide additional help, which may include more comprehensive reviews of the school's practices and specific content area help from regional educational agencies.

Advertisement

Ohio's requested changes keep the same process for identifying low-performing schools and for exiting CSI status. But the proposal would add 16 possible actions the state could take if identified schools don't improve within three years. It's unclear whether a struggling school would be expected to start with the first listed action and progress through the list toward the more severe interventions or if any of the measures could be used at any time.

The first several proposed strategies are actions that schools under state oversight likely already have undertaken, such as revising their school improvement plans, setting new literacy and math goals, partnering with a regional support team and selecting state-approved instruction and testing materials.

The bottom of the list includes more drastic measures such as:

- Appointing an outside agency to redesign the school, such as how it delivers instruction, its curriculum and its leadership.
- Reopening the school with a new principal who would have authority to replace staff or restructure programs.
- Converting the school into a charter school that would be operated by a state-approved school management organization.
- Merging the school with a higherperforming school operated by a school management organization.
- Hiring an outside education provider to operate all or portions of the school.
- Closing the school permanently. Many of the proposed interventions, including restructuring a chronically low-performing school, converting it to a charter school and closing it, already are options available under state law. But the existing laws — Ohio Revised Codes 3302.12 and 3302.04 — give the governing board of the struggling school the authority to decide which corrective actions to take from a state-recommended list. The proposed federal changes would give the state education department more authority to decide which actions should be used to improve a struggling school.

Advertisement

Lacey Snoke, spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, said districts and schools will work with the department to select the options that will best drive student success for their students.

Federal amendment supporters: Flexibility, more aggressive steps are needed

Snock said the proposed corrective actions give the state needed flexibility.

“Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the revised amendment on school improvement establishes a flexible menu of tools and supports,” Snoke said. “These options are designed to

align with the state’s priorities, including raising literacy achievement through instruction grounded in the science of reading.”

Aaron Churchill, Ohio research director at the education reform think tank Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said Ohio’s proposed changes are a necessary course correction to the existing vague and ineffective intervention policies.

“When local control has failed, the state has an obligation — on behalf of students — to take more aggressive steps to turn around a low-performing school,” Churchill said.

He cited a 2025 study by the American Institutes for Research/Rand Corporation where researchers found no positive effects four years after Ohio schools were put under state oversight. He also noted that 34 traditional public schools and 20 charter schools have been in CSI status since at least 2018.

“Simply identifying these schools as low-performers and requiring some paperwork has not made a difference,” Churchill wrote in July for Fordham, whose affiliated nonprofit sponsors charter schools in Ohio. “(The Department of Education and Workforce) is right to ratchet up the pressure when they persistently underperform.”

Advertisement

Akron, Summit County school leaders raise concerns

Akron school leaders have joined other education leaders across Ohio, as well as public school advocates and some state and federal legislators, in raising concerns about the state’s amendment request, particularly the proposed

changes that would allow the state to close, convert or take control of a struggling school.

They are skeptical of the state's promise to partner with district leaders to make decisions on what corrective actions to use to improve schools.

Their concerns prompted U.S. Reps. Emilia Sykes and Shontel Brown, Democrats who each represent portions of Northeast Ohio, to send a Sept. 8 letter to U.S. Department of Education Secretary Linda McMahon that urges her to reject the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's proposed changes and requests a briefing about the issue and the criteria being used for evaluation.

Outley said Akron Public Schools, which has a dedicated school improvement department, has worked with regional and state officials to previously turn around struggling schools, such as Helen Arnold Community Learning Center three years ago and Buchtel Community Learning Center more than 15 years ago. District officials have been meeting monthly with members from a state support team to improve the district's literacy scores.

"I believe that is the difference between the current work we are doing and the ESSA (changes)," she said. "It's now a partnership and we have a say, versus what

"When local control has failed, the state has an obligation — on behalf of students — to take more aggressive steps to turn around a low-performing school." Aaron Churchill

Advertisement

Ohio research director at the think tank Thomas B. Fordham Institute

is being proposed as something that is something happening to you, so it's a penalty."

Pat Shipe, president of the Akron Education Association representing teachers and other certified staff in Akron Public Schools, said the state's proposed

changes would diminish a community's voice in the decisions about the schools that they, as taxpayers, own and support.

"Our (school) board is accountable to the Akron community," said Shipe, who also serves as co-chair of the Ohio 8 Coalition that represents nine of Ohio's largest urban school districts. "To say that we're going to take buildings potentially as part of these progressive interventions and hand them over to a for-profit charter school should outrage every community in the state."

She noted that Garfield, which was built in 2022 and boasts the district's only geodome greenhouse, is one of Akron Public Schools' newest school buildings, and Akron taxpayers still would be required to pay off the construction bonds for the project even if the district no longer operates it.

Akron Public Schools also is constructing a new school for Pfeiffer Elementary, which ranked in the bottom 5% of Ohio schools in 2025 based on state test scores and could become subject to the proposed corrective actions if it doesn't improve its scores in two years. It's unclear whether the state would have the ability to take over the building since the new school also will serve students from Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts when it opens in August 2028.

Advertisement

Shipe said the proposed changes are similar to the controversial state-appointed academic distress commissions that were created in 2015 and had the power to assume many of the responsibilities traditionally held by the elected school board. A 2019 report by the state superintendent found that community resistance to the distress commissions and a lack of assistance and expertise often hindered improvement efforts.

Shipe said the difference now is the state is targeting individual public schools rather than entire school districts.

“If the state legislators were worried about students and their education, then I think they should be worried about students across Ohio, not just those in public school,” Shipe said. “We’re confused as to why the same requirements are not placed on private and parochial schools.”

Shipe and Ohio 8 co-chair Jeffery Talbert of Canton City Schools have advocated for the state to send help before schools reach a crisis point instead of waiting for schools to struggle and imposing increasingly severe penalties.

Karen Taylor, a consultant for Schnee Learning Center in Cuyahoga Falls, said she and Executive Director Tony Pallija believe it’s important that state leaders recognize the unique student population that dropout prevention and recovery schools serve when it considers which proposed interventions it may use.

“We support accountability and the use of evidence-based practices to improve student outcomes,” Taylor said. “We also believe that any additional intervention should consider the mission of the school, the students we serve, the circumstances under which they enroll and the progress they make after entering the program.”

Advertisement

The learning center, which serves roughly 70 students between the ages of 14 and 21 who have fallen behind in meeting state graduation requirements, has been under state oversight since 2018 due to a low graduation rate and ranking among the bottom 5% of Ohio schools on state report card measures.

Taylor said the learning center, which has been using rigorous improvement strategies, has since exceeded state standards every year it has received a rating. Its most recent state report card, which reflects last school year, shows that its graduation rate exceeds the standard for dropout prevention and recovery schools, which evaluates how many students graduated within four to eight years.

Taylor also raised concerns about whether federal funding could change under the state's proposal.

The Schnee Learning Center, which doesn't receive local property tax revenue, relies on federal funds for 34% of its \$1.2 million operating budget. Taylor said the federal school improvement funds allow the learning center to provide the additional instruction, intervention and support that its students need.

She said if significant school-improvement funding was reduced or became unavailable without another funding source replacing it, students and families would directly feel the impact.

"For Schnee families, this is not an abstract funding discussion," Taylor said. "These are young people who have already faced barriers to completing high school and whose families chose Schnee because they wanted and believed another path could still lead to a diploma."

Reach Akron Beacon Journal education writer Kelli Weir at [330-580-8339](tel:330-580-8339) or kweir@usatodayco.com.