

Your Turn Lisa Willner Guest columnist

Senate Bill 1 is an attack on our city, public education

Anybody who doubts that the General Assembly is waging a symbolic war against Louisville and public education should read Senate Bill 1. There could be no more glaring example of the dual attacks coming from the state Capitol.

This legislation, finalized by the General Assembly a few days before its veto recess, is truly a Frankenstein's monster of a bill. If the expected veto is overridden, a new and scary tale will begin to unfold.

As a member of the House's Education and Appropriations and Revenue committees and as a former member of the Jefferson County Board of Education, I am acutely aware of just how devastating Senate Bill 1 will be.

For much of the last year, Republicans said that parents should have more of a voice in their children's education. This legislation does the exact opposite. It weakens parents' ability to determine curricula at their children's schools; it effectively requires that an inaccurate, sanitized version of American history is taught; and it takes direct aim at JCPS.

Senate Bill 1 dictates how often our school board can meet, requires more than a majority vote for school board decisions and severely limits the board's spending authority. Those provisions only apply to JCPS.

Rural legislators with no expertise in education are determining how the largest urban school district in the state must be run, with dictates that do not apply to their own districts and without regard to the views of Jefferson County voters. So much for parents having a voice.

Under House Bill 9, which the legislature approved this past week, Jefferson County's school board would also be the only one required to authorize a charter school, a move that would shift hundreds of thousands of tax dollars away from JCPS and into the pockets of whatever private and unaccountable company runs

the school. Together, House Bill 9 and Senate Bill 1 represents the most consequential changes to public education since 1990's Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Other aspects of Senate Bill 1 fundamentally undermine public education in troubling ways.

Currently, more than 2,300 parents serve on site-based decision-making councils which, along with teachers and administrators, set policy and determine curricula at their school. Under Senate Bill 1, final curriculum decisions will solely be in the hands of the superintendent. What that really means is that decisions will be made by VanHoose administrators who parents do not know and to whom they have no access.

The most widely discussed aspect of Senate Bill 1 is the portion that incorporates this year's Senate Bill 138, a Republican attack on 'critical race theory.'

For months, we have been told that CRT — a postsecondary subject that has been wildly mischaracterized — has been taught in our K-12 schools. When pressed for details, the sponsors can only offer anonymous and unsubstantiated stories. For them, CRT is a convenient dog whistle that plays whatever tune their political base wants to hear.

Part of this provision requires middle and high school social studies teachers to use 24 historical documents selected not by educators or historians, but by politicians. Many, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, have long been taught. One of these mandated documents is a 1964 political speech by Ronald Reagan. Only one of the 24 was written by a woman.

The academic merit of this particular list is beside the point. Until now, the General Assembly has never inserted itself so brazenly into the classroom.

Current law sets out sensible parameters that education professionals use to establish rigorous standards. Within those standards, SBDM councils choose curricula that best fit their students. Teachers are then called on to make this entire system work and they have done a phenomenal job over the decades in the face of numerous challenges.

It is sad that one of those challenges is now the state legislature. Many of my House and Senate colleagues see a profession that is struggling with low salaries, understaffing, reduced benefits and sagging morale and their response is to find new and cruelly innovative ways to chill academic freedom and ship as much tax money as possible to private interests. At a time when our state is facing a critical teacher shortage, SB 1 gives teachers one more reason to leave the profession.

Senate Bill 1 may be the legislature's highest priority, but it's the very last thing we need for Kentucky.

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