



EDUCATION


POLITICS & GOV

Testimony on Ohio's proposed higher ed overhaul shows more than 130 opposed and 14 in support

State Sen. Jerry Cirino introduced SB 83 earlier this year and it continues to receive significant blowback every step of the way in the Statehouse.

BY: **MEGAN HENRY** - NOVEMBER 30, 2023 4:45 AM



 Jamie Pipik from the University of Akron holds up a sign during a protest led by the Ohio Student Association in opposition to Senate Bill 83, June 14, 2023, at the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio. (Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal. Republish photo only with original story.)

A Cleveland State University associate professor gave Senate Bill 83 – a massive proposed piece of legislation that would overhaul higher education in Ohio – a failing grade.

“Any student that’s dissatisfied with their professor, perhaps because of free speech, that professor can be punished,” John

Plecnik said during Wednesday's House Higher Education Committee hearing on SB 83.

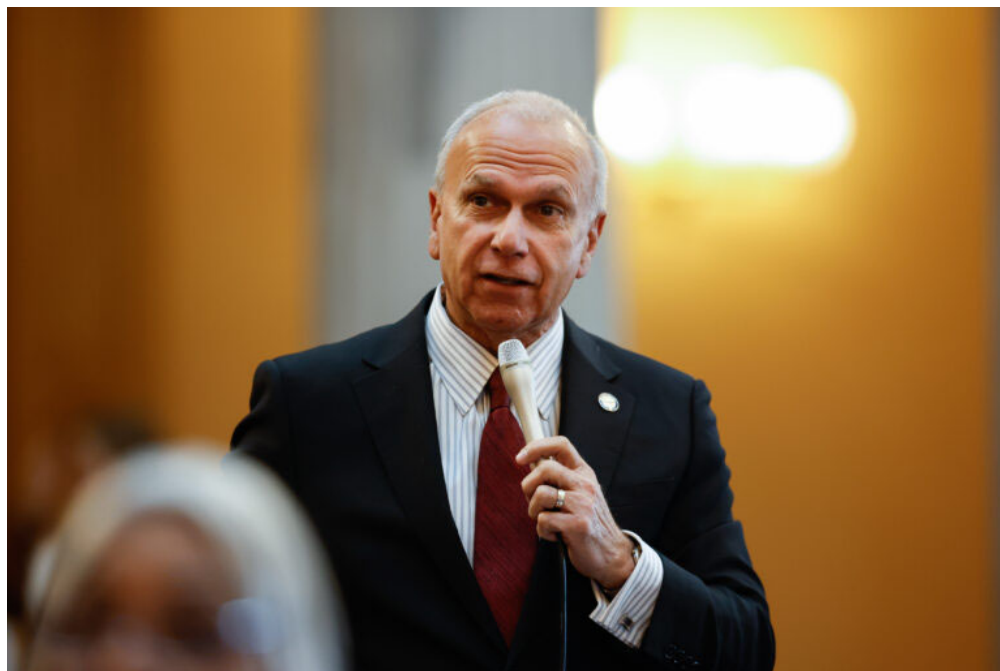
"I think you will find that professors will be punished for reasons that are entirely different from trying to indoctrinate students if you take away all job protections," he said.


State Sen. Jerry Cirino, R-Kirtland, introduced SB 83 earlier this year and it continues to receive significant blowback every step of the way in the Statehouse. Despite passing in the Senate, it doesn't seem likely that [SB 83 will get the necessary votes needed in the Ohio House](#).

"It doesn't have the votes," House Speaker Jason Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, said on Tuesday. "I think there are a lot of concerns with that bill from both sides of the aisle, frankly."

While Wednesday's meeting didn't last as long as the marathon [seven hours of opponent testimony during a spring Senate Workforce and Higher Education meeting](#), more than 130 people submitted opponent testimony and 14 people submitted proponent testimony. However, due to time constraints, only eight opponents and eight proponents were able to testify. The committee allowed one hour and 15 minutes for both opponent and proponent testimony.

What's in the bill?



 State Sen. Jerry Cirino, R-Kirtland. (Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal. Republish photo only with original story.)

The bill has undergone many revisions and is currently in its 11th version.

The current version of SB 83 eliminated a controversial anti-striking provision, but added a new retrenchment provision that would prevent unions from negotiating on tenure. It would also allow universities to fire tenured professors for a broad list of reasons including reduction in student population. Faculty with between 30-35 years of tenure would be protected.

SB 83 prohibits mandatory diversity, equity and inclusion training unless the training is mandatory to comply with state and federal law, professional licensure requirements or to get accreditation or grants.

The bill defines controversial beliefs or policy as “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.”

The bill would allow students to “reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies and shall not seek to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious point of view.”

SB 83 says Ohio universities can only enter into a new or renewed academic partnership with a Chinese academic institution if there are certain “safeguards” in place – including complying with all federal regulations – “to protect the state institution’s intellectual property, the security of the state of Ohio, and the national security interests of the United States.”

Opponent testimony

Kent State University Student Body President Julie Buonaiuto said what is addressed in the bill doesn’t align with what is actually happening on Ohio’s college campuses.

“There is a narrative right now that students are being indoctrinated at universities and I think that’s absolutely not the case,” she said. “It’s a nonexistent problem.”

SB 83 is anti-union, anti-faculty and contains vague language around intellectual diversity, said Steve Mockabee, of the Ohio Conference AAUP–American Association of University Professors.



📷 COLUMBUS, Ohio – JUNE 14: (left to right) Students Mel Searle from the University of Cincinnati, Kayli Rego, Brielle Shorter and Brittany Glenn from Ohio State prepare for a protest led by the Ohio Student Association in opposition to Senate Bill 83, June 14, 2023, at the Statehouse in Columbus, Ohio. (Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal. Republish photo only with original story.)

“This ambiguity would leave faculty open to frivolous complaints,” he said. “The legislature should avoid creating laws that dictate the manner in which faculty members must run their classrooms. Such prescriptive language would chill academic freedom and would actually stifle the honest conversations that are essential for quality education.”

Although he was glad to see the recent removal of the no-strike provision, he has concerns about the new retrenchment portion of the bill.

“To impose a one-size fits all approach here statewide isn’t necessary and I would argue it would be counterproductive,” Mockabee said.

Some of the opponents, including Ohio State University student Clovis Westlund, said SB 83 would have a chilling effect on college campuses.

“It would take a lot of the value out of my education,” Westlund said.

Christopher Nichols, an Ohio State history professor, said SB 83 is already turning potential students and faculty away from OSU.

Angela May Mergenthaler, an Ohio State associate professor of Germanic Languages and literatures, said SB 83 would have been a barrier to her coming to Ohio

“I would be very hesitant and scared,” she said. “We are afraid and concerned and we’re depressed. (SB 83 is) unnecessary.”

Committee Ranking Member Joe Miller, D-Lorain, apologized to those who came to the Statehouse but were unable to testify.

“Your testimonies will be printed and submitted and on record,” he said.

Proponent testimony

Proponents of SB 83 mainly focused on the DEI portion of the bill.

“DEI is the single biggest enemy of academic excellence and the biggest friend of racism in American college life,” said Ohio University Professor Emeritus Richard Vedder.

State Rep. Josh Williams, R-Sylvania, asked Jonathan Pidluzny, with the America First Policy Institute, about the use of DEI in hiring.

“Do you agree that using DEI as a factor in hiring diminishes the presence of minorities or marginalized groups that were able to obtain their position through merit alone or essentially they begin to assume the reason they are here is because they check some box for the university?” Williams asked, to which Pidluzny said DEI can accidentally reinforce stereotypes.

“(DEI) sew division and hate in society, they promote race-exclusion and race-essentialist perspectives,” Pidluzny said in his testimony.

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