

OHIO

# DeWine is now redrawing state school board districts

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*Plan alters the boundaries of  
those who supported an  
anti-racism, equity resolution.*

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COLUMBUS — Gov. Mike DeWine recently pushed forward a plan that significantly alters the Ohio State Board of Education boundaries of four members who supported an anti-racism and equity resolution passed in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

Although DeWine's office says the governor's hands are tied by the process, critics of the proposal say it's the political gerrymandering that no one is following.

"This seems like a very concerted political effort to move all of those advocates off of the state board," said Cynthia Peeples, founding director of Honesty for Ohio Education, one of the first groups to piece together the maps and a coalition that includes the Ohio Conference of the NAACP, the Ohio PTA, teachers' unions and Policy Matters Ohio.

**SEE STATE SCHOOL BOARD, A18**

The Ohio State Board of Education, which has 19 members — including 11 who are elected and eight who are appointed by the governor — oversees the Ohio Department of Education, hires the Ohio superintendent of public instruction and figures out how to put into practice laws passed by the legislature.

Although local districts can choose textbooks and other learning materials not specified in state law, the state board sets an overall vision for education in Ohio.

Under state law, Ohio must redraw its state school board boundaries every decade after state legislative redistricting is completed, since each school board district comprises three state Senate districts. If the General Assembly doesn't reapportion the districts — and this year it did not — the law says the governor must choose new boundaries by Jan. 31.

DeWine released a letter Jan. 31 that described the districts in writing, which fulfills the requirements in the law, but did not include a map.

DeWine's state school board proposal may not be final since the Ohio Supreme Court hasn't yet seen an Ohio Senate map that doesn't contain what it determined was illegal gerrymandering. Republicans on the Ohio Redistricting Commission, of which DeWine is a member, have twice submitted maps that the court rejected.

It took some time for school board members and education advocates to assemble the map based on DeWine's written proposal.

#### WHAT IT SHOWED

DeWine most drastically changed the districts of Meryl Johnson of Cleveland, Dr. Christina Collins of Medina, Dr. Antoinette Miranda of Columbus and Michelle Newman of Newark, which is outside Columbus.

All four members supported the July 14, 2020 resolution that acknowledged racism and inequity in schools against Black students, Indigenous students and students of color.

They also voted against the Oct. 13 measure that rescinded the anti-racism resolution, replacing it with a statement that seeks to promote academic excellence without "respect to race, ethnicity or creed."

The fight over school boards — at the state and local levels — in the last year has become hotly political, as communities debated what students should be taught about racism and history and whether schools teach children social-emotional skills.

Former President Donald Trump turned many women away from the Republican Party, and critics say the politicizing of education is an attempt to win them back to the GOP, but the education of Ohio kids could also be affected.

Critics say the map is based on a gerrymandered state Senate map. It could help the election of conservatives to the board who may politicize education, they said.

DeWine's lines could also make it more challenging for African Americans to get elected from the Cleveland and Columbus areas since those districts now include exurban and rural areas.

DeWine also significantly altered the district of John Hagan of Stark County, who was a leader in the effort to rescind the anti-racism resolution. Hagan was most recently elected to a district representing counties in the Eastern part of the state, hugging the Ohio River. But in his proposal, DeWine moved Hagan's district to the northeastern-most part of the state.

DeWine's proposal changed nearly every school board member's district. However, most members were able to maintain the general shape of their district or its characteristics. For instance, school board members from rural areas got new boundaries to continue almost exclusively representing rural students.

In the case of Collins, who lives in Medina, DeWine redrew her district so that she no longer lives in it. In his letter, he assigned her to a district farther to the south, near Columbus.

"The continuing attempts to gerrymander Ohio's maps threaten to undermine the promise of a high-quality public education for all of Ohio's children," said Scott DiMauro, president of the Ohio Education Association. "We've seen how a national network of extremists has already attempted to use the State Board of Education to control a political narrative by distracting voters from the real issues facing our schools. Unfair state legislative district maps, which determine the State Board of



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Education lines, rob Ohio voters of their right to choose board members who represent their interests and who will stand up for what's best for Ohio's kids."

DeWine is in a Republican gubernatorial primary race, facing more conservative opponents using education as a wedge issue — especially former congressman Jim Renacci, who falsely claims critical race theory is taught in public schools and promises to remove "woke" education models from public schools if elected.

But Dan Tierney, DeWine's spokesman, denied politics played a role in the proposed boundaries.

Tierney said that Senate districts could not be split on state school board maps. Each state school board district must contain three whole Senate districts.

"When it comes to Franklin and Cuyahoga counties, each of those has

more than three state Senate districts, so the counties cannot remain whole for purposes of the state school board," he said.

In 2015, voters amended the Ohio Constitution to limit gerrymandering of state legislative lines. Tierney said that the Redistricting Commission tried to minimize splitting cities, towns, and counties to comply with the constitutional amendment.

Tierney acknowledged some of the new state board boundaries look "goofy." But he said there's a reason for that.

"I think most people would agree they're goofy because they're derived from the Senate districts, which are derived from the (Ohio) House districts, and these are just the shapes of Ohio's counties," he said.

"We think that this map is compact. It represents as closely to the previous maps

as you can, looking at the whole state-wide — given that the puzzle pieces are just completely different than they were 10 years ago.”

### **BLACK STUDENTS AND FAMILIES**

Honesty for Ohio Education’s concern is not only just that urban and suburban areas got grouped in with exurban and rural areas. The coalition also worries about representation on the board for Black families.

Right now, Johnson and Miranda are two of three Black school board members. Both are term-limited in 2024.

DeWine’s proposed new districts could make it harder for African American candidates to win, Peeples said.

“The fact that they completely diluted the urban Black, brown, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous people’s voice up in Northeast Ohio by basically overwhelming it with two rural districts is very concerning,” Peeples said.

The third Black member is State Board President Charlotte McGuire of Dayton, whose District 3 stays in tact.

Johnson was elected to represent District 11, including parts of Cuyahoga and Lake counties. Her new proposed boundaries, also District 11, have parts or all of Ashland, Medina, Wayne and Cuyahoga counties.

Miranda represents District 6, most of Franklin County and Delaware and Knox counties. DeWine’s District 6 proposal has most of Franklin County and all of Pickaway, Hocking, Perry, Fairfield and Muskingum counties.

At state school board meetings, Johnson, a retired Cleveland school teacher, and Miranda, a professor and director of the school psychology program at Ohio State University, frequently pipe up with data about children of color, the unique challenges facing urban school districts and the importance of “wrap-around services,” which are academic, social and behavioral supports for children at school.

In fact, DeWine had championed wrap-around services at the beginning of his term, funneling unprecedented amounts of money toward them.

Miranda said she represents all kids in Ohio, but she has worked in urban schools and teaches a class on urban issues in edu-

cation at OSU.

“I have some knowledge about diverse schools and some knowledge about working with diverse populations that give me a different perspective that maybe other board members may not have — especially if you’re coming from a rural area,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with that. But you may not have the bigger picture.”

### **STRATEGIC PLAN**

During Johnson’s first term, she described board members as more open to helping all children. As a result, the board created a strategic plan to do so.

“I think it was a masterpiece,” she said. “It really focused on helping all children, including children of color.”

The strategic plan aims to increase the number of Ohio high school graduates who enroll in higher education, career-technical programs, apprenticeships or the military, or engage in meaningful work that pays a living wage.

To get there, the strategic plan lays out several guiding principles, including equity and strategies to educate “the whole child,” acknowledging an increasing number of Ohio children are unhoused or live in poverty and experience stressors that harm their intellectual development.

“The state’s education system is not effectively meeting the needs of specific groups of students, such as African American, Hispanic, English learners (EL), economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities,” it states. “Ohio’s achievement gap has been evident since the state began disaggregating student data more than 15 years ago.”

Then members left the board, and the new ones appointed or elected were more conservative. They bristled at a discussion about race and eventually had the votes to overturn the anti-racism resolution passed after Floyd’s death in Minnesota. Education advocates are concerned they’ll turn their attention to dismantling the strategic plan next.

Ohio Federation of Teachers President Melissa Cropper said in a statement that DeWine has attacked the strategic plan in the choices he made in the proposed boundaries.

“The effect of Governor DeWine’s delineation of Ohio’s State Board of Education

districts will be to dilute the voting power of Black communities and other communities of color, and to jeopardize the seats of the strongest advocates for the Board's strategic plan for Ohio's schools," she said. "The governor is undercutting the future of the strategic plan — a holistic vision for a whole-child approach to education that was adopted with broad consensus support from stakeholders — with this gerrymandered redrawing of Board districts."

Johnson is concerned about people of color not being represented in District 11 after completing her second term and leaving the state board.

"It's very sad," she said. "Because some people in leadership don't care about consequences of their decisions."

Miranda, meanwhile, wishes she better understood the factors that went into DeWine's decisions.

"I'm still kind of confused," she said. "I really still don't know how the decision was made."

#### **COLLINS' AND NEWMAN'S DISTRICTS**

In November 2020, about 226,000 people elected Collins to the state board District 5, containing some of Cuyahoga County, all of Medina County where she lives, and parts or all of Summit, Stark, Holmes, Wayne, Ashland and Richland counties.

DeWine assigned her to District 7, containing all or parts of Franklin, Delaware, Union, Knox, Morrow and Holmes counties.

The networks she made with school communities and families won't be needed in the new proposed district, and she'll have to start all over again, meeting people and visiting schools, she said.

Collins, who has a doctorate in education, works full time, has four kids and is a foster parent. It's a two-hour drive from her home to Union County, she said.

She said her voice is for Ohio kids no matter where they live, but she wishes she could represent Medina County.

"I was the only board member completely relocated," she said. "With my reelection not being up until 2024, there are other people whose reelection is up this year, which would have seemed to make a little more sense (to move them out of their home district if necessary).

Because somebody in that territory then could have run this year for that territory to represent them — versus them being stuck with me for the next three years."

Newman, of Newark, was also elected in November 2020 and isn't up for reelection until 2024.

Over 298,000 Ohioans elected her to District 9, a compact area that stretched across 13 counties from part of Franklin County to the west to Tuscarawas County to the east.

DeWine put her in a newly created District 8, which is shaped like a wishbone or boomerang. It includes the city of Youngstown and 18 counties, including many that hug the Ohio River.

Gone is Franklin County and most of the counties near her home in Licking County. She also lost Muskingum County, where she has relationships with the community because she works there. Those areas provided her with most of the votes she received to win the election.

"So I took almost all of (fellow board member) John Hagan's original territory," she said. "It's a drastic shift from what I ran in and what I was elected to represent."

Newman tries to see the positive that the proposed boundaries will be an opportunity to meet new people and learn about schools in a different part of the state. It will take some shuffling to make time to get out to some of the areas, but she said she plans to do it.

"I take very seriously my role to actually get out there and visit schools," she said. "It's literally my favorite part of the job."

But she's also keenly aware of the political nature of her work. Newman said that when she types her name into the Google search bar, the first smart suggestion to come up is, "Michelle Newman, political party."

State school board elections are non-partisan. But voters tend to look up party affiliation. Newman said she usually pulls Democratic ballots in primaries.

"If you look at the vote breakdown of how I was elected and what it would look like in 2024, I mean, it's a completely different ballgame next time around," she said. "... You should be there for the kids and for public schools. And that is a non-partisan issue. But it's hard in such a radicalized society we have right now."