**ECOT scandal remains major issue between Yost, Dettelbach**

**By****Jim Siegel****The Columbus Dispatch**

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ECOT and its founder should have been brought down years ago, says Democrat Steve Dettelbach, who pledges that accountability and ethics will be a focus if he is elected attorney general this fall.

But Auditor Dave Yost, his Republican rival for the job, says the political rhetoric surrounding the ECOT scandal is “a good example of how my opponent doesn’t understand the laws that set up state government or the authority of my office.”

Yost and Dettelbach met with The Dispatch editorial board Tuesday.

The closure of the online Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, formerly the state’s largest charter school, has become a major pressure point for the November election. More than 10,000 students were left without a school after ECOT, founded and operated by major Republican donor Bill Lager, closed in January after the state ordered $80 million repaid for unverified enrollment over two years.

The school had collected about $1 billion in state funding since 2000 and Lager’s companies were paid about $200 million. He made $2.5 million in Ohio political contributions, the lion’s share to Republicans who have dominated state government.

The Department of Education deserves some blame in why the ECOT situation went on for so long, Dettelbach said, “but it is also a failure of enforcement at the back end.”

“There should be an aggressive, complete, comprehensive criminal investigation to find out” whether ECOT accidentally overbilled the state or did so knowingly, “which seems to me to be the far more likely scenario,” Dettelbach said.

“This is an overbilling scandal — and he’s the auditor,” Dettelbach said of Yost.

Yost has said that ECOT likely was collecting money it didn’t deserve for years. He also says that, prior to 2016, the Department of Education considered only whether ECOT offered 920 hours of instruction for students, and not whether students actually participated.

His office is required to follow the standards set by the department, Yost said.

“The auditor goes in to make sure that what is happening is happening according to the rules ... that are set up by the executive,” Yost said.

Dettelbach said Yost’s approach to ECOT should have been similar to that of his 18-month investigation into an attendance data-rigging scandal involving Columbus City Schools. That investigation, which came after a Dispatch report on efforts to alter student data to improve the district’s state report card results, led to two felony convictions and the removal of multiple administrators.

But Yost said of Dettelbach: “He’s just wrong about conflating those two things and doesn’t understand the nature of my office or the limitations on the power of my office.”

The Columbus Schools situation was discovered because the data were available, Yost said.

“I didn’t know what I know today,” Yost said of ECOT. “There was no way to crack the veil of those private companies.”

Using log-in data that the department started collecting only in 2016, Yost said he determined in his most recent audit that Lager and ECOT officials were knowingly turning over fraudulent attendance data to the state to boost payments based on enrollment. He also detailed how Lager utilized his for-profit management and software companies to hide the source of spending on political ads.

“The auditor found these facts,” Yost said. “It was the auditor who sent that to the federal government ... (and) personally sat down with (U.S. Attorney) Ben Glassman to pitch taking the case. Most of what you know about ECOT comes directly or indirectly from my office’s work.”

Asked why Lager’s dealings weren’t flagged sooner, Yost said, “I don’t think it would have been justified, because merely the existence of those self-dealing relationships, as long as they’re disclosed, does not rise, under the law, to criminality.”

***jsiegel@dispatch.com***