**Gov. Kasich must end his silence on GOP lawmakers' backsliding on Ohio charter-school reforms: Brent Larkin**



In this 2011 file photo, seventh-grader Kelsey Monk, 12, left, and her sisters Alina Monk, 14, a ninth-grader, center in background, and sixth-grader Holly Monk, 11, of Mentor, do their homework and all their schoolwork online as students in the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow. Brent Larkin writes that Gov. John Kasich has to step in to make sure that state education officials' efforts to police Ohio charter schools and enforce a new reform law aren't thwarted by backsliding lawmakers. *(Lisa DeJong, The Plain Dealer, File, 2011)*

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CLEVELAND -- The biggest scandal in Ohio history is knocking on the Statehouse door.

This isn't about then-Gov. Bob Taft [failing to disclose](http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2014/04/former_ohio_gov_bob_tafts_crim.html) a few rounds of golf.

It's about pouring hundreds of millions of dollars a year down a rathole. And selling out tens of thousands of children in the process.

Every penny of this massive waste of money would come straight from your pocket. Every child getting kicked in the teeth might as well be your neighbor.

The villains who want to perpetuate this swindle are the Republicans who run the Ohio General Assembly.

Here's what it's about:

Ohio taxpayers send nearly $1 billion annually to the schools housing the state's 119,000 charter students.

Last year, enormous public pressure forced a reluctant legislature to enact a law requiring reasonable oversight of those charters – a network of schools that includes some doing heroic work, others doing the devil's.

Ohio's state legislature today passed a major charter school reform bill that adds new financial reporting, transparency and conflict of interest rules to a much-criticized charter school sector.

This happened after it became [common knowledge](http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2015/03/ohios_charter_schools_ridicule.html) in education circles nationwide that Ohio was one of the two or three worst states in the nation in terms of requiring meaningful oversight of those schools.

Now, less than a year after requiring more state oversight of charters, Republican legislative leaders yearn for a return to the time when their benefactors in the charter school industry were free to reap windfall profits unencumbered by the messy business of teaching children.

Towards that end, on Aug. 22, a panel of legislative Republicans blocked a rule designed to identify underperforming charters.

Republican legislators have put a hold on evaluating charter school "sponsors," also known as "authorizers," because rules governing those evaluations were rushed

Why?

\* Because they may have caught the Ohio Department of Education on a technical misstep. But absent that misstep, legislators would have probably invented one.

\* Because operators of underperforming charters, who contribute generously to their campaigns, wanted them to.

\* Because, like many Democrats are bought and paid for by the teacher unions, many Republicans are bought and paid for by charter school operators.

The legislature's approach to charter school accountability was [summed up](http://www.ohio.com/editorial/editorials/scandalous-at-the-statehouse-1.706780) perfectly by the Akron Beacon Journal: "The scheme is transparent: Win applause for making needed changes, and then unravel the work in the relative darkness of the rule-writing process."

There's only one person in this state of 11.3 million who can stop this budding scandal in its tracks.

That person, of course, is Gov. John Kasich.

And while it's important to note the current governor has clean hands in this developing scandal, Kasich's silent support for the Ohio Department of Education's attempts to police bad charters is no longer enough.

Because if the legislature continues to whittle away at the reforms it enacted less than a year ago -- and make no mistake, that's the intention of House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger and Senate President Keith Faber -- it will not only ruin Ohio's reputation, but might also just destroy Kasich's as well. And with it, any hope Kasich has of winning the presidency in 2020.

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The timing of all this is hardly a coincidence.

At the heart of it all is the legislature's obsession with protecting online charters, notably the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), Ohio's largest online school, with nearly 15,000 students.

William Lager, ECOT's founder, has been a huge contributor to GOP legislators' campaigns. And, as I've written repeatedly, this is a legislature run by people who care a lot more about contributions than they do about kids.

But the people at the Ohio Department of Education are old-fashioned. Unlike many Republican legislators, they think students attending online schools should spend time on the computer doing schoolwork.

In March, an initial ODE review of ECOT's records determined most students logged into ECOT's online platform only about an hour a day.

[](http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2016/07/many_ecot_students_spend_just.html)

[Many ECOT students spend just one hour online for classes each day, state lawyers say](http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2016/07/many_ecot_students_spend_just.html)

Many students at the giant Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) online school spend less than an hour a day online for school, state lawyers said this week

Online education is a tricky thing. Attendance is far more difficult to track than it is at a conventional brick-and-mortar school. But by any measure, an hour a day seems woefully insufficient.

So when the state asked a Franklin County court to order ECOT to turn over attendance records as part of an effort to determine if students are actually receiving the 920 annual hours of education that the state requires, ECOT fought back – with a vengeance.

ECOT now accuses the state of "criminal misconduct" and "incompetence," The Columbus Dispatch [reports](http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/08/17/ecot-claims-education-department-engaged-in-criminal-misconduct.html).

School spokesman Neil Clark argues passionately that ODE has gone "way overboard" in its attempts to punish ECOT. And the result of this nasty court fight is far from certain.

But the facts aren't ECOT's friend. In fact, a front-page [story](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/19/us/online-charter-schools-electronic-classroom-of-tomorrow.html?_r=0) in the May 18 edition of The New York Times left readers with the clear impression ECOT might be the worst school in the United States.

The Times investigation found "more students drop out of the Electronic Classroom [ECOT] or fail to finish high school within four years than at any other school in the country, according to federal data."

Stories by news organizations throughout Ohio, including The Plain Dealer and cleveland.com, have also reported extensively on ECOT's atrocious student performance.

Granted, ECOT takes lots of troubled students.

Nevertheless, the numbers are mind-numbing:

The four-year high school graduation rate in Cleveland's underperforming school district is 66.1 percent. ECOT's is 38.8 percent.

Unless Kasich intervenes, look for the legislature to continue gutting charter-school regulations, especially those affecting online schools.

At the very least, the governor should issue emergency rules governing charter oversight and publicly warn his dishonest colleagues he'll veto any legislation that rolls back the most recent reforms.

In [his Aug. 21 show on HBO](http://www.hbo.com/last-week-tonight-with-john-oliver/episodes/3/81-episode/index.html), comedian John Oliver spent more than ten minutes of a 30-minute program belittling Kasich and Ohio over the pathetic performance of the state's charter schools, notably the online ones.

Oliver concluded with the suggestion that by the time Ohio finally gets it right, "futures may have been ruined."

Not caring about kids is already this legislature's legacy. Kasich needs to do more to make sure it isn't his.

*Brent Larkin was The Plain Dealer's editorial director from 1991 until his retirement in 2009.*

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