

Ohio House Speaker Jason Stephens: Higher ed overhaul doesn't have votes to pass

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A controversial higher education overhaul that would restrict diversity training on campus faces dim prospects in the Ohio House.

Speaker Jason Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, said Tuesday that Senate Bill 83 doesn't have enough support to get through the House – and he's not trying to push for a vote. His comments dealt a blow to Republicans in the Senate, who passed the measure earlier this year and consider the legislation a top priority.

A House committee is scheduled to hold a hearing on the bill Wednesday. Supporters say it's necessary to combat liberal bias on college campuses, but opponents contend it goes too far and will restrict academic freedom.

"I think there are a lot of concerns with that bill from both sides of the aisle, frankly," Stephens told reporters. "Understanding what's being attempted, but sometimes that language can go either direction. I think it's important that we look at that before it's passed."

The proposal would prohibit most diversity, equity and inclusion courses, require students to take an American government or history class, and prevent public institutions from accepting gifts or donations from China. It would also establish student evaluations that assess whether faculty promote an atmosphere "free of political, racial, gender and religious bias."

The original bill would have banned employee strikes, but proponents agreed to remove that provision earlier this month to get it across the finish line. However, it would allow boards of trustees to reduce programs or academic degrees and eliminate the associated faculty jobs if the student population drops or their missions change.

Critics say that process – called retrenchment – is too broad and could wipe out tenure. The legislation would protect faculty with between 30 and 35 years of tenure.

Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, said earlier this month that he expects the bill to return if it doesn't pass during the current legislative session. Senate Republicans will be less willing to compromise if that happens, he warned.

"When you make concessions and folks who say, 'If you make these concessions, I'll vote for it,' but they don't, the concessions don't end up getting made in the future," Huffman said.

Reporter Jessie Balmert contributed.