

# Ohio lawmakers may allow party labels in school board races

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Ohio voters could start seeing an R or D next to the names of school board candidates on the ballot.

Senate Bill 107, introduced by Sen. Andrew Brenner, R-Delaware, would allow contenders for state and local school boards to declare their political party in general elections. It's not a firm requirement: Those who don't want to identify as a Republican or Democrat could request a nonpartisan or third-party label, or scrap the designation altogether.

Brenner said he wants to leave room for candidates who identify as independents. But he contends party labels provide more transparency for voters.

"I think people need to know who they're voting for and their backgrounds," Brenner told the statehouse bureau. "We have a lot of political activism going on in our local school boards."

School boards set budgets, hire superintendents and develop policies for their districts – routine activities that have become intensely political.

Frustrated parents flocked to meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic to air grievances about mask mandates and at-home learning. Others began advocating for book bans and claimed school officials were improperly teaching race and gender concepts.

Brenner's proposal also comes after Republicans stripped powers from the state Board of Education and created the Department of Education and Workforce. Backers of the change argued the board spent too much time on ideological fights, such as whether to support federal protections for LGBTQ students.

This isn't the first time Ohio Republicans have advocated for party labels in school board races. The practice is rare but not unheard of: Nine states allow partisan school board candidates, according to the Missouri-based MOST Policy Initiative. By contrast, Florida voters recently rejected a constitutional amendment to make school board elections partisan, the Tallahassee Democrat reported.

At this point, Brenner's bill focuses on general elections and wouldn't require Republican or Democratic candidates to run in primaries. He said that could change as lawmakers debate the legislation.

A spokesperson for the Ohio School Boards Association said the bill would "unnecessarily limit local participation" and bar certain candidates, such as state and federal employees who aren't allowed to run for partisan offices.

"School board is front line," said Stephanie Hightower, a former Columbus school board member and president of the Columbus Urban League, who's recruiting candidates for the upcoming election. "You already have a limited amount of people who want to get in the fray just because of the politics that go into being a school board member."