

Ohio professors submit 4,500 signatures to kickstart repeal of controversial higher education bill

By **Laura Hancock**
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COLUMBUS, Ohio - Youngstown State University professors working to repeal a controversial higher education law submitted their petition and about 4,500 signatures to state officials Monday afternoon – kickstarting a long and expensive process of getting a referendum on the ballot.

The group collected 4,500 signatures in about 10 days, said Mark Vopat, president of the Youngstown State Education Association. (The Columbus-headquartered Ohio Education Association is not involved in the referendum effort.)

The professors needed at least 1,000 valid signatures of registered Ohio voters. They're aiming to get the referendum on ballots for the Nov. 4 General Election.

Those initial 1,000 signatures are just the first hurdle in the process of adding the referendum to the ballot. The proposal will go through several administrative reviews before organizers can begin collecting hundreds of thousands of additional signatures they will need to put the question before voters.

The group wants to repeal [Senate Bill 1](#), which Gov. Mike DeWine signed March 28 and which goes into effect June 23. The new law bans diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives at public colleges and universities, prohibits professors from striking, states professors can't "indoctrinate" students and requires all viewpoints to be considered during class discussion, among dozens of other requirements.

Many Ohio faculty and students opposed the bill during legislative testimony and in demonstrations around the Statehouse, citing labor union changes to the potential of students with extremist views derailing a class discussion.

Vopat said that before the [group's website](#) went live, people throughout the state were asking if they could gather petitioners, which he believes is a sign of how deeply unpopular SB 1 is.

Many Ohioans link the Ohio legislature's desire to control higher education to President Donald Trump, Vopat said. This could give the referendum a boost.

"It's almost a state version of what's going on in the federal government," he said, noting that Youngstown State [recently lost 14 international students](#) because the U.S. Department of Homeland Security revoked their visas.

State Sen. Jerry Cirino, a Lake County Republican who sponsored the bill, has defended it in recent public appearances, saying state funding for public colleges and universities will be tied to compliance with the new law.

"We are not kidding around. This law will not be ignored. It will be welcomed and it will be implemented at our universities and community colleges," [Cirino said last week at the City Club of Cleveland](#).

Money could be a challenge for the group. A successful referendum campaign can cost millions just to get on the ballot, and then millions more for digital and broadcast advertising. The professors at this point don't have any well-heeled groups backing them, Vopat said.

For referenda, petitioners have to submit the petition and signatures to Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose in downtown Columbus. Within one day of that submission, the petitioners must submit a copy of SB 1 and their petition summary to the Ohio Attorney General's Office, also in downtown Columbus, [according to an explanation of the process by the AG's office](#).

Within the next 10 business days of receiving the petition, the Secretary of State's office must verify the petition signers are registered voters and their addresses on the petition matches that of their voter registrations, [according to the Secretary of State's office](#).

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost also gets 10 days to review the petition and certify whether he believes the summary to be a fair and truthful statement of the law to be repealed. In recent ballot initiatives, [Yost has rejected](#) summaries and petition titles.

Then the Ohio Ballot Board, a group of elected and appointed officials, meets within 10 days to determine whether the referendum contains one repeal or more than one.

After the Ballot Board meetings, the second round of signature-gathering can begin. The group would need just under 250,000 valid signatures statewide from at least 44

of Ohio's 88 counties. They would have to submit the signatures by the end of June to qualify for the November ballot.

Many successful petition and referendum campaigns use paid signature-gatherers for this stretch of the campaign. That may not be the case for the professors.

"That would be really nice if we had money to hire petition gatherers," Vopat said. "Right now, there's no plan to hire anyone."

If those signatures are gathered and submitted, LaRose will work with local election officials to verify them. If enough valid signatures have been submitted, the referendum can proceed to the ballot.

"When we started it, the whole idea to show everyone – other unions, the OEA, the (American Association of University Professors – Ohio chapter,) all the groups across Ohio, whether they're academic or not, that there is a groundswell of support for this," Vopat said. "That if we can start it, then other groups, other individuals will jump on board."