

DeSantis targets unions, school boards with ‘Teachers Bill of Rights’

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Gov. Ron DeSantis unveiled a series of proposals Monday aimed at school boards and teachers unions, the latest salvo in the governor’s battles over education policy in the state.

DeSantis unveiled what he called a “Teachers Bill of Rights” at an event in Jacksonville that would give teachers the go-ahead to oppose their school boards if they believed their policies were against state law.

He also proposed banning teachers unions from automatically deducting dues from paychecks, imposing stricter term limits on school board members and changing the state constitution to allow school board candidates to reveal their political parties in what are now nonpartisan races.

DeSantis said he wants an additional \$200 million to the special fund created to raise teacher pay, bringing the total to \$1 billion for teacher pay in his recommended budget for the next year.

Overall, \$3 billion has been spent on salaries in the past three years, he said..

But much of that money has been devoted to increases in starting pay for new teachers, leaving the state still ranked 48th in the nation in average public school teacher pay last year, according to the National Education Association, one spot lower than when DeSantis took office in 2019.

The state also had 5,300 teacher vacancies this month, more than double the jobs they needed to fill two years ago, according to the state teachers union.

DeSantis’ proposals on school boards came after he inserted himself into local board races to an unprecedented degree for a governor, boosting conservative candidates

around the state. That included Orange County, where Moms for Liberty member Alicia Farrant won a seat on the board.

“What we’ve seen over the years is you have ... counties in like Southwest Florida that voted for me by like 40 points, and yet they’re electing people to school board who are like totally the opposite philosophy,” DeSantis said. “... And sometimes it’s hard without knowing because you have all these names on a ballot.”

State Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-Orlando, wrote on Twitter that eight-year term limits for school board members, instead of the current 12, and partisan elections are designed “to basically get rid of current members over time and make public education more partisan. This goes far deeper than just culture wars — this is an educational power grab.”

The new proposals would have to be approved by the Legislature or, in the case of changing the constitution, by state voters via referendum.

They come just days after DeSantis and Education Commissioner Manny Diaz made national headlines in banning an AP African American Studies class in the state and announced plans for the state to fund any parents who want to send their children to voucher schools, no matter their income.

His teachers’ rights proposal is patterned after the Parents Bill of Rights that allowed parents to ignore COVID restrictions in schools. DeSantis said the state would “protect” teachers from their boards or unions.

“[If] a teacher is faced with either following state law or listening to a school board or school union or an administrator telling them to violate state law, if they follow state law, they’re protected,” DeSantis said. “... And it doesn’t matter if a school board or superintendent thinks otherwise.”

It could potentially affect teachers at odds with their school boards on the interpretation of issues ranging from the so-called “don’t say gay” law to the “Stop WOKE” law banning critical race theory, both of which are broadly written.

The educators and board members who spoke at the event cited their opposition to their boards’ vaccine mandates and other anti-COVID measures.

“At my current charter school, I am free to choose to wear a mask or not wear a mask, and ‘social distancing’ and quarantining of healthy children because of proximity are foreign terms,” said former Duval public school teacher Leah Hannigan.

Duval School Board member Charlotte Joyce said “during the pandemic, we saw the teachers unions advocate strongly for mask mandates and for vaccinations. Because of our great governor, he just put a stop to that and said, ‘We’re not going to have that in the state of Florida.’”

DeSantis' proposal to end the automatic deduction of union dues was also directed at teachers unions, which he said have too much power.

“That’s your choice,” DeSantis said of paying dues, a critical source of funding for unions. “If you want to do it, send money, that’s fine. But to have it automatically deducted when you sign an authorization form? They don’t even tell you how much is being deducted.”

He also added that union officials “should not make any more than what the highest-paid teacher is making. You have these people making huge amounts of money, and the teachers are making half of that amount of money. How is that fair? How is that something that makes sense?”

He did not say if he would attempt to pass a law mandating that, however.

Diaz continued the attack on teachers unions following the event, writing on Twitter that it was unions that were “standing in the way of teachers getting the raises they deserve.”

A spokeswoman for the Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union, did not return a request for comment.