

State can't be trusted to educate equitably

As a mom with four school-aged kids, my heart is aching for the children and families of Youngstown City Schools. For many, sending your child to school is bigger than any one day in the classroom. It's the promise of an equitable future.

When you're just trying to survive your morning routine, you don't have time or patience to hear about misguided politics influencing our public education system. As a taxpayer, you deserve to trust that your kids are learning what they need to become well-rounded, thoughtful humans.

But, unfortunately, we live in Ohio, where the mantra seems to be "if a donor can make a buck, to hell with our kids," and that's exactly what happened to YCSD.

Trust has been broken. This gerrymandered-into-oblivion state government is run by Ohio GOP leaders who brazenly ignore the Constitution, the law and the will of the people. The teachers strike has been the direct result of teachers saying, "No more!" They've been standing up to the state lawmakers who are intentionally eroding public schools, and I'll stand with them in that fight any day.

This dismantling of our school system has been carefully crafted over years and its Columbus architects are salivating over this strike. They continue efforts to defund public schools, line the pockets of their wealthy donors and create further economic class divide.

Democrats fought for the implementation of the Ohio Fair School Funding Plan, which uses actual data and research to determine the true cost of educating a child.

Our counterparts instead destroyed the elected State Board of Education, turning it into a governor appointed agency. It's been renamed the Department of Education and Workforce. It will be run by businessmen chosen by the governor instead of educators and board members chosen by the people.

They also gave more funding for charter schools and a universal education voucher program that'll see \$2 billion removed from public schools. While Democrats successfully got a nearly 11% increase in funding for public schools, the GOP profiteers

succeeded in getting a 16% increase to their for-profit charter schools. Do I trust that the state cares about equitable education for all kids? No.

YCSD was meant to be the first public school system to live out this master plan, falling under state control in 2015. “The Youngstown Plan” created a path to turn YCSD into a charter. Instead of supplementing the diminished resources that resulted from population and tax decline in the region, the root cause of the academic strain, lawmakers instead took power away from the school board, installed a CEO and Academic Distress Commission, and removed any mechanism for taxpayer accountability in the management of the District. The state said we couldn’t be trusted in Youngstown to make our own decisions.

But trust in the state to improve our schools is certainly misheld. Over the course of eight years, YCSD saw two CEOs fail to improve academic standards or teacher turnover. Former CEO Justin Jennings left us with nearly \$8 million in wasted spending and a U.S. Department of Education investigation. Where was the state during all this?

You’d be right to ponder if stronger rules could solve the problem, but these politicians aren’t trying to hold accountable bad actors who hurt Ohio kids. They’re trying to maintain power. There are more than 150 exemptions in law for their charter schools. The corrupt politicians of Columbus aren’t interested in transparency, responsible usage of taxpayer funds or providing equitable resources to all kids. They care about their power and their profits.

As parents, we care about what is best for our kids. We want our children to learn how to think for themselves, not to be molded into someone else’s workhorse for industry. We want them to decide their own path because that’s what strengthens our society. I trust our teachers to create a classroom environment where they can do this.

And that’s why I’ve introduced a bill that will end Academic Distress Commissions in Ohio, forever, and remove any chance the untrustworthy state can take over our great public schools again. We must join with our teachers and communities in saying no to this power grab.

State Rep. Lauren McNally, D-Youngstown, represents the 59th Statehouse district.