

could not use zoning codes to block a charter school from opening. Such a proposal follows a zoning fight last year in Washington Township, where the MSD Washington Township community used zoning hearings to oppose a new charter school, Girls IN STEM Academy, opening in the area. Rep. Behning had referenced that conflict in his reasoning for this proposal, though he later tells us that it's not in direct response to what happened in Washington Township, because the zoning went through for Girls IN STEM without issue. However, Behning fears another municipality may see success down the road in using zoning to stop charter schools, so he wanted to do something now, "In other communities, I fear this might happen, and clearly this looks like something that might have been used in that case (Washington Township) if it had gone on further."

□ We predicted in our last issue that you would see some form of amendment to the zoning provisions in HB 1515. Sen. **Brian Buchanan** (R) of Lebanon, the bill's Senate sponsor, adopted an amendment cleaning up the zoning language to make it less broad. Essentially, the original bill text could have been interpreted to mean that a zoning board could not deny a school's rezoning request no matter what . . . even perhaps if the school wanted to open in an unfit space. Sen. Buchanan's change to the language clarifies that a zoning board could not deny a school rezoning request on the sole basis of the petitioner being a school.

□ HB 1515 will next head to the Senate Committee on Appropriations for consideration.

• The bill to render school board elections partisan, SB 287, is stalled on the House floor, having sat on the Third Reading calendar all week with no vote called yet. We're hearing it might be a tough pass, as bill sponsor Rep. **J.D. Prescott** (R) of Union City has apparently been counting heads in the chamber each day before session started all this week to determine how many members were present to vote for the bill. Several representatives were absent Thursday, making the vote a no-go this week and kicking the debate to next week.

□ House Speaker **Todd Huston** (R) of Fishers tells reporters to expect SB 287 to be on the board early next week, but he offered little explanation as to what the holdup is, "I don't know. It's been a little bit of a weird week with just conversations around a lot of different issues, so, not just on that." The Speaker then avoided the "will it pass?" question, twice, simply answering, "I support it."

□ Meanwhile, on social media, Lieutenant Governor **Micah Beckwith** (R) has been lobbying all week for the passage of SB 287 through a series of posts on different platforms. On Wednesday, he tweeted on his official lieutenant governor X account (formerly known as Twitter):

"Doesn't it seem odd that if you run for school board, you're not allowed to declare a party affiliation? SB 287 would change that, not only allowing candidates more freedom, but it would also increase transparency." A video of Beckwith explaining the bill accompanied the tweet where he explains, "It would help you the voter know a little more about the candidates, whether they identify as Republicans, Democrats, independents, Libertarians, or just no affiliation. I think that's super important because we all know that schools have become the hottest, most politicized institutions in our entire nation right now. While I don't like seeing that, it just is what it is."

□ On his personal X page, also on Wednesday, Lt. Governor Beckwith posted a photo of what appeared to be a Pride flag in the window of a classroom at Center Grove High School in Greenwood. With the photo, Beckwith again advocated for SB 287's passage: "This is yet another example of political ideology showing up amongst a supposedly 'non-partisan' school board. SB 287 brings these ideological differences out into the open so parents know exactly who is making the policies that affect their children. SB 287 ensures transparency. It gives voters the clarity they deserve by making school board races partisan—so you know where candidates stand before they take office."

• Votes landed mostly along party lines for HB 1348 authored by Rep. **Tim Wesco** (R) of Osceola, which passed through the Senate with a vote of 32-15 and is now on its way to the Governor's desk, having accrued no changes by the Senate.

□ The bill's final passage, however, was preceded by discussion in the Senate Committee on Education and Career Development, where perhaps an unexpectedly heated debate ensued on its first reading in the committee.

□ The bill itself is relatively straightforward and meant to be a preemptive prevention of discrimination toward students by prohibiting state or local public agencies from throwing out certain job applicants based solely on their high school diploma coming from a nonaccredited nonpublic school or homeschool. As we have reported, Rep. Wesco, who was homeschooled, authored the bill after hearing of issues with some local agencies rejecting students for just holding a homeschool diploma.

□ In discussion, there was a point of debate sparked with Senate Democratic Leader **Shelli Yoder** (D) of Bloomington as she asked whether discrimination was happening within Indiana's higher education institutions, which Rep. Wesco said was a problem in other states but is not a widespread issue in Indiana and the bill prevents that from happening in the future. The back and forth continued as Sen. Yoder incorrectly stated that the bill just addresses higher education

and questioned the need for it. However, the bill also includes local units of government, such as the police. In the heat of the exchange, Rep. Wesco revealed the name of the police department that allegedly did not hire a homeschooled student as the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, which had not been named in prior discussions but only alluded to as being a precursor to the measure.

□ As the conversation continued, Sen. Yoder questioned the veracity of the claim and its origin. She asked Rep. Wesco if he had personally verified the claim of discrimination against homeschooled students by IMPD. He said he had not verified the claim personally but had been told the information by the state homeschool association, to which Sen. Yoder retorted, “So not even the individual.”

□ The at times heated discussion resurfaced in the testimony of **Kylene Varner** of the Indiana Association of Home Educators, who said that her organization is the one that dealt with the initial claim in 2018 of an Indiana homeschooled high school graduate, who graduated from Ball State University and also obtained a master’s degree. She claimed that, in his rejection, IMPD told him “you don’t qualify because you have a high school diploma.” Despite his protests that his nonpublic diploma still counted under Indiana law, they said he was still not qualified, Varner detailed.

□ Later on, discussion circled back once again as Sen. **Andrea Hunley** (D) of Indianapolis brought up information she had obtained to “correct just a couple quick things for the record.” As Sen. Hunley explained, she had reached out to the chief of police at IMPD to clarify the law. She said the Law Enforcement Training Board sets the education level requirements. As she explained, the current requirements align with what is in administrative code as Title 250 Indiana Administrative Code, Article 2, Rule 3, Section 3 (250 IAC 2-3-3). The provision states that the “applicant shall, at a minimum, be a high school graduate as evidenced by a diploma issued by a state accredited high school. An equivalency diploma issued by an accredited high school or proof of an earned degree issued by an accredited college or university is also acceptable.” Which means, theoretically, if the student had a university diploma as Varner mentioned then it would mean that counts to allow acceptance, at least according to state code.

□ Other moments of contention around the bill echoed similar concerns raised by House Democrats about homeschooling in general, as mentioned in our prior reporting. The initial questioning done by Sen. Ford asked about whether Rep. Wesco had any proficiency test administered to him in his homeschooling and how higher education institutions can verify “the quality and the content” of a person’s homeschool education. Rep. Wesco replied that is why institutions can use tests such as SATs or ACTs or similar tests. Additionally, the

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bill allows for the local agencies or educational institutions to require further proof or a competency test for an applicant with a homeschool diploma, or a nonpublic nonaccredited diploma.

□ **Joel Hand**, representing the Indiana Coalition of Public Education and the American Federation of Teachers of Indiana, testified in opposition to the measure once again and called the bill a “legal fallacy.” He said students in public schools, charter schools, and accredited nonpublic schools have to take regular standardized tests throughout their education, and “none of that applies to homeschool students.” He also expressed concern about students who are brought out of high school and into homeschooling without “any real education taking place.” Hand went on to reiterate a claim that homeschooled students have no verification of their ability to read, write, or do basic math. A similar idea was brought up in the statehouse. The comments drew a firm response from Chair **Jeff Raatz** (R) of Richmond, who informed Hand, “That’s not the way the bill is written.” Sen. Raatz also accused that there was an attempt in testimony to “vilify” homeschooling, and “to vilify is wrong.”

- HB 1634, a measure that would rethink Indiana’s math education system, clears the Senate Committee on Education unanimously and is before the Senate Committee on Appropriations on a recommit. As we’ve reported in previous issues, the measure would primarily establish metrics to follow when teaching foundational math at the elementary level, requiring instruction to focus on three tiers: conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and real-world problem-solving. HB 1634 also would implement math screeners, similar to the reading screeners for K-2 students to identify early indicators. The bill further tasks the Indiana Department of Education to review teacher preparation programs to align with the math instruction requirements set forth in the bill.

□ Additionally, the bill sets up an auto-enrollment for advanced math courses in middle school. Middle school students who earn high ILEARN scores in math would be automatically enrolled in the advanced level math classes. This provision was tweaked slightly in the Senate to make the auto-enrollment apply to students who school “higher than proficiency,” instead of “at proficiency or higher” in the original bill text.

- HB 1498 would formally task the Indiana Department of Education and the State Board of Education with creating a new A-F accountability framework, and that measure clears the Senate in a 43-4 vote.

□ As we’ve detailed, the exact criteria for the grading scale are undecided, as the state board will be able to develop its method for determining which metrics will be used to assign

letter grades for schools. There are provisions in the bill that require the methodology to include third grade literacy rates, diploma seal attainment, statewide testing, and on-track graduation rates. Another provision is related to having IDOE develop proposals to adjust diploma waivers to better fit the new diploma requirements. There is a portion that allows the option for the waivers to be eliminated altogether.

□ In its hearing before the Senate Committee on Education, Sen. **Spencer Deery** (R) of West Lafayette brought forward an amendment which included striking out the language regarding on-track indicators and adding language requiring the SBOE must report their “proposed new categories or designations” to the general assembly. The amendment for the on track indicator language was also an idea echoed by Secretary of Education **Katie Jenner**, who says the change would allow for flexibility as it would leave the provision as an option but not a requirement.

□ Generally, the A-F system – which, as you may recall if you’re a frequent reader of this newsletter, was last utilized in 2018 to grade schools – was a contentious part of the initial committee discussion on the bill. Democrats on the committee, such as Sens. **Andrea Hunley** (D) of Indianapolis, who is a former public school principal, and **Fady Qaddoura** of Indianapolis, argued that the letter system is based mostly on quantitative metrics such as test scores, which are only one part of a student’s entire academic performance.

□ Sen. Qaddoura stressed that “it is difficult to compare apples to apples” as schools can have differing socioeconomic situations for their student population that could then theoretically alter their overall grade. Instead, he said there should be a consideration of “weighted factors” to account for differences in the amount of resources and effort of teaching in some districts compared to others.

□ Sen. Qaddoura also expressed a desire to create guidelines and a policy statement to better guide SBOE in creating the new accountability framework. The sentiment brought forward possibly echoes back, if you recall our previous reporting, to the tension between Democrats and IDOE around the initial diploma requirements draft. Back in December, Rep. **Ed DeLaney** (D) of Indianapolis engaged in a heated exchange with Secretary Jenner because he believes SBOE had “ran away” with the high school diploma changes without consulting the General Assembly. The line of questioning by Sen. Qaddoura seems to harken back to this tension between SBOE and Democrats. Sen. Qaddoura referred back to the diploma rulemaking process from last summer, expressing he wants to avoid getting upset calls from constituents wondering why lawmakers told the state board to make such changes.