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**The State:** Let governor appoint education superintendent (Opinion)  
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Editorial

Gubernatorial candidates talk a lot about public education, and little wonder. It's the most important thing the state does, and 40 cents of every state general fund dollar goes to the schools.

But a governor has less control over our schools than a member of the House, even though she represents 124 times as many people. Although she can make suggestions, her only formal power over education is the ability to veto legislation.

She can't take a single positive action on her own, because the person who runs the state Education Department is a separately elected official. Someone who can get along with the governor, as the current one seems to do, or not, as his predecessor seemed to do.

It begs the question: If the governor has no control over the agency that spends 40 percent of our general tax dollars and performs the state's most vital function, what, exactly, does she govern?

We've never heard a good reason why the person who runs our most important state agency does not have to demonstrate a single qualification for the job, other than the ability to raise campaign funds and get more votes than any of his competitors — none of whom, likely, is the person anybody would actually hire for such an important job.

Fortunately, there's an easy way to address both problems: Allow governors to select the person who runs the Education Department, just as they select the person who runs the Commerce Department and the Corrections Department and the Revenue Department and nearly a dozen other state agencies.

That way the education vision that voters buy into when they elect a governor will be the vision implemented in our schools, at least to the degree that the law allows it. Where the law doesn't allow that, the education superintendent will work on behalf of the governor to convince the Legislature to change it. And rather than being limited to the handful of politicians who are up to making the race, the governor will be able to choose from professionals across the state and even the nation, in much the same way our local school boards do when they hire a district superintendent.

Legislation up for debate today in the Senate would begin the process of making that change, by placing a question on the 2014 ballot asking voters to amend the state constitution. If they say yes, the governor would appoint the education superintendent beginning in 2019. Our current education superintendent, Republican Mick Zais, supports the change, as did his predecessor, Democrat Jim Rex, and his predecessor, Democrat Inez Tenenbaum.

In fact, for years, it's been hard to find opponents of the idea outside the Senate; the House has voted several times to authorize the constitutional referendum, only to watch the measure die in the Senate. But last month, the Senate agreed without objection to place the legislation (S.53) on priority debate status, which should — but does not necessarily — mean that it has the two-thirds support necessarily to advance to the House.

It's past time to make this change. The Senate should approve the referendum, and then the House should follow suit, and allow voters to eliminate this outdated provision of our state constitution.

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