

Anti-teacher, anti-librarian measures stall, fortunately

INDIANA'S Republican lawmakers in the General Assembly at long last have heard the voices of Hoosiers who implored them not to pass wrong-headed anti-teacher and anti-librarian bills.

There is no other way to characterize, respectively, what House Bill 1134 and Senate Bill 17 were. If Indiana lawmakers don't comprehend that these bills are anti-teacher and anti-librarian, they need to educate themselves on why so many people were so angered by them. These bills attempted to use state law to censor what we can say or read. Not only that, the bills showed utter disrespect for professional public servants who deserve our praise, not punitive measures from politicians.

House Bill 1134 is the anti-teacher bill that, among other things, sought to limit what educators could say when teaching about "divisive concepts." Practically any concept can be divisive, so the bill had fundamental First Amendment problems as well as vague language. That's been the ruin of many a poor bill Indiana lawmakers have passed in recent years that led courts to strike them down as unconstitutional.

The bill's overarching problem was that, on the whole, it was a message from the legislative leadership to teachers and public schools saying, "We don't trust you." That's problematic for a legislative supermajority in a state where roughly half the tax dollars go toward funding education.

Sen. Linda Rogers, R-Granger, who sponsored a watered-down HB1134 in the Senate, pulled the bill Monday, effectively killing it for the session.

"It probably needed a little more work," Rogers said in a remark that's a leading contender for understatement of the legislative session.

What needs a little more work is the General Assembly's relationship with our teachers, who are among the lowest-paid in the nation. Teachers won't forget this shameful bill, nor will parents or a broad coalition of Hoosiers who rose up against it. Indiana State Teachers Association President Keith Gambill thanked supporters who "made their voices heard that HB1134 has no place in Indiana."

Teachers will be watching to make sure the terrible elements of HB1134 don't crop up during these final two weeks. That's when lawmakers tend to sneak all kinds of unpopular and unscrupulous measures into other bills, particularly in the final 48 hours before the legislature is scheduled to adjourn by March 14.

Meanwhile, the anti-librarian bill, Senate Bill 17, appears dead for the session after missing House deadlines for votes. That bill would have, in its original form, potentially prosecuted librarians who provide "harmful materials" to minors, even for educational purposes. Again, those vague words would have invited a court to strike the law, had it passed.

Here in Columbus, the Bartholomew County Public Library held a "read-in" to protest the bill. Like the anti-teacher bill, Senate Bill 17 tread on basic liberties. People saw this and spoke out. For all the doubts we sometimes have in our systems of government, this time, it looks as if people's voices were heard.

If there is to be any silver lining to the censoring and professional harassment that was attempted through these bills, let it be that our lawmakers learned a basic lesson in democracy: Their duties end where they infringe on our basic rights.