

**Testimony – Jamie Davies O’Leary**  
**House Government Accountability & Oversight Committee**  
**HB 512**  
**February 27, 2018**

Thank you, Chair Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and members of the Government Accountability and Oversight Committee for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 512.

I am a former public school teacher and a current education policy analyst. I’m also a former candidate for Ohio’s State Board of Education (District 6). In 2016, I ran in a five-way race for a seat to represent Knox, Delaware, and most of Franklin County. I’d like to share about that experience as it relates to your proposal to overhaul the board, streamline its work with higher education and workforce development, and place the onus of education policy implementation within a new cabinet. This would mirror 26 other Ohio departments and promises to give more influence to future governors over K-12 public education, a shift that is far from unusual when looking at the landscape of education governance in other states.

Opponents of changing Ohio’s education governance structure have focused on two primary assertions. First, they argue that reducing the authority of the board would subvert the will of voters. Second, they suggest that giving the governor more direct control over education would increase partisanship—that “party politics” is bad for Ohio schools.

These arguments ring hollow for me, having learned first-hand how much special interest money dominates State Board elections, and how little voters know about the board or the candidates running for it.

**Money**

I was aware of the role of money in elections, yet its influence became realer than ever when I had to raise a lot of cash to be even remotely competitive. You need money to purchase yard signs, t-shirts, radio ads, billboards, and digital outreach. In such a large district, the size of nine House districts, you need more than you think because you can’t simply walk door to door.

Enter powerful interest groups. For statewide elections, the contribution limit when I ran was around \$12,500. For candidates earning both statewide teachers’ unions endorsements, that means \$25,000 to work with off the bat. In school board races that don’t usually have other organized interest groups to serve as a counter weight, the union contributions make a big difference. So do political parties. Even though these races are technically nonpartisan, parties often pony up sizeable endorsements. More important, party endorsements earn candidates a place on the party’s “slate card,” which heavily influences voters in down-ticket races.

I ended up talking to both the teachers’ unions, but I did not earn their endorsements. Nor was I endorsed by a major party. I was able to secure contributions that kept me competitive and ultimately helped me earn second place. And I worked together with Leadership for Educational Equity, a national group that supports teachers and former teachers to run for office.

Shortly after I lost, smart folks who were well-schooled in politics suggested that to earn endorsements in the future, I would need to go through the proper channels and let the inner circle of special interest

groups and political parties tell me when it was my turn to run. If powerful interest groups—no matter what side they're on or what sector they come from—are hand-selecting amenable candidates who will likely do as they say, how independent are our elected school board members?

The implication is clear: Ohio teachers' unions—and other large interest groups that occasionally get involved with education elections—have enormous influence. A quick search of Ohio's campaign finance contributions for state board candidates who won seats in 2016 shows that all but one earned large contributions from the unions and the Democratic party. The combined contributions are tens of thousands of dollars, and I'd venture to guess there's a similar pattern for winners in other election years. We're kidding ourselves if we think the selection of this particular board isn't already rife with "partisan politics."

### **Voter knowledge and turnout**

The idea that HB 512 weakens the will of voters is unconvincing given how few people cast votes for education board seats, know who their representatives are, or even know what the board is. It also rings hollow considering the state doesn't have comparable policy making boards in other policy domains. In those policy areas, we trust appointed cabinet-level leaders to lead in policy without a separate, elected policy-making body.

About 95 percent of voters I spoke with seemed to know little or nothing about the seat for which I was running. They didn't know what the board did. The most powerful and resonating talking point I used was that I was the only candidate running who had K-12 teaching experience. At the time, only three sitting members had worked in a public school, and voters were receptive to getting another teacher on the board because they recognized the value of educators' insight and knowledge. Yet most voters didn't realize that wise policy decisions require other knowledge, too. Teaching kindergarten didn't prepare me to serve on the board. But working in Ohio education policy for nearly a decade, and studying policy for my master's degree, did.

By the end of my campaign, having drilled down talking points into tiny blurbs I could deliver at an OSU game to passersby, or during 30-second radio spots, the policy wonk in me felt a bit deflated. Folks didn't seem to care much about policy details that the State Board engaged in. Most admitted they voted in whatever way their party's slate card instructed them to, having done little to no research on candidates independently, even for races that are meant to be non-partisan.

Moreover, it's typical in races like mine for voters to skip the bottom of the ballot altogether—where lesser known seats are up for grabs. So even in a presidential election year, which no doubt boosts turnout, people voting for major federal and statewide candidates still often ignore the lesser-known contests. There are typically far fewer ballots cast for down-ticket races, and with many other state and federal races on the ballot—as there was in my year—voters pay even less attention to small contests.

Finally, with such a sprawling district, I also wonder how it's even realistic to adequately represent voters. District 6 is rural, suburban, and urban, and leans left overall though it has heavy pockets of Republican support. The schools I spoke with on the campaign trail had vastly different priorities and concerns—many of which were entirely outside the purview of what the board has authority over.

Which brings me to my final point, and is the primary reason I support an overhaul of Ohio's current education governance (rather than just take issue with arguments against it). In recent years the board has served to stifle, stall, question, or block policy that has been passed by the legislature and/or led by the governor. This is above and beyond its role and is why the board suffers from gridlock.

For instance, Ohio's move toward more rigorous graduation requirements and the third-grade reading guarantee was the right one. As a first-generation college graduate myself, I see nothing helpful or compassionate about lowering expectations for young people who need us to believe in them and their academic capabilities. Raising the bar in high school and ensuring that third-graders are reading proficiently are sound policies adopted by other states, leading to positive results for kids.

Yet in Ohio, our State Board of Education has worked to undermine these policies. This has shone a spotlight on how disordered and dysfunctional it is to have overlapping visions for K-12 education. Ohio's current arrangement is not just inefficient, it's also used by those who oppose the governor's or legislature's reforms as a last line of defense to weaken or otherwise thwart their goals. That's not good government. Perhaps that's why the majority of states allow for appointed education boards. And perhaps why leaders from both parties—in the past and currently—have expressed wanting to give the governor more control over public education.

In conclusion, the merits of this bill should be discussed without this distracting hyperbole. Changing Ohio's governance structure and the powers of the State Board is not a blow to democracy nor will it inject party politics into our schools—at least, no more so than what already exists under our current framework.