

Testimony against SB 178

Provided to the Primary and Secondary Education Committee
Ohio House of Representatives

Provided by Kathleen Knight Abowitz

Board member, Talawanda City School District, Oxford, OH
12/13/22

My name is Kathleen Knight Abowitz, and I'm an elected board member for the Talawanda City School District. Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. I live in Oxford where my two children received an excellent education in our public schools, and where I have been involved as a volunteer, advocate, and now elected official. I teach at Miami University, helping pre-service teachers and school leaders prepare for their careers.

Local school districts and public education itself rely upon state level governance to be characterized by two things which are jeopardized by SB 178. We need state education policy making to be: 1) **consistent**, in terms of provision of supports and services, and 2) **non-partisan**, in terms of being transparent and accountable to all.

Local districts rely upon the State Board of Education to interpret, and inform state legislative debates regarding educational policy and practice. We also rely on the DOE for data collection and special services. Local districts are important stakeholders, arguably the largest single stakeholder body in the DOE, but have been given absolutely no say in any proposed organizational plan, nor any process for transitioning to a new system. How would this change work with state data collection? How would this work with regards to services currently provided by the ODE? How will consistency of services and supports be maintained when the Governor's seat changes hands and parties?

One of the justifications of this bill is that it will make the State Board of Education more accountable. Accountable to whom? The new Department of Education will be accountable to one entity: the political party running Ohio. Thanks to gerrymandering efforts explicitly rejected by Ohio voters, that is now, and will be for the foreseeable future, the Republican Party. This Bill takes a non-partisan state department which is supposed to serve non-partisan local districts, and makes it the purview of the Governor's office. This political party applauds local control and supposedly despises big government, but is now consolidating power at the

state level to bring educational policy more under control of the political party now in charge of every policy-making body at the state level related to education.

Proponents of this bill state that its purpose is to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the State Board of Education and Department of Education. Certainly, improvements can be made in these organizations, including data collection processes. A process should be initiated to revise and recommend improvements, after appointing a new Superintendent of Instruction. Such a process should be given time for vetting among voters and local district leaders, so that the operations of the DOE are not compromised, and so that the non-partisan nature of education is safe-guarded. Such reforms should not be planned by party leaders, people who are not educators, and who are unaccountable to voters in a lame duck legislative period. Similarly, if officials are interested in elevating support for Career and Technical Education, there are many ways to do this other than making the Department of Education under the domain of the governor's office.

This bill appears to be a political power play. By consolidating control of state education policy-making with one party, you're ensuring that about half of our state is unrepresented. What a terrible idea, and antithetical to the spirit and mission of public education in this state and nation. We need education to be LESS partisan, not more.

I respectfully ask you to reject SB 178.