SB 178

Opponent Testimony

Primary and Secondary Education Committee

December 2022

Chairwoman Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee, thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. I received my PhD in Educational Policy Studies in 2005 and have been studying democratic school governance and accountability ever since. I currently serve as a professor of education at the University of Cincinnati (though I am not officially representing the university today). I was raised to support Republican values of small government and local control and have seen the positive impact of both in my research. I support better integrating the efforts of governmental groups serving across the pre-K through college spectrum on issues of education and career readiness, but SB 178 is not the right way to achieve that end. I write today to urge you not to support this bill. This is not a good policy for improving governance, oversight, or accountability to achieve the larger goals of workforce development and pipeline integration; rather, it invites serious problems.

I focus here on the central problems related to restricting the role of the elected State Board of Education and awarding new powers to appointed officials via the executive branch. SB 178 is problematic for these reasons:

- SB 178 further removes the voice of constituents on state education matters. Ohioans voted in the 1950s to establish an elected State Board of Education in order to ensure that their views were reflected via representatives that they elected and who were accountable to communicating with their constituents. Moreover, Board meetings were intentionally crafted to be open to the public, with citizens invited to share their input during the meetings. The desire of the citizens was limited in the 1990s when the legislature allowed some members of the Board to be appointed. SB 179 considerably further restricts locally elected voice and representation by transferring most decision-making ability to unelected officials who are appointed by the office of the Governor and whose decision-making can occur without transparency or public participation. This bill further removes the voices of the people at a time when difficult educational problems require more hands on deck and greater participation of the citizenry in improving our schools. We should not relinquish citizen participation and elected governance through a bill that confines power to Columbus.

- SB 178 reduces expertise in education decision-making. Looking across this history of State Board of Education, you will see that many of those elected to serve have substantial

backgrounds in education, including former teachers and administrators. Such practitioner-knowledge is important for making wise educational decisions for the state. Moving toward political oversight by appointees of the Governor is likely going to mean fewer experienced educators at the decision-making table. This body was intended to focus on making wise choices for our schools, without the heavy hand of politics unnecessarily guiding it. By handing over the reins to Governor-appointed officials, SB 178 removes that voice of experience and further invites educational decisions to be made based on political ideology rather than what is in the best interests of children, our state, and our democracy. One of the most common complaints of teachers is that they do not feel heard by policymakers. This bill may lead to further silencing and more ignoring of teachers and their firsthand knowledge.

- SB 178 shifts greater power to the Governor and his/her appointees invites greater political swings. I published a book in 2017 with Oxford University Press, where I document the impact that similar moves have had in other states as well as some related reorganizations prompted by mayoral control in some major cities. So far, the results of these changes has been to introduce greater pendulum swings in educational policy. With each new executive elected, power changes hands and a new political ideology seeks to undo or redo the changes put in place by the predecessors. Such undulations further frustrate teachers already exhausted by cycles of education reform. Evidence shows that school governance needs a steady approach, driven by research and practice, led by experience rather than politics.

- SB 178 reflects a misplaced belief in greater accountability for the Governor which has not played out elsewhere. Similar reorganizations in other states have been touted as providing greater accountability for educational decision-making by tying them to the executive branch, but this has not played out in reality. Education issues are often far down on citizens' lists of expectations for governors and they tend to be outweighed by other issues when it comes time to vote. Yet, when unhappy with educational issues, the ability to vote out/in an elected State Board of Education representative is clear and occurs on term limits shorter than that of the Governor. While I applaud efforts to improve accountability for education, research shows it's better to do this by broadening who "counts" as being both accountable to the public and responsible for public education, rather than narrowing the field.

Please vote NO on SB 178.

Respectfully,

Dr. Sarah Stitzlein

The research behind these claims is detailed in Sarah Stitzlein, American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in an Age of Accountability (Oxford University Press, 2017).