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House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
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SB 178 – Opponent Testimony
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Chairman Manning, Vice Chairman Bird, and Ranking Member Robinson, thank you for the opportunity to share my views and the position of the League of Women Voters Ohio on SB 178.

My name is Susie Kaeser. I live in Cleveland Heights where my children received a wonderful education in our public schools, and where I have been a classroom volunteer for more than 30 years. I am a city planner by training, and a public school advocate by vocation and conscience. I joined the League because of its commitment to democracy, to the importance of the citizen voice in shaping public policy, and its recognition that public education is fundamental to developing the informed electorate needed to make self-governance possible.

The League opposes SB 178. Centralizing the governance in the Governor's office is a radical departure from the current structure that is representative and accessible. It may be expedient, but it will undermine public confidence in state government and make policy making less democratic and responsive to the realities of our local school districts and diverse students. Advocates for this bill have not provided any convincing justification for a radical transformation of the governance of our whole system of public education, for reducing K-12 education to workforce development, and for shutting out the public from shaping state education policy. Appointing an education czar who is responsible to the Governor, will make policy making less responsive and accountable to the communities that benefit from an educated citizenry.

One of the things we know about the 610 local school districts and 49 vocational education districts in Ohio is that they are unique. Local preferences, resources, community values, educator expertise, and local history lead to very different needs, remedies and conclusions. Our tradition of local control honors that diversity. It's a brilliant solution.

During my 40 years of involvement with public education, I have watched the state role in public education retreat from providing for a well-funded system of public schools, providing high standards for fiscal accountability and teacher professionalism, and protecting student rights. Lawmakers have become comfortable with judging and labeling schools instead of supporting them.

As the legislature's priorities shape more and more of the local agenda, it reduces local control. This loss of independence makes it even more important that the public and practitioners have access to state level policy makers and a forum for making their views known. The State Board of Education provides that venue. Moving education policy leadership to an appointed individual suggests that neither the citizen perspective nor the experience of practitioners is valued or welcomed. It fosters an environment

of the all-knowing leader. This is dangerous. It's hard to see how this will produce policies that are welcomed by those who must implement it.

The state board member that represents me epitomizes the responsive elected official. She knows every superintendent in her district and meets with them regularly. She shows up at school events and meets families and students. She is a frequent speaker at public forums. She isn't just visible, she listens. She is in touch with who we are and what we care about. She plays a fundamental role as connector between the public and state government. This means that when she participates in crafting the state's education plan or considers the rules for implementing state policy, or shapes the education budget request, she is informed by the reality of the diverse districts she represents. Her availability and visibility also make the public more supportive of state policy because we know someone who knows us helped shape it.

There is no way the individuals directing a massive state bureaucracy would have the time or focus to play the role that the state board members perform. A more effective approach to developing responsive education policy is to retain the powers of the State Board of Education, and ensure that all members are elected.

The LWVO has a long-standing position in support of an elected State Board of Education, and its role in establishing state education policy. This structure is responsive to voters and to the experience of educators who actually educate our children. It also provides a venue for public input on policy. As state lawmakers exert more control over education, it is more important than ever to have a forum where the public and practitioners can apply their authentic understanding of children and learning to the development of state education policies and decisions – not less.

Have you ever been with a group of people who care about the same topic but where you can't get a word into the conversation? That's what this feels like. We may all have an interest in this topic but SB178 means that only a few dominant voices will have a chance to participate in the conversation.

Today's hearing is a sacrosanct part of the lawmaking process. I hope that hearing from lay citizens like me, experts, and affected parties increases your understanding of issues and the implications of the legislation you are considering. Public hearings are the fundamental link that makes it possible for our diverse voices and views to be considered. They make it possible to earn the consent of the governed. If this process is something you value, then please don't take it away from education policy making in Ohio. Reject SB 178.