

## **Opponent Testimony: SB 178 (Creation of Department of Education and Workforce)**

My name is Lori Knisley, formerly Michalec, and I am a veteran teacher of 22 years. Rather unconventionally, I entered into the profession after working for a number of years in private industry, completing my degree by attending college during the evenings and on weekends while I worked full time and raised a family. Upon entering the profession, I spent the first several years navigating the bureaucracy of public education, finding it laborious and frustrating quite often. As someone who had previously worked in management for an international hotel chain and then as the secretary to both the vice-president of finance and vice-president of sales and marketing at a Fortune 500 company, I was accustomed to committing myself to the vision and mission of each organization with whom I was employed; yet, I found that the teaching profession, a career that I passionately pursued in the hopes of giving back to the community in which I lived, was vastly different in its approach to creating a culture of innovation and change, and there was a lack of clarity and transparency. Educators seeking to improve the quality of instruction and/or the climate of a school community were often ignored, at best, or resented by district administrators who sought only to appease stakeholders and meet the minimum requirements of the state. State mandates often seemed to bog down the process of change and further infringe on the ability of educators to focus on teaching and learning. Consequently, during my tenure, I have reinvented myself on numerous occasions, both to meet the needs of my students as well as the demands of an ever-changing institution.

I have always been one to fight for social justice and continue to advocate for those who are voiceless, so being honored as the 2015 Ohio Teacher of the Year granted me opportunities too few experience: I was provided a platform to ardently advocate for my profession and the children of Ohio. Since 2015, I have continued working to improve public education in this state, serving on the Commission on Student Success (COSS) through the Ohio Education Association as well as the Governor's Task Force for Secondary Education to help craft education policy, lending my voice to the COSS report and helping to create the State's Strategic Plan for Education: *Each Child, Our Future*. I have provided testimony before the Ohio State Board of Education, as well as written testimony in response to proposed legislation in the House that, ultimately, undermines and devalues public education and those who have played an instrumental role in trying to elevate the profession.

Hence, I am respectfully requesting that this committee re-examine the need for a new state department, one that would undermine the role of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as reduce the role of the Ohio Department of Education to little more than an oversight committee on credentialing and devalue the relationship between our elected State Board of Education members and the constituents that they serve. Public education does not need more intrusion by well-intentioned politicians, but rather public school educators need to ensure that there is a voice at the table that represents them in all their myriad needs. At present, Dr. Siddens, our Ohio Department of Education, and the State Board of Education have working

relationships with educators from across the state, whether that is through cadres like The Ohio Teacher Leader Liaison Cohort and Ohio Teacher Leader Ambassadors or the Ohio Educator Voice Academy, which works with the National Education Association to advocate for national change. Those of us who have dedicated ourselves to serving students and their families within the larger community do not need more regulations, more oversight, more state control; rather, we need to shift the paradigm of education in a fundamental way, away from top-down mandates, unfunded mandates, and ill-conceived notions of what Ohio's children need, because Ohio's children need highly qualified educators who choose to remain in the profession because they make a difference, are valued and respected.

Development of this new state department sends a clear message: Who we are as educators, and what we do, is under continued scrutiny. To diminish established working relationships with the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Ohio Department of Education, and the State Board of Education only reduces our ability to work collaboratively for needed change. Ohio's educators do not want to be armed on campus, they want to arm students with a fair, honest education; they do not want convoluted policies that would allow unlicensed substitutes and/or teachers in classrooms, particularly as qualified educators find themselves enduring more restrictions and regulations and many are looking for an exit strategy. Rather, educators desire clarity and transparency, a working role in shaping policy and legislation, and to feel valued as partners by policy makers.

As a result, I summarily urge the committee to ask itself *why* this change is needed. How will the creation of this particular cabinet department significantly improve the ability of educators, students, and families to advocate for students' needs? How will it ensure that learning gaps will be appropriately measured in a manner that does not stigmatize students in order for learning interventions to occur? How will it streamline the processes currently in place and allow for stakeholders to have more impact in creating change? What, if anything, will this department do to address the teacher shortage? What, if anything, will this department do to monitor the role of voucher and charter schools in dismantling public education, siphoning money from public schools at the expense of taxpayers and students? More specifically, how will this department elevate the teaching profession? Yet most importantly, what qualifies policymakers to assume that they, without the critical and continued input of those working in the field of education, solely hold the answers to these vitally important questions?