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Opposition Testimony – SB 1

House Economic and Workforce Development

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Chairman Swearingen, Vice Chairman Santucci, and Ranking Member Upchurch, my name is Susie Kaeser and I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts with the committee about SB 1. I live in Cleveland Heights, my children were educated in our public schools, and I have been an advocate for public education and its role in our democracy and as a resource for equal opportunity, for more than 40 years. For the last three years I have served as an education specialist for the League of Women Voters Ohio.

I've been a classroom volunteer at my neighborhood elementary school for more than 30 years, and during the last 10 years I have led a team of literacy volunteers. We have two teams of four volunteers each who are assigned 8 to 10 kindergartners. Each team member arrives on a different day to work with their assigned kids. Each student is tutored four times each week. We help kindergartners who come to school without the basic building blocks for reading, learn their letters and the sounds that go with them, and how to put letters together to make words. We have an 80% success rate. Without our individual attention they would not leave kindergarten on grade level.

Tutoring includes getting to know my young friends who welcome the extra attention and the chance to learn something that is completely foreign to them. I get a glimpse into how their minds work and what goes on in their lives. Each is unique. This connection puts me in touch with the challenges they face, and the complexity of the teaching task that we have put on the shoulders of our teachers.

If only it were as easy as changing who gets to lead the state agency in charge of education and making them report to the Governor. This change is magical thinking at its best. It is in the same category as thinking that if we test kids enough and make them pay a high price for a low test score, that will somehow resolve every barrier that prevents full engagement at school. It's a bad fit.

I'm fairly certain that putting one person in charge of public education governance and turning the focus toward workforce development will not change the issues my young friends experience or their trusted educators are trying to solve. It won't provide sufficient resources to make it possible to reach every child where they are or to give them sufficient time to master the skills they need. It will have no impact on test scores since it will have no impact on the income disparities that drive test results nor will it change the reality that kids don't learn at the same rate. It will have nothing to do with getting more college students to earn their degrees.

Changing the governance of public education will not solve these underlying problems. The authors of this proposal either are ill-informed about the causes of the problems they say this change will solve, or they have other unstated goals.

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This is a bad idea for education reasons and for governance reasons.

The evolution of Ohio's constitution shows that we keep trying to improve state government. The first Constitution gave the governor most of the power. Most amendments since then have given voters a greater say in who carries out the work of governing.

This proposal is a step backwards.

SB 1 changes the way we govern education in Ohio, but it fails to improve governance. It concentrates power in the hands of a few, ends decision making by elected representatives, and ends public input and debate. The public has less say – not more.

Power can be used for good or ill purposes. A simple case in point is the refusal to regulate charter schools and the financial fraud that followed that. Or the last legislature's stated concern about learning loss due to covid, yet a steadfast commitment to punishing 3rd graders who are not reading at grade level. Whatever the sequel is to these missteps, an appointed education chief would have a blank check for harmful policy choices.

I am deeply concerned about the harm that can be inflicted on our children and the quality of education they receive, on the reputation of our state, and on democracy by stripping the elected state board of education of its powers and handing them over to an education czar appointed by the governor and answerable to the Governor. This move ends the protective wall that helps to keep politics out of education policy making.

The elected members of our state board are in touch with their constituents, know the needs of our communities, are informed about how education is working across our 610 school districts and 88 counties, and are passionate about education. Who exactly will represent the diverse needs of our students, perspectives of our citizens, and challenges of our communities when it comes to making significant decisions about the direction of education policy under your system? No matter the superpowers of a great education leader, the Governor's appointee cannot fill this critical role.

When voters select who represents them on the state board of education, they have a voice. An elected board conducts its business in public and permits public input. This is the best way to iron out competing ideas and weed out bad ones. This structure secures educator and citizen input and in so doing, increase their investment in the policies that board members devise. If responsibility and authority for making education policy is given to one person and that person is appointed by the governor, the power of our ideas and the relevance of our concerns are lost.

During this contentious era, it is more important than ever to make education policy making transparent, responsive, and accountable. An education czar does the opposite.

Public education is a primary responsibility of the state legislature and receives the largest percent of state resources. It touches every community and more than 1.6 million children. It is a marvelous public institution. We want it to thrive. It is the best asset we've got for selling our state, developing good citizens and future leaders of our communities, if only we would support not thwart its ability to achieve what it was established to do: prepare citizens who are capable of self-governance.

The LWVO opposes SB 1 because it concentrates too much power in one person's hands. It removes the public voice in selecting who guides education policy and closes the public out of the policy making

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process itself. And it is premised on some ill-informed belief that complex problems will be fixed by changing who is in charge. SB 1 is wrong. It's a far cry from the process that produces good solutions; a process that encourages diverse views, informed debate, professionalism and accountability.

When voters approved the 1851 Constitution, they claimed a right to have a greater voice in who does the work of the people. SB 1 rejects this important part of our history. I urge you to reject this bill, and replace it with a governing structure that makes all members of the state board elected and permits the messy work of democracy to proceed.