

**Opponent Testimony for House Bill 12**  
**House Primary & Secondary Education Committee**  
**Tuesday 21 March, 2023**

**Malia Lewis, School Board Member**  
**Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District**

Chairman Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary & Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Malia Lewis. I am an **elected** member of the Board of Education of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District. I am here to provide testimony in opposition to House Bill 12 (and by extension against Senate Bill 1).

In Ohio we have a system of **local** school districts, governed by **locally** elected school boards. There are 611 school districts in Ohio. Each is governed by a locally elected school board responsible for educating its students according to the requirements of the state and the values of its community. I was elected by my community to write and implement policy to best serve our children; to advocate on their behalf here in Columbus; to oversee a budget made up of state, federal, and local tax dollars; and to evaluate the performances of our superintendent and treasurer. I am beholden to my constituents (as are you to yours): both my neighbours who voted for me and those who did not. If they are unhappy with my performance, they can vote me out of office.

The same system **used** to apply to the State Board of Education, which oversees the Department of Education and sets state level education policy to best serve all of Ohio's children, oversees state-wide budget and funding priorities, and evaluates the state superintendent of schools. Until it didn't.

Today some members are beholden to their constituents, and some serve at the pleasure of the Governor. The messy redistricting since the 2020 census led to changes in who represents whom. In my neck of the woods, we re-elected Meryl Johnson to represent us on the State Board of Education. Then her district was re-drawn to exclude communities which were some of her strongest supporters. Tom Jackson, meanwhile, has had to work overtime to learn the issues specific to the communities he now represents. Voters do not know where to turn; they feel as if their vote has been made meaningless.

Our public education system is non-partisan. House Bill 12 subjects the education of Ohio's children to the winds of partisanship. House Bill 12 strips voters of their power to choose who represents the interests of their children. This is fundamentally undemocratic.

House Bill 12 disenfranchises Ohio voters **completely** by turning over the main responsibilities of the State Board of Education and Department of Education to un-elected appointees of the Governor. Who will make sure these appointees live up to expectation? Who will ensure that their policies address the needs and expectations of all of Ohio's communities? How will we make sure that their decisions are guided by educational best practice? Voters will no longer have a direct say in who directs the education of their children.

My children learned that what makes republican democracy work is engaging in robust, respectful debate around issues we care about in order to discover common ground and arrive at agreements which advance the common good. But consolidating power all up and down the system does not further the common good. Rather, it creates autocracy.

Every child in Ohio deserves a free, relevant, challenging, engaging, and safe education. House Bill 12 does nothing to bring that goal any closer to reality. House Bill 12 centers workforce development rather than the needs of Ohio's children. It panders to the desires of the business community instead of addressing the root causes of Ohio's academic distress: decades of unconstitutional school funding, crisis-level teacher shortages, poor working and learning conditions, lack of wraparound services, literacy issues rooted in poor legislative policies, and disparate student outcomes.

Ohio needs a strong, independent, representative (*ie*: elected) State Board of Education to work with a properly funded Department of Education in order to provide all of Ohio's students with an equitable education focused on helping each child reach their potential.

Please reject House Bill 12 because it does nothing to help our children or our democracy.

Thank you.