

Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee - March 21, 2023 – Linda Striefsky

First, I want to thank the Chairman Bird, Vice Chairman Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson for the opportunity to speak.

I am Linda Striefsky, testifying as an opponent concerning Senate Bill 1. My children attended public schools in Cleveland Heights. We chose public schools because we understood the value of a public school education. We were not disappointed; our children received an excellent education.

Under Senate Bill 1, the re-named Department of Education and Workforce would take over most of the job of the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. An appointee of the Governor would lead this new system. This contrasts with voters electing the State Board of Education, which in turn selects a State Superintendent.

Fundamentally, HB 12 is a solution in search of a problem. We don't need these changes. We don't need HB 12 at all. It is overreach by the administration in power. It ignores the tradition of local control of public schools and it ignores the will of the voters in electing representatives to the State Board of Education. It fails to address what our schools need, which is fair funding. Fair funding can include additional work force training, certainly, but we don't need HB 12 to achieve that.

The approach of HB 12 is interesting, also, not because it will have any benefits for our public schools, but because it is part of a pattern. As applied to schools, that pattern ignores the constitutional requirement to provide fair funding for our public schools. The legislature should be working on fair funding for public schools. The legislature should not be spending time politicizing our public education system and moving public tax dollars to private schools, religious or not.

But on a broader basis, when it comes to the pattern I mentioned, the pattern involves ignoring the voice of the voters and making it harder for voters to elect their representatives. Just as we had, and have, partisan gerrymandering of state legislative and congressional districts – notwithstanding 2 constitutional amendments to end partisan gerrymandering – we have another variation on gerrymandering, when it comes to the state board of education. The governor changed the districts for the state school board. When that failed to produce the Republicans' preferred result, we got proposed HB 12 - simply take away many jobs of the elected board of education. Again, all the time spent changing the rules should be spent on providing fair and constitutional funding for public schools.

Ohio voters did not go to the trouble of deciding who to elect to the state board of education only to have the board's role wiped out. Ohio voters made decisions to elect their representatives, and these votes should matter.

Limiting the authority of the State Education Board and the Superintendent is tantamount to replacing the Department of Education with a centralized, Governor-controlled organization.

We have seen the experiments in state take overs of schools, such as in Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland. That did not solve the problems. Again, can we just get the fair funding in place, please, and let the teachers and administrators do their jobs? Drop HB 12.

Our public education system in Ohio is critically important to the future of our children. Our founding fathers recognized the importance of universal public education as a fundamental building block for our democracy.

We also have a tradition of local control of public schools, with an elected school board and a professional administrator. The state school board and superintendent structure mirrors that, quite appropriately. We don't need to change that. Isn't the voter in the best position to inform education choices? Given all of the Republican support for home schooling and private schools, ostensibly because parents want those choices, why is the attitude different when it comes to respecting the choice of voters as to public education? Why aren't the decisions of voters, as to the state board of education, just as valuable and respected? We don't need the Governor to take over public education, we need fair funding for public schools.

Regarding the sales pitch for HB 12 around workforce development, there seems to be some kind of magical thinking going on about changing the name of the Education Department to include "workforce" – that will not make our children more ready for work. They need basic education, regardless of their career path after high school. They need easy and affordable access to high speed broad band. In our economy today, access to the internet is akin to access to water and electricity lines 100 years ago. If the legislature is concerned about workforce development, why don't we have broadband access for everyone in Ohio? That would be a huge help towards workforce development.

In any event, if work force training is a concern, the State Board of Education and our state's curriculum and policies do already address that. There is no need for a new expanded department to do this. There may be a need for more vocational and training programs, but that comes back to the funding needs, which the legislature can't seem to get to.

The oversight of the education standards and curriculum for Ohio public schools should remain in the hands of those with the greatest interest in the success of these systems, the voters, through their elected representatives on the local and state School Boards. The voice of the voters should matter. Please leave the state board of education alone, and focus on fully funding our public schools.

Thank you very much.