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Chair Bird and Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for reading my testimony in opposition to House Bill 12. My name is Lalitha Pamidigantam, and I am the Advocacy Manager for YWCA Columbus. I am here today to oppose HB12, which would remove powers mandated to the Ohio State School Board of Education and move them under the Governor's office, creating the Department of Education and Workforce Development.

YWCA Columbus is on a mission to eliminate racism, empower women, and bring peace, justice, freedom and dignity to all. At the core of this mission comes our commitment to protecting democracy and ensuring that Ohioans have a voice in their education. Our agency has been working on education issues at the State Board of Education for the past two years, chiefly to protect marginalized students at the intersections of race and gender. A part of the reason for shifting our advocacy focus to education is the blatant, strategic, and political attacks on K-12 education – indeed, there cannot be systems change without addressing the faults of our education system. However, education must first, and foremost, belong to Ohioans. The ability to make decisions about education through the power of the vote is an integral one; to put it plainly, House Bill 12 puts forth an inherently anti-democratic stance over the issue of education.

A core component of our agency's work is our commitment to the vote. Expanding the ballot box, protecting the vote, and educating our community on important issues have all been ways we support our electoral system. Voting for school board members is one way our Ohio constitution protects statewide education decisions; the elected 11 members represent their unique regions. The consolidation of education powers to a new Department, under an appointee of the governor, removes the direct ability of public involvement in the decisions that govern their districts, their schools, and their kids. And while we agree that our public education system requires structural changes, we disagree that removing powers as important as approvals, reporting, finances, and oversight of public education from a publicly elected body is the way to do this.

Definitely, the State Board of Education can be frustrating – from low electoral engagement to long meetings discursing issues we also don't want to see on their table. But we recognize that proponents of this bill are using supposed inefficiency as a reason to overhaul powers invested in a democratic institution. We believe that the answers lie in making structural changes to voter accessibility, and providing support to the existing State Board members with training, evaluation, updated practices and processes, and other ways to ease the nebulous nature of the board.

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Instead, this bill is an act of evading the real, structural problems facing Ohio's voters, and trades democracy for so-called "efficiency" which in reality is just entirely new bureaucratic measure.

Such a move will create more information asymmetry – a basic failure of public policy, where the governor's office will hold more information and power regarding education than the people of Ohio. YWCA Columbus urges this body to consider the implications of removing democratic participation in education issues; even with proposed amendments to enact stakeholder engagements, we are concerned with removing families, voters, and taxpayers away from their rightful place in governance. At a time when our democracy seems to be under fire from every direction, we see House Bill 12 as a measure that protects political interest over the will of the people, and especially over the wellbeing of Ohio's children. We urge our public bodies to look towards other ways to support education, including analyzing the systemic issues located in our education system which plague our marginalized students.

We will continue to support measures that will increase democratic engagement and equity for all of Ohio's children, and look forward to having more conversations regarding this issue. Until education justice, just is.

Thank you,
Lalitha Pamidigantam
Advocacy Manager, YWCA Columbus

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