

House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee  
HB512 Opposition Testimony  
March 14, 2018

Good morning, Chairman Blessing, Vice Chairman Reineke, and Members of the Committee.

My name is Susie Kaeser, a 40 year resident of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, a proud parent of two graduates of the Cleveland Heights –University Heights City School District, and a public school advocate by passion and vocation. For 17 years I directed Reaching Heights, a community-based organization to foster community pride in and ownership of our public schools. I am currently a volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School, something I've done since 1988, the year my daughter started kindergarten. I'm also the co-convenor of the Heights Coalition for Public Education, an informal volunteer organization dedicated to protecting public education in an era when state policy seems to be at odds with public education itself.

I have two passions: democracy and public schools. What they have in common is respect for the value of all people and the importance of every voice. I oppose HB 512 because it damages both democracy and public education.

I am most concerned about the sections of this legislation that propose to consolidate three very distinct functions into a mega agency, and will shrink the roles and responsibilities of the Ohio State Board of Education and the Department of Education.

HB 512 makes education policy making less democratic, and diminishes the possibility that the healthy development of all students is the guiding light for education decisions. If you think that streamlining policy making and removing public voices from the selection of policy makers or from the process of policy making are the key to improving outcomes for students you are barking up the wrong tree.

First, while k-12 education, higher education and workforce development all have to do with learning, they are very different animals. They have different issues; success is achieved in different ways; the learner is at a very different stage in their lives and has different motives and goals. It's hard to imagine how putting all of these issues in the same pot would produce responsive or nuanced policies that are appropriate to these three different state responsibilities.

Furthermore, it is very dangerous and potentially could significantly limit the quality of learning that takes place in our schools if K-12 education is defined as work force development! Put them in the same pot and pressures build to make them the same thing. While jobs are important, so is human development and they should not be confused or conflated.

If you want work force issues to inform public education or public education issues to influence workplace issues appoint the state superintendent of public education to your workforce policy leadership team. Don't remake the way we govern public education.

Second, when did making a public agency bigger ever really make it better or more effective? Economies of scale don't really work in this realm. Rather, important issues slip through the cracks. Specialized interest is needed to give hard issues adequate attention. This proposal seems to close out any special agency focus on K-12 education. This does not bode well for maintaining a high quality system of public schools.

The Governor – whoever she or he may be – already has plenty of power to shape our state. Too much power in one place may be efficient, but it isn't responsive. Furthermore, an appointment by the governor produces a very different dynamic than being elected by voters.

Moving central responsibilities that the State Board now handles to an unelected mega agency will mean voters have no say in who represents their interests, and also weakens our opportunity to influence the decision maker. It diminishes the imperative to be responsive to community concerns and reality. While my influencing you today may be a long shot, it is much more likely than if you served at the pleasure of the governor.

When voters elect a board member to represent them, that board member is motivated to pay attention to what is taking place in the schools in the district they represent. This matters. Elected board members have the responsibility and opportunity and in my experience, the desire to get close to how public policy affects education as it is implemented in schools in communities in Ohio. This is essential information for shaping effective and supportive policy, and keeping it focused on children and their development. This accountability and service to communities brings the right motive to policy making. This legislation would remove this responsive voice from making education policy. That worries me.

Furthermore, making the elected board a disciplinary board makes them irrelevant to what matters most, and would certainly discourage anyone from wanting to seek election whose motivation is to empower learning.

Please reject this legislation. Don't create another barrier to a strong system of public schools by limiting representative government.

Thank you for your attention.