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*The OEA will lead the way for continuous improvement of public education while advocating for members and the learners they serve.*

Good morning Chairman Readler, Vice-Chairman Gilbert and members of the Education Subcommittee.

My name is Russ Harris and I advocate for the 122,000 members of the Ohio Education Association. I am here today to express our concern with the suggestion that the State Board of Education should be an appointed board. The OEA has had a longstanding policy that supports an all-elected State Board of Education.

It should be noted that the election of State Board of Education members is one of the few public offices that is considered to be “non-partisan.”

It’s hard to believe the claim of some proponents of the all-appointed state school board that such a board would be less “political.” That notion belies the fact that there are appointed members on the board today. But having an all-appointed board would make it more vulnerable to the political whims of whoever is governor.

In 1993, when the then-sitting board refused to appeal the state’s loss in the DeRolph case, the Governor called for an all-appointed board. The inference was that if he had his way the board would do whatever he wanted. After rejecting this idea, the legislature decided to compromise and created the current hybrid board with 8 gubernatorial appointees and 11 elected representatives from districts that are each comprised of three state senate districts.

While the current hybrid board, elected and appointed, has at times been mired in partisan politics, it has also come to agreement on important issues, such as the need for stronger oversight and accountability of Ohio’s floundering charter schools. Having elected board members on the board has made the overall board more responsive to the public’s desire for reform.

Nevertheless, there are still many instances where the votes of the board are “along party lines”. The appointed members join with members of their own party to form a working majority on most votes.

It’s not clear just who the appointed or “at-large” members of the board represent. They may represent people in the school district or county in which they happen to reside, or they may be carrying out the wishes of the Governor who appointed them. In any event, they do not have to answer to the voters.

In order to best serve the needs of Ohio’s students, the State Board of education should be an independent voice for public education. An autonomous board can better advocate for high-quality educational opportunities for all children and for providing resources based on educational needs instead of political expedience.

The all-elected board was a great example of democracy in action. It is time to return to that model.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to this important public policy issue. I would be happy to entertain any questions you might have at this time.

