

Testimony by Jeff Krabill, President
Sandusky Board of Education
to
Ohio Constitutional Modernization Commission
Education, Public Institutions, and Local Government Committee
Thursday February 11, 2016

First, allow me to thank the committee and Chairman Readler for this opportunity. As I said in my letter of transmittal last week, rarely does the public get the opportunity to weigh in on topics that are as timely and substantive to the public discourse as testifying before your committee represents to me. So I am honored to be afforded this opportunity.

Second, I like many others across the State of Ohio have committed themselves to the education and betterment of Ohio's children. It is not really a job but more of a calling. We come from many different walks of life with many different life experiences, but we share the common bond that Ohio's children represent. As such, I am here today as a 14-year member of the Sandusky Board of Education, but also as a business person, a developer, a parent and a concerned citizen. My comments reflect the blended experience of all those responsibilities.

Originally I asked to address your committee on the matter of how best to structure the Ohio Board of Education. Should it be elected, appointed or some combination of those two, as we have today. However, I was subsequently asked to address "...the role of the state board in regulating local districts, and whether districts benefit from the current arrangement of state education regulators." Let me take the two topics in turn. Given the complexity of both topics though and an eye toward brevity, should you have follow-on questions, I stand ready to help in any way that I can.

With regard to the structure of the Ohio Board of Education, I am a clear and unapologetic proponent of an all-elected Board. I come to this position from two different perspectives – one philosophical and one practical. Philosophically, we are as a nation and a state based on the premise of a representative democracy. This was the miracle of our founders' genius that was memorialized in our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, our nation's Constitution and our Ohio Constitution. Our founders knew and time has shown that the collective wisdom of our people voting for its representatives is more sound and balanced than a form of governance reliant on the judgments of one or a select number of "leaders". Additionally, elections also have the social benefit of settling issues and conferring a mantle of acceptance on the elected, at least for a period of time, that more narrowly drawn decisions making cannot. But this brings me to the "practical" aspects of this question.

A number of years ago, the Ohio Legislature conferred on the Governor's office the authority to appoint eight members of the Ohio Board of Education. We have to assume from media accounts at the time that the notion was to provide for a closer working relationship between the executive branch (the Governor) and the education community to effect a better outcome for our schools. While experimentation can be a good thing, this "experiment" has had decidedly mixed results. There is an

undeniably closer relationship between the Ohio Board and the Governor's office, yet the outcome for education has not been elevated. Please keep in mind that my personal politics are closely aligned with our current Governor, so stating my opposition to the current system isn't the easiest thing for me to do. But any impartial observer of the current Ohio Board of Education must be struck by the politicization of the Board. Having said that, I also have to observe that education overall has become something of a political game of football being played between those supporting Common Core and those opposed to it, those wanting a larger role for the state in funding and those concerned that with more state funding comes less local control, and those who are proponents of charters and those who oppose them. We have to ask ourselves a critical question: is Ohio's education in a better place because the Ohio Board, charged with oversight and administration, has been dragged into these fights? I have to believe that an impartial observer is left with the undeniable impression that the political influence of appointed members on the Board has not improved the functioning of the Board, nor advanced the cause of education, particularly public education, for the children of Ohio.

To conclude on this first question, Ohio needs to return to electing ALL of the members of the State Board of Education. The experiment of a blended board has not advanced the ball of a quality education for all of Ohio's children. We need the mantle of confidence that elections confer on these matters.

Now, let me turn my attention to the matter of "...the role of the state board in regulating local districts, and whether districts benefit from the current arrangement of state education regulators." This is a complex and, I'm sure, sensitive question. Let me begin with an observation. Namely, the current "arrangement of state education regulators" is a product of the legislature. To be more precise, the product of decades of legislatures and decades of legislative decision making by both parties and many interested parties like lobbyists, associations and the like. As such, the regulations faced by local educators are NEVER diminished, and only rarely streamlined. I think it is well recognized by local educators (Superintendents, Treasurers, teachers and Board members) that with state funding come the strings of expectations and standards. This is understandable. Because leaders here in Columbus are spending public dollars on education, we at the local level should necessarily be held to account on outcomes. But the weight of decades of legislation and the natural bureaucratic momentum of the Department of Education have now contorted local education. Let me offer several examples.

Example 1: Teachers and local boards alike see how much time is spent on mandated testing. We spend a significant portion of our budgets preparing for and then administering these tests. We then spend still further personnel resources analyzing and trying to apply the "lessons" of these tests. But to what end?

- The tests are often not aligned with curricula.
- Local preferences on course content are ignored, and obviously never tested.
- Test validity (i.e., do the tests actually measure understanding and comprehension) has never been established.
- Local citizens are perplexed why their school district that has always been a source of pride and one with broad local acceptance is now being graded so low.
- Teacher evaluations are heavily based on the outcome of these tests, over which they have only indirect control.
- Students all too often underperform due to the test anxiety inherent with high-stakes testing.

- Now, there is the threat of state takeover of districts that underperform by a definition structured by unknown, faceless people remote to the local district.

As I said before, this is but one example of a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach that was not sought by local districts, places great stress on local resources and isn't in the end even statistically valid. One is left to wonder what next is coming down that rabbit hole.

Example 2: Districts continue to experience delays in funding and enrollment alignment. For example, we are just now seeing payments in our funding formula included with the biennium budget for the current fiscal year. We're in February and well over half way through our academic year! ODE continues to send financial adjustments throughout the year, based upon previous fiscal year data. The overall burden can be misleading for CFO's to control and project cash flow, hindering financial reporting to Boards of Education and communities. The foundation payments are not being funded consistently or timely with EMIS reporting data.

Example 3: ODE is notoriously late in reporting out academic data. We deal with having to import data only to learn ODE is unprepared on their end to deal with our uploads. Error reports through EMIS are delayed. When we do receive them we have 48 hours to adjust and resubmit. High stakes testing and the data from such tests need to be in districts by August 1st. No excuses. Local Education Associations (LEAs) have to jump for ODE but the reverse is not true. Federal allocations were received late but still had to be in by June 30th. The double standards are not appreciated. ODE has the potential to do great things but is currently ineffective.

Example 4: The issue of Gifted Education in Ohio is often overlooked, but is an important part of our overall educational system. Having said that though, ODE is supposed to do a top/bottom review of the gifted system every five years and issue new guidelines. We are currently three years into the review, over half way through the five year period, and there are no new guidelines. That means that if this stagnancy lasts much longer, the state will be due for yet another 5-year overview and we still won't have had guidance from the past overview.

There are a couple axioms that I think are as true today as ever – the best government is the one that governs least. Also: the best government is the one closest to the people. In both cases, we have certainly moved far from those principles in education. And perhaps most startling of all, few if any at the local level ever asked for any of this. It came largely from various persons at the top who had the political wherewithal to impose a solution, well-intentioned or not, needed or not.

Please understand, local schools want a good partner in Columbus. We willingly and eagerly reach out to any number of resources to make our systems better. We are all engaged in quality assurance and we welcome support (e.g., curriculum, financial controls, HR practices, etc.). But nothing in our society is made better by centralized planning/control. Ask a teacher what he/she teaches, when they teach it, how it is taught or even what resources are to be used. In nearly every aspect, there is a strong hand directing them from outside their district. Yet the direction of local schools needs to be local. We are getting ever closer to the day when every aspect of school management will be dictated by administrative rule or by law. When that day arrives what will the point or purpose be for local boards?

For local administrators? Will the only “local” matter be the waging of levy battles for local funding? If so, that will be the day when local support, local buy-in, will end. And given the ever growing difficulty of passing local operating levies, we may already be at the tipping point.