

February 2, 2016

The West Virginia Constitution rightly created the WV Board of Education as a separate, non-political body tasked with the supervision of our public schools. The system was designed to insulate education-related decisions from the politicians. It is often called the fourth branch of government in West Virginia because it doesn't really fall under any of the other three. Board members are appointed, not elected, for nine year terms. So their terms always outlast the Governors who appoint them. No more than five can come from any one political party, so the Board can never become politically lopsided. And the seats are distributed evenly across the state geographically. Board members are prohibited by law from selling anything to the school system, so there is nothing to be gained through membership other than the warm feeling of public service. Our only purpose is to get the best education possible for the kids.

I have not always agreed with the positions of all of the current and previous State Board members with whom I have served. That being said, I firmly believe that all but one of them has been there for the right reasons; making the education system as good as it can be for our students.

The system was designed to ensure that educational decisions such as what we teach and how we teach it would be decided by professional educators, not politicians. And decisions such as what, how, and when to test our students would likewise be based on educational decisions, not politics.

Yet after more than seven years on the Board including two as President, I can say with complete confidence that the Legislative Branch has systematically ignored the Constitution for decades. And frankly, the State Board has allowed them to get away with it. Never has the essential tenant of separation of powers, so explicitly laid out in our constitution, been ignored and trampled as it has been in these last two years. We have known since Recht and Hechler that the authority and responsibility for setting education policies and standards rests with the State Board for good reason.

Unfortunately, the State Board has sent the wrong signals by being too compliant and cooperative with the Legislative and Executive branches of government over the past several decades. It's as if everybody wants the authority of the Board of Education, but without the aggravation of attending the meetings or learning pesky facts about education. And now the Legislature has effectively declared war on the State Board of Education.

The level of politically-motivated meddling now comes from all sides. The Union-influenced Democrats run Bills undermining the State Board's commitment to 180 days of instruction each year. They constantly use their political power to attack the RESAs while the RESAs tend to produce results cheaper and more efficiently than traditional State employees. They seek to undermine most policies related to performance. Now that Republicans are in charge, they use their new found political power to attack standards about which they know nothing. In layman's terms, they want to tell the educators what to teach and what not to teach. The "Rs" also attack the RESAs without any idea of what RESAs actually do. In the current session, the lawmakers seem to be looking for every way possible to damage the State Board. Some of the stuff is downright silly.

One thing on which both political parties and the unions all agree is that the State Board's program to instill real accountability and transparency to the quality of our schools must be stopped! Oh they won't say that, but their actions sure prove it. Republicans want to do away with the best standards WV has ever had. Democrats and Republicans both want to force the State Board to do away with our assessments. And virtually everybody wants to add "multiple measures" to the accountability system, which will water it down and make it meaningless. Heaven forbid that parents might actually know the academic quality of their local schools. We don't want to embarrass anyone, right?

These are but a few of the constant litany of actions intended to usurp the authority and constitutional responsibilities of the State Board of Education. The vast majority of the attacks come from people who haven't the slightest inkling of what they are talking about. The unintended consequences of their irresponsible actions are NEVER understood or considered. Nor do they care that their incessant budget cuts to the Department of Education undermines its capacity to help dozens of small rural counties which don't have the resources to provide quality education programs on their own.

Ironically the politicians don't "get" the fact that once they are allowed to make the important educational decisions, those choices are sure to be reversed as soon as the political winds change from "R" to "D" or the other way around. Union control for a while, then TEA Party. Then Union again. Back and forth. What a nice way to run a school system.

For anyone who might care, here are a few of my thoughts and observations about public education in West Virginia:

- The Smarter Balanced tests should be scrapped in favor of End of Course Exams as quickly as they can be developed. The results from the EOC tests should impact students' grades, teachers' evaluations, schools' grades, and each county's approval status.
- Many counties have too few students to justify the cost of a county administration. With our declining population, we should be spending more money on teachers, and less on county administrations. We should restructure the system to have somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 school districts instead of 55. The boundaries should be formed geographically around student populations.
- We should be strengthening the capacity of the WVDE and the RESAs to support the needs of the locals; not stripping them. This would increase capacity and efficiency.
- We should fund our cyber school programs according to demand, rather than capping them at some arbitrary level. This is the future, and we'd better get out in front before we get run over by cyber programs coming from other states.
- We should move the 100 or so students attending the WV Schools for the Deaf & the Blind to new programs based at WVU and Marshall, and close the antiquated facility in Romney within a year. It is a travesty to continue that taxpayer-funded jobs program on the backs of those unfortunate kids.
- We should look at our facilities from a statewide perspective rather than by individual school districts. What is happening in Fayette County is a travesty, but it is not the only one by far. Our current system is certainly neither equal nor efficient.

- Any education law proposed by a legislator should be placed on automatic hold until that legislator attends twelve consecutive State Board meetings and all associated committee meetings before it is eligible for consideration.
- No Governor or legislator should be allowed to criticize our school system as long as our national performance ranking equals or exceeds our national teacher pay ranking.
- Promise scholarships should be made in the form of loans. These loans would be forgiven if the student lives and works in West Virginia after graduating from college. If not, the money should be paid back to the WV taxpayers.

I have never run for political office, and I didn't seek this position on the West Virginia Board of Education. I have never been a politician and never will be. Over the past seven years I have sacrificed innumerable days and hours at the expense of my businesses and my family to this role. I would have done so for two more years if I thought it would matter.

The children of West Virginia should not be used as fodder for political vendettas and paybacks. Our Constitution demands it. But based on this war on the State Board by the Legislature, it appears the citizens of West Virginia want their school system to be run that way. It appears no State Board of Education is needed.

That being the case, I'm out.

Wade Linger