

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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The Honorable Kelli Stargel
324 Senate Office Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

The Honorable Carlos Trujillo
204 House Office Building
402 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

March 6, 2013

RE: Parent Empowerment Legislation

Senator Stargel and Representative Trujillo,

Thank you for your leadership in education reform in Florida, particularly for your efforts to empower parents to take an active role in their children's education. As a parent and an educator, I have been an active supporter and practitioner of parent involvement in education. Based on my experience in 2011 with "parent trigger" legislation in Indiana, I respectfully offer my perspective and suggestions regarding the bill language as it is currently written.

First, I would like to commend you for including provisions that will ensure that students are taught by effective teachers. Research clearly shows that students who have access to great teachers can achieve far more than those who do not. Florida, as a result of eliminating the tenure system, is in a better position than ever to ensure that principals can be held accountable to put together teams of the best and brightest teachers, to ensure that every student has access to a teacher that can change their life for the better. It is our job to ensure that principals know how to manage their teams of educators to improve their skills and drive student success.

To that end, it is important that we hold all those at the local level responsible for the duties they have to provide our students with a great education. One of Florida's strengths is the emphasis that

it places on local control and responsibility in education. The legislation as written includes language that may let local elected school board members off the hook when it comes to respecting a parent's role in the process.

Rather than allowing an appeal process that shifts responsibility to the State Board of Education, which is not best equipped to understand the local sensibilities of these issues, parents, teachers, students and community members have a right to make sure that when parents voice an opinion it gets considered. School boards should not have the ability to push the decision to the state. They owe it to parents to consider what they have to say without being able to avoid the tough decisions. Indiana has had success with similar duties for school districts, and it is important that we continue to hold local communities accountable in Florida for improving our education system.

Further, the process laid out in the bill seems to require an overly burdensome process for parents to navigate when working to improve their child's school. Rather than a formal process of notices, votes and petitions, local elected officials should be held responsible for listening to those who know their students' best—their parents. Simply put, if a group of concerned parents, no matter how large, shows up at a school board meeting or calls board members on the phone, those *school board members have a duty to carefully consider what those parents have to offer*. Parents should have a say, and it should count more than anyone else's, regardless of a formal petition process.

Florida has always been a leader in education reform, and was certainly a model for my former state to follow. As we move forward, I am committed to doing anything I can to help you continue leading the way to improve education in our state. I would be happy to make my staff and myself available to work with you on anything we can do to enhance the important role that parents can play in their children's education. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Bennett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Tony Bennett
Florida Commissioner of Education