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Elected school boards are best option to oversee our public education system

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Headlines from newspapers across the state this week indicate a new fight is looming for public schools. It is not a battle about curriculum, calendars, or even budgets. This dispute is more fundamental. It is a battle that has been fought for thousands of years over fertile soils, flowing waters, and veins of various ores. It is a contest over who should control our most precious resource.

In case you might have missed it, some politicians have proposed that voters across Tennessee give up their right to elect those who oversee public education, a resource that is the very fabric upon which our communities, state, and nation are built. As a result, boards of education are facing a real challenge to their legal authority and public mandate to protect the best interests of all children.

This is not your standard fight for something that will eventually disappear, nor is education a fad that will soon be replaced in society with something else. Quality schools are the foundation for a healthy economy, a good quality of life, and a vibrant future for all citizens.

The concept of local communities electing school board members to represent their views is fundamental to our society. The thought of one person with singular views and perspectives appointing every member of a board of education runs contrary to the established philosophy of a school system that serves and is responsive to the diversity of our population. It is equivalent to a president appointing every member of Congress.

With so much at stake, it is not surprising that “education” has become a catchphrase for those who seek political notice. Unfortunately, what started out as a plea for attention has turned into something much larger. Make no mistake about it. This is not a fight over the authority, training, knowledge, or accountability of those making decisions about our schools. If it were, there really would not be an argument. This is nothing more than a contest to see who will run our schools.

The question of who is authorized to make decisions concerning the direction and operation of our public schools is crystal clear. State law provides for the existence of school boards, and the duties of those boards are specifically defined by the legislature. Unlike local legislative bodies and chief

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executives who oversee a multitude of unrelated governmental functions, school boards have the singular task of providing a quality education to our youth. The law recognizes the importance of that task by creating a separate entity to consider educational matters.

Because school board members are trusted with our most precious resource, the General Assembly requires more from them than just a willingness to serve. Unlike members of local legislative bodies at the city and county levels, Tennessee law requires school board members to attend annual training sessions throughout their service to the community. These seven-hour academies present information, provoke thought, provide resources to those who are charged with making decisions that are critical to our future. Failure to attend the required training can result in the removal of Board members from office by the commissioner of education, a standard which is higher than that required for other elected officials.

The decisions made about education by school board members are based on the thorough study of information and a careful consideration of consequences. This type of analysis takes time, often months or years, to undertake. Mayors, councils, and county commissions deal with education issues for no more than weeks at a time when budgets are presented. School boards spend a major portion of each year crafting the financial needs of their districts based on an intertwined collection of goals, data, and performance. They are able to consider this large volume of material because that is their only task, a luxury other elected officials just don't have.

Finally, the legislature was very careful to make accountability a centerpiece of the Education Improvement Act of 1992. Voters, making full use of the democratic process, elect school board members. Those members hire a director of schools, who in turn hires and manages the employees of the school district. The buck stops with school boards, which are directly accountability to the public every time there is an election. The taxpayers who fund our schools have the final say about who runs them, and they are able to exercise their right to elect individuals who represent their diverse opinions, needs, and goals for education. The diversity of our school boards is a positive, not a negative, and that benefit would be lost if boards are appointed by a single person or entity who brings only one perspective to the table.

At the end of the day, education is more than a buzzword. It is more than a campaign promise, and it is more than a soundbite. Education is our future, and control of it belongs with our elected boards of education. Attempts by other bodies or individuals to circumvent the authority of school boards by withholding funds or passing bureaucratic roadblocks to educational progress are nothing more than political powerplays with questionable motives. If our schools are to improve, it is time to let boards of education do their jobs, and it is time to give them the tools they need to do that job - with no threats and no strings attached.