# J.H. Snider’s Testimony before the Maryland Senate’s Committee on Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

# Concerning Senate Bill 173, Anne Arundel County Board of Education, Straw Ballot to Select Members

# Thursday, January 24, 2013

Good afternoon. My name is J.H. (“Jim”) Snider. I am the President of iSolon.org and a Fellow at the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University. For more than a decade, I have been a regular contributor to *Education Week*, the much-cited publication in Maryland for its number one rating of the Maryland public schools.  Two of my children have served as the Student Member of the Board on the Anne Arundel County School Board, zx and I have served as vice chair and chair of the Countywide Citizen Advisory Committee.  My Ph.D. from Northwestern University is in political science in the field of American government.

Since 2007, I have written a blog about the Anne Arundel School Board Nominating Commission (SBNC), the public body that nominates school board candidates to the Governor for his approval. Since then, I have attended more SBNC meetings than any member of the public or press and perhaps more than all but several members of the SBNC itself.

I would encourage you not to structure a straw poll in such a way that it suggests only two alternatives: an appointed versus an elected school board. This framing obfuscates the fact that there are many types of appointed vs. elected school boards that differ in highly material ways. The purpose of a straw poll should be to express dissatisfaction with the current electoral system and spur meaningful public deliberation pointing to the creation of a more democratically accountable system. It should not prematurely foreclose discussion about alternatives.

For example, last Sunday the Washington Post ran an editorial arguing that Prince George’s County should consider county executive control (popularly known as “mayoral control”) as opposed to either an appointed or elected school board, both of which it has tried with poor results. I’m not advocating for or against mayoral control, but this is the type of option, endorsed by the current U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and implemented in 2007 in Washington, DC, that should not be foreclosed before a debate has even begun.

Similarly, we need to have thoughtful discussion about such critical electoral variables as partisan vs. nonpartisan election, single vs. multi-member districts, district vs. at-large election, and proportional vs. non-proportional representation.

And the question of the future of the electoral system for the student member of the board should not be ignored. The student member of the board has the same voting rights as the adult members, yet doesn’t neatly fit into the dichotomy of appointed vs. elected boards. My guess is that not one member of this panel really understands how the student member of the board is actually elected, as opposed to elected in theory.

Based on the above considerations, I suggest modifying the paragraph beginning at line 15 to be more open ended, along the lines of:

Do you favor changing the method of selection of the members of the Anne Arundel County Board of Education from the current system of appointment by the Governor (subject to each member’s approval and retention or rejection and removal by the voters of the County at a subsequent election) to another one that is more democratically accountable to the public, such as direct election by the voters of Anne Arundel County?

I also recommend adding a section stating that if the voters approve the referendum, the Maryland General Assembly will convene a Joint Committee on AACPS Governance composed of members of the Anne Arundel County delegation and that this Committee will convene a minimum of two public hearings to take public, televised testimony, and then propose reforms, if any, for approval by the Maryland General Assembly.

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