December 7, 2018

Chairwoman Marva Johnson
State Board of Education
325 W. Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Chairwoman and State Board Members,

With the impending departure of Commissioner of Education Pam Stewart, the League of Women Voters of Florida reminds you that as members of the State Board of Education you not only have the opportunity, but a constitutional responsibility, to conduct a national search to find the person who is best suited to oversee Florida’s system of public education.

Article IX, Section 2 of the Constitution of Florida was overwhelmingly adopted by the people of Florida in 1998. That provision created the Board of Education, consisting of seven members serving staggered terms to oversee Florida’s system of free public schools.

By enacting that provision, the people of Florida made it clear in the Constitution that it is the Board of Education — not the Governor — that has the responsibility to appoint a Commissioner of Education. Further, the Board of Education members’ terms of office were purposely staggered to ensure that as governors change, the Florida education system would be insulated from the disruption caused by political patronage appointments of a Commissioner of Education.

At a minimum, Floridians expect you to carry out a due diligence process aimed at ensuring Florida’s students that an individual of the highest possible caliber oversees public education. We urge you to take this important duty seriously and not simply “rubber stamp” a politically motivated choice.

Under our state’s current constitution, the Governor retains input to the process by filling vacancies which occur as Board Members terms expire, however, the Board must carry out its constitutional duty and make appointments based upon merit, not political patronage. While members of the Board may ultimately concur with the recommendation of the incoming Governor regarding who to appoint, the Board of Education should decline to opt for an expedient political patronage selection.
In sum, the Board should be guided by the constitutional statement that imposes upon the State a “paramount duty” to make “adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders.” Included in such a paramount duty is the selection of the best person possible to lead the effort. Finding such a person mandates that the Board conduct a national search and not just grant perfunctory approval to a political patronage appointment.

Florida’s children deserve nothing less.

Patricia Brigham
President

cc: State Board of Education
Vice Chair, Andy Tuck - Andy.Tuck@fldoe.org
Gary Chartrand - Gary.Chartrand@fldoe.org
Ben Gibson - Ben.Gibson@fldoe.org
Tom Grady - Tom.Gradoy@fldoe.org
Michael Olenick - Michael.Olenick@fldoe.org
Joe York - Joe.York@fldoe.org