Our community has been discussing the makeup of school boards for many years. Recently, the lieutenant governor suggested that some members of such boards be appointed. Currently, all are elected.

No matter what ideas are discussed and debated, our focus as the governing board of the nation’s fifth-largest school district must be on the success of our students. Five of our School Board members attended the Council of Great City Schools’ 66th Annual Conference. We engaged with school board members from 77 large urban districts. The composition of these boards all differ. Some boards are appointed, some hybrid and some are elected.

Still, all school boards face the same issues: board dysfunction, governance issues, disruptive public meetings and disruptive board members.

Focusing on student outcomes is the most critical challenge every school board faces. It is a challenge because board members run their election campaigns on the inputs (e.g. more cameras in schools, or curriculum issues) but rarely do they run
on improving student outcomes. Once they become board members, they focus on pushing forward the issues on which they ran, many of which are not the duties of a school board member.

For most, it is a difficult paradigm shift from the politician who advances a personal agendas to the board member on a team of seven focused on student outcomes. Meanwhile, our students suffer and student outcomes never change.

Changing the composition of school boards is admirable. However, the core issues are still not being addressed.

Members with a strong understanding and experience in board governance can make a positive change. They understand that setting the vision for the community is critical. They understand the importance of setting and monitoring student-centered goals. They understand systemic change takes a long term and focused commitment from multiple parties.

We know, from experience and research, these tasks require basic organizational management actions, and this year the board has refocused our energy on this work.

Research repeatedly demonstrates that districts with constant superintendent turnover fail to address long-standing challenges. For the first time in decades, the Clark County School District is addressing the lack of systems and structures. We are building a foundation upon which future student success hinges.
As we dig deeper to address historically negative practices, special interests advocate for their own interests. The same individuals who welcomed change when an external superintendent was hired are now the ones pleading for the status quo.

Aside from elections, there is little anyone can do to hold board members accountable. The board has tried multiple paths to address destructive board member behavior. But some members would rather pursue their political paradigm. In four years they can do a lot of damage to what is the most important public institution in our community.

The children in this community deserve our undivided attention. Student outcomes will never change until adult behaviors change. Our students deserve leadership that will place students and student outcomes above adult issues.

Irene Cepeda is president of the Clark County School Board.