



The City of Lorain, Ohio

Chase Ritenauer

Mayor

Senate Education Committee

Proponent Testimony for Senate Bill 110

April 2, 2019

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice-Chair Terhar, and Ranking Member Fedor, Good Morning. My name is Chase Ritenauer, and I am the Mayor of Lorain. I am here today to offer proponent testimony for Senate Bill 110 sponsored by Senator Manning.

Lorain is approaching 2 years since it has been under the provisions of House Bill 70, which replaced the city's elected school board with an academic distress commission and a CEO. The distress commission appointed a CEO in July of 2017. In the time since, the Lorain City School District has been mired in a state of chaos. Through 2017 and 2018, I remained, for the most part, quiet on the matter. What was assured to Lorain regarding House Bill 70 by the prior administration did not come true, but I chose to attempt to work with the new CEO despite having deep concerns about the legitimacy of the search process. I felt even though I disagreed, the issue had been settled and as mayor I owed it to the community and the schools to attempt to work together despite my strong disapproval. What has happened in the time of this CEO has prompted me to express publicly the need for change.

The CEO feels he is accountable only to the state's appointees on the distress commission. The appointees from the school board and the mayor are dismissed as they are not needed to form a majority on the commission. The CEO to this day has not even been evaluated as required by law. He refuses to meet publicly with the elected school board despite my public pleas for a meeting. When questioned, he simply ignores or, when pushed, lashes out. He told my appointee to the distress commission—a career educator and former high school principal—that she comes from a place of impurity and does not have children's best interest in mind. While the school board has no power from an operations standpoint, they hold the power to place a levy or bond issue on the ballot. In Lorain, a renewal levy generating about 3.5 million dollars risks missing the ballot in November because the elected school board has not had its questions answered about the CEO's spending, which is not required to be approved by the board or the commission. Academic distress will soon be joined by fiscal distress if this critical situation is not resolved. Simply put, the CEO has more power to spend than the president, governor, or mayor. I could go through each and every element of House Bill 70 and how it has been problematic. But I suspect many of you know these talking points. In the past several months, I cannot come to Capitol Square without members of the legislature—members who do not represent Lorain—looking at me and

apologizing for what is happening in Lorain. While House Bill 70 was dubbed “The Youngstown Plan,” Lorain has become the poster child for dysfunction under its implementation.

So what can we do? I know the docket is full. School funding, state report card, and, of course, structural, long-term fixes to House Bill 70—all in conjunction with the biennial budget—are bearing down on the General Assembly. That is why I ask for your support of Senate Bill 110. It tackles what I believe to be the fatal flaw of House Bill 70—lack of local control. Senate Bill 110 is not a Cleveland Plan, but it borrows a key aspect of the Cleveland Plan. It makes the mayor a key component of the plan. It makes the majority of appointees to the commission local appointments while strengthening the oversight function through CEO meetings with the school board along with financial and performance audit requirements. Two of the state’s three appointees live hours from Lorain. When a recent vacancy occurred, the state had the opportunity to appoint a local resident in an effort to garner community support. Instead, a Columbus resident was appointed. You may have seen recent news about the CEO telling teachers they would need to re-apply for their positions only to reverse course. The earth has been scorched with the teachers, staff, and the community. This CEO has lost his voice and his ability to lead. This experiment has not worked, and it is getting worse. I envision a massive enrollment decline, if it has not happened already, and a point of no return. Senate Bill 110 is imperative to addressing this situation and quickly.

As mayor, I have plenty on my plate relative to running the city. But I cannot do my job with a school system in complete disarray. Some have suggested I sit on the sidelines and let this mess play out. Why should I risk getting some of the mess on me they ask. Well, I think that is why we run for our respective positions. It is to solve problems and improve people’s lives. I cannot sit by and watch my school district fall over the side of a cliff only to have to work to put it together in 5 years when House Bill 70 says the mayor gets authority to run the schools. Giving the mayor the same number of appointees as the Department of Education will immediately provide more local buy-in and oversight. For one, an elected, accountable office will be making the appointments. Perhaps no office is more accountable locally than the mayor. And I can tell you that when I am out to breakfast, grabbing coffee, or at church, people tell me what’s on their mind. The incentive to get this right is there for a mayor; it is not there for unaccountable commission members who live hours away.

Honorable Members of the House Education Committee, I am not saying that Senate Bill 110 is a perfect solution or even a long-term solution. What I am saying is that it is the solution that Lorain needs now. Next school year is closer than we think as is the August deadline for submitting a renewal levy to the voters. Lorain cannot afford to operate another school year in this disastrous situation. I believe, too, that Senate Bill 110 could be the opportunity to test some new policies to see how they work in Lorain. I am confident that if given the opportunity, Lorain will illustrate how the provisions of Senate Bill 110 could be replicated elsewhere. What is happening in Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland versus what is happening in Cleveland offers a stark contrast. While the Cleveland Plan is far more robust and comprehensive than House Bill 70 or Senate Bill 110, the key ingredient is having a local decision maker as a driver of the effort. Lorain is ready to assume that responsibility, and Senate Bill 110 will give us that opportunity. What I can assure you is that the dysfunction we see today will be tackled, and we can get to work for those who matter most: our kids. Lorain needs your decisive action to get us there before it is too late.