



Presentation to Ohio Senate

April 2, 2019

Chairwoman Lehner, members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning; I am honored to be in this hallowed and historic hall. On behalf of the citizens of the proud International City of Lorain, I would like to greet you with a salutation that, as a Vietnam War veteran and police officer, I often hear...thank you for your service...to the state and our communities back home.

I have spent 48 years as a law enforcement officer in Lorain...and I have chosen to wear my uniform today because that is who I am. But I stand before you at this moment...and I speak and humbly, respectfully implore you...as a son of Lorain who loves my community and wants the very best for our children.

I love the Lorain City Schools. What has occurred here as a result of H.B. 70 has been devastating...to our community and especially to our children. After the opening of the new Lorain High School there was an air of optimism within our city that I had not experienced for a long time. It was joyful and hopeful and it seemed that the entire community had come together and embraced our schools with the anticipation of a brighter future. You could feel it and it was contagious. The Police Department even changed the color of two of our cruisers to match Lorain High School colors.

From the beginning of the current Academic Distress Commission, the situation has gone from bad to worse. Prior to this drastic change in direction, the Lorain Schools had been plagued with frequent changes in administrations that brought in new curriculums and different philosophies; due to its dire financial conditions, the schools were always in the position of "chasing grants" and each program added to the instability and constant change. Faculty and staff, parents and children were now all on the same page; they were ready to move forward...together...to address the issue of academic achievement. Morale was high, not only in our school buildings, but in our community as a whole.

Then everything changed overnight. The superintendent that had rallied our community, and our elected Board of Education, were reduced to irrelevance. The process to replace him was tainted, controlled secretly from behind the scenes, and driven by a philosophical agenda. There was a pretentious attempt to give the appearance of citizen participation, but almost everyone understood that their voice really didn't matter; the insulting aspect was that those who controlled the process really seemed to believe that Lorain folks were too dumb to figure that out. It was condescending and I believe initiated the loss of credibility in the ADC that is so magnified today. The truly sad note is that our community had originally accepted the "state takeover" and we were ready to tackle the academic issues; this was a direct result of our former Superintendent painting a picture that we were all in this together and that this would be a partnership for improvement with the State of Ohio.

Despite this disappointment, the Lorain community circled the wagons, recognizing that these were the cards that we had been dealt, and decided to support this effort on the premise that it

would help our children. They were taken aback by some of the decisions that were made, the authoritarian leadership style, the lack of transparency (including potential violations of the Ohio Public Records law), the controlled message, the confrontational approach to our elected officials, the secretiveness and lack of accountability with regard to financial expenditures, the hiring of so many additional administrators (some unqualified and uncertified, most lacking experience), the lack of emphasis on safety and security within the buildings, the manipulation of statistics, the exodus of administrators and teachers who had devoted their life to Lorain kids... with the false narrative that "these people had failed our children" along with the arrogant notion that somehow these new administrators care more for our kids than we do. Gradually, segments of the community began to lose faith in the new approach, especially as the Lorain Schools filled the front pages and airwaves with stories of student fights (at first denied), and the constant discord between the School administration versus the Board of Education, versus new members of the ADC, and versus parents.

However, what has raised the ire of the Lorain community is the attack on teachers and a management style that has created a culture of fear, threatening the livelihood of anyone who criticizes or disagrees with the Administration. It is tearing at the fabric of this previously tight-knit community and I believe that the ultimate outcome will be shattered relationships for years to come. This is a disaster for our community and children and I feel that it will be a long time before our school system recovers.

School teachers and administrators certainly play a role in academic improvement...but to lay all the blame on them for a system that has failed to recognize the effect of pervasive poverty and racial discrimination on a child's ability or desire to learn...is disingenuously dishonest. To compare districts like Lorain, Youngstown, or East Cleveland to school districts that are homogenous, enjoy high median incomes, and are blessed with tremendous financial resources and a high level of parental participation and community support, is unfair at its core. The tactic of placing all teachers and administrators in fear of losing their jobs as part of an overall strategy to improve state scores is flawed, demeaning, and immoral (not to mention probably illegal).

When H.B. 70 was passed (without the benefit of public input), two major premises were ignored. The first is that the Ohio Supreme Court had already decided that the funding of public schools in Ohio is unconstitutional; the Court instructed the state to resolve the issue, but years later that has not happened. The second is the obvious. The answer to improving academic performance in urban schools lies, not in the threatening of teachers (who have chosen to devote their professional careers to the most vulnerable), but in addressing the serious social economic issues that are directly related to the crippling poverty that is the reality of many of our children.

It hurts me to see children, many of them African American or Latino, having to grow up (or raise themselves) in the midst of poverty, violence, drug and gangs, racism, without hope or opportunity, without a supportive parent or even their most basic needs being met...with no lifeline. How can children learn when they are not eating or sleeping enough, when they are scared, being abused or neglected, when they come to class sick, with a toothache, or they can't see the board; when they are not nurtured and no one at home gives a damn about their homework or education?

What happens when children are constantly barraged, through the media and their own school administrators, with the message that they are attending failing schools, in academic distress,

under state control because the schools have a grade of F ...loser kid from that loser city who attends a loser school...that is the message, loud and clear. How can you value yourself when everything around you says you're not worth nothing!

Does that mean that these children cannot learn or break this vicious cycle – of course not. What it means is that comparing them and the schools that they attend to the wealthier, resource heavy bedroom communities represents an intellectual lack of integrity. It means that demeaning these children and public shaming them (and their schools) is mean-spirited and will do nothing to uplift them. It means that the approach in HB 70 has not worked, and the only hope for a solution involves investing in “helping” these school districts with the issues that serve as barriers to learning.

The “takeover” of local school districts and replacing dedicated teachers and administrators with outsiders who have no vested interest in our children...who look at our schools as a stepping stone to the next rung on their career ladder...will never work and will only generate hostility and a loss of faith in public education. And maybe that is the idea and was always the plan. It is painful and unconscionable to think that there is a group “behind the curtain” who decided to quickly amend a law that would reduce our kids to guinea pigs in a social experiment to test an ideology... with a laser focus on moving towards charter schools. And why not Lorain, why not Youngstown? They are just old rustbelt cities with a large number of minorities with very little political power. That is what our community believes!

Maybe a more compassionate, dignified and holistic approach could have served as a true catalyst for change, guaranteeing a pathway to success for our kids. Lorain is a proud city; we have endured the loss of our steel, auto, and shipbuilding manufacturing base. Economically, we have suffered for decades. But we love our children. Despite the individual hard times, our citizens always came together to support the Lorain Schools, passing each and every levy, including the one that resulted in the building of all new school buildings in the district.

Instead of stripping our citizens of their local control...by eliminating the input and authority of our elected officials (and their access to information)...by giving one person total power over the future and well-being of our teachers and staff, and most importantly over our children...even placing the “future ownership” of our schools, that were built with the help of our beleaguered taxpayers, in the hands of one individual (with no local accountability)...just maybe there was a better way. I dare say that it is probably the closest that most of us will ever come to the feeling “of being occupied by a more powerful force, with no control over our own destiny.” I don't say that lightly; I served as part of an occupying army in Vietnam.

Maybe we (collectively) could have finally acknowledged the difficulty faced by urban schools in dealing with the myriad of issues that come with children who have not been properly prepared to attend school... and who bring a lot of challenges to class from their personal lives. Maybe instead of a hostile takeover, the Department of Ed could have worked collaboratively with our Board, administrators, teachers and parents, placing technical experts in house to work hand in hand towards a common goal.

Maybe the state could have shown some understanding for the unique plight of our Lorain Schools; most of the new development and growth in our city since the early 60's, has not benefited the Lorain Schools – over half of all residential and business areas situated in Lorain

belong to and pay their taxes to support Amherst, Clearview, and Vermilion school districts. Is it any wonder that our schools find themselves in constant financial crisis?

Maybe a better solution would be to regionalize these school districts and integrate our children into the surrounding communities...and their children into our new buildings. Talk about creating "distress!" Maybe then we could build true equity in education, eliminating the forced segregation of communities of color, isolating our poor and then condescendingly blaming their "failing schools." Right now the story is two Lorains; half of our kids go to neighboring school districts that are deemed excellent and the other half attend schools that are struggling.

The pragmatic and moral road for the State of Ohio could have been to admit our neglect in failing to provide adequate oversight, assistance and funding for urban schools for decades...these communities and kids were abandoned a long time ago...if the idea is to point fingers, there is enough blame to go around! The humane response would have been for the State to embrace Lorain kids...accept them as "part of our Ohio Village"...and provide a sustained investment in addressing the realities that they face each and every day... that keep many from even believing that they have a chance towards a better life, much less achieving at high levels...understanding that these conditions were created over decades (and in some cases centuries) of overt and targeted racial and class discrimination and neglect...realistically, it may very well take a generation to turn this around...instead of experimenting with our kids, and creating an atmosphere of mistrust and anger in our community, we need to move forward "together" with a sense of urgency.

However well intentioned, the implementation of H.B. 70 has created chaos and misunderstanding, discord and anger, and a loss of credibility and support for our Lorain Schools and the Ohio Department of Education. Citizens who used to lead campaigns to pass levies now promise to organize to defeat all school levies until such time that this situation is resolved; obviously that would create financial distress in addition to academic. Beyond anything else, the issue of local control and input, the idea that our schools are no longer ours, that we do not own these buildings that we took so much pride in building...has galvanized a coalition that is determined to fight for the right to have a say in the running of "our" school district. In order for our schools (and more important our kids) to succeed we must have a united community. This process has done irreparable damage and I truly believe that our children are now in a worse place; it has been rumored that hundreds of children have left our school district since the beginning of the academic year, but numbers have not been released. In fact, the claim has been that enrollment is slightly up, but everyone knows that these statistics have more to do with the new arrivals from Puerto Rico who fled the aftermath of the horrific hurricanes.

In closing, I would like to ask you to be thoughtful in your deliberations and to reflect on the negative impact that this situation will have on the lives of our children who are enduring the current situation. I have had the opportunity to listen to tear-filled testimonies by dozens of students, and many of my teacher friends, who are distraught over what has happened to Lorain Schools. Many of the students are in their senior year and say that they will never get over the sadness of their last years in high school; they are not talking about their fellow students, or teachers, or previous administrators. They are referring to the consistent turmoil that has resulted from H.B. 70. They are talking about the constant public shaming of their school by state officials, the condescending put downs by the "turnaround" administrators, and the non-stop negative media coverage in print and on television. The students say that they love their Lorain

High School and they just don't understand why the adults who currently hold power over their dreams and aspirations don't see all of the good things that are happening there. They feel belittled and betrayed.

Lorain needs your help. It is critical for the pride and well-being of this community that our voices not be silenced...that our voices matter. In the end, these are our children and our schools. The schools are supported by Lorain taxpayers...these Ohio citizens deserve respect. Our parents, community members and our students have an absolute right to share in the decision-making process that will affect the rest of their lives; I would argue that theirs should be the dominant voice and that they should be the ultimate arbitrator in holding our school leaders accountable.

There are many steps that need to be taken to return Lorain Schools to a space where our children can learn and excel and feel good about it. Our critical issues cannot be successfully addressed by a stacked commission made up persons who have to use their GPS to get here. We need technical assistance and expertise, and I am sure that would be welcomed, but this is a journey that has to be led by own community. We need to own it and we cannot be locked out of the door to our children's future. Thank you.



Chief Cel Rivera
Lorain Police Department
Community Advocate

Other observations and thoughts:

1. The Ohio Strategic Plan for Education: Each Child Our Future...One of the 3 Key Principles is building Community Partnerships. This is difficult to do when the community has no faith in HB 70 and are taking sides.
2. You cannot underestimate the importance of the students' perspective about the community in which they are being educated – Loss of pride in the Lorain Schools but are expected to perform to the same standards as their counterparts in other communities.
3. Continued loss of parent involvement and faith in our schools by community members: Has the potential to lose future levy support...it may take years to restore faith/credibility in order to pass a levy.
4. Because open enrollment has been closed in many neighboring school districts, many families have chosen to move out of the city completely. Have heard that over 125 kids left our schools within the first couple of months...figures have not been released.
5. The Academic Distress Commission just met for the first time in several months. Because it has been so focused on strife there have not been any productive meetings to move the district forward – no legit discussions on curriculum. In fact, two members of

the ADC have never even spoken publicly at the meetings that have been held. It is acknowledged that one member does not even attend regularly, sending a clear message that this endeavor is not important.

6. In a frank discussion with a group of administrators and faculty that have been here previous to the ADC and change in leadership, they have described their situation as a gut-wrenching feeling of defeat, swimming against the tide, and having to work hard to support staff who feel distressed and at the same time try to maintain normalcy for students.
7. The emphasis on replacing staff with Teach for America alumni results in under experienced and under educated teachers. Most of those hired lack public education experience in state education standards and accountability measures such as state testing, Third Grade Reading Guarantee, Kindergarten readiness, etc. Pushing an ideology as opposed to hiring of qualified staff – Lorain seen as a social experiment.
8. No one can be successful when they are shooting at a moving target – constant changes, no system in place. There can be no checks and balance when a culture of fear inhibits teachers and staff from bringing up barriers or concerns.
9. In addition to the more affluent half of the city belonging to neighboring school districts, the Lorain Schools also have to compete with the growing number of charter schools that target cities like Lorain that are struggling economically.
10. Problematic: Structural changes that are not well communicated to staff – no investment in those who have their boots on the ground doing the work.
11. Lorain Schools have always produced outstanding graduates and alumni. Someone would be hard pressed to name another school district of this size that can list a more distinguished group of graduates...we can include the Chief of Naval Operations during World War II, Medal of Honor winners, Military Generals and Admirals, Several winners of the Pulitzer Prize and a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, award-winning poets (including the Poet Laureate for the United States), an astronaut, a Metropolitan Opera Star, Famous journalists and entertainers and artists (including one responsible for a great many of the covers for the Saturday Evening Post), NFL football players, and accomplished business leaders (including the CEO's of USAA, BP of North America, Sprint Florida Operations, PC Campana Inc, etc.). I personally know many recent graduates of Lorain Schools that went on to excel at Medical, Law and Graduate schools at some of this nation's most prestigious universities and colleges (including Stanford and Harvard). And they graduated from the same "failing" Lorain Schools with the same teachers...what happens at home affects what happens in the classroom.
12. The Lorain Schools were poised to meet the challenge of academic achievement prior to the passage of HB 70. The school administrators and teachers that have left the district because of the turmoil have not had problems obtaining employment with other school districts. One now serves as a superintendent; others hold executive positions, and our teachers have been welcomed by neighboring school districts. Our elementary

Curriculum Director, Dr. Marva Jones now serves as the Ohio Department of Education Executive Director of Continuous Improvement.

13. Needed Changes:

- Local Control – partnership between ODE and Lorain Board of Education – ODE consults to the board.
- Be Public School Focused
- Realistic Time Tables based on Adequate Yearly Progress measured and Student Culture/Climate
- Extra Resources – curriculum resources
- Continue and appropriately fund wrap around services for our students
- Provide a sense of stability for teachers but open up bargaining (i.e. relinquished managerial rights)
- Prescribed lesson plans for teachers that initiates accountability and guidance to best practices of lesson planning that has to have a monitoring component.