Senator Lehner and Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. My name is Deborah Amend, and I am addressing you on behalf of the North College Hill Education Association. However, I speak to you as not only the NCHEA president, but as a teacher, advocate of children with disabilities, parent and member of the North College Hill community. To say that I speak for many in stating that there are grave concerns with the current state takeover laws is an understatement at best. Its abysmal failure of the children in the distressed districts of Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland should provide more than enough evidence as to the lack of validity it offers as a solution. It is time to stop experimenting on our children, and allow our local leaders to create school improvement teams, based on research-backed methods, that will directly benefit our students. As a district on the list to be possibly taken over in two years, administration, staff and community members of North College Hill are united in our belief that such a takeover would be devastating to our community. As you likely already know, the bipartisan bill HB-154 has already passed the House (83-12) and is before you for consideration.

 North College Hill is a small city that faces extreme challenges. Over the years the changing demographics of the community have created new issues, but have not overcome the care and involvement of those committed to the city’s well being. Poverty abounds in the district, but so does generosity and investment. I have lived in North College HIll and surrounding areas for over 26 years, having worked at NCH High School for the past 5. This is long enough to see a complete changeover in administration in the district, something that only began a mere 3 years ago. Under the leadership of our current administration, we have seen the ship begin to change direction. Staff are being trained in researched backed methods for student engagement and interventions -- both mental health and academic. In the past year, under the direction of our new curriculum director, curriculum has been aligned across the district, and updated to reflect not only our current learning standards, but address gaps in learning as well. Our special education services have expanded greatly to meet the needs of our diverse student body -- from adding a sensory/de-escalation room in the high school to hiring a district BCBA to implement informed behavior plans to launching an alternative program targeted at our most at-risk students. In short, we have begun to form school improvement teams on our own in response to the need!

 All the steps that have been taken in the past several years will be for naught if a state take over happens. Our community will lose local control over the education of their own children, and the community will have no voice in what happens to their children once the school board is abolished! As a teacher I find this deeply troubling, but as a parent I find this appaling! People trust our local public schools because we trust the members of our community -- the people we live and work with! The current legislation produces actions that further deteriorate the state of our communities across Ohio by replacing those we have trusted with those we don’t know. Those who are not stakeholders in our children’s futures.

 Furthermore, the decision to make a takeover is based upon the ever-changing metric of state testing. As my daughter so aptly stated after this year’s round of testing, “The only thing a state test measures is how good someone is at taking a state test.” Yet, these tests are used to create a report card that dictates how a district is run! What the State Report Card does not do is indicate solutions for the problems resulting in these “failures” -- the transient nature of our student population, poverty, crime and lack of mental health supports. In fact, the “rigor” of this testing mandates time away from the very solutions that can alleviate the underlying causes of academic failure. Yet, the decision to take over a district is based upon these report cards, and can act in such a way that they actually remove the people who have both the knowledge and community relationships necessary to affect change.

In closing, I strongly urge you to support HB 154 and do away with Academic Distress Commissions. Repealing the Academic Distress legislation will not return districts back to those that were not able to effectively run it in the first place, but will, rather, return it to the people who were changing the district direction upon its application. Changes take time. The issues our students in high poverty districts face are enormous. However, under the right leadership -- leadership made up of those who know the students and community - we know that they can learn, and achieve success.

Thank you for your time.