**Testimony Before the Ohio Senate Education Committee on House Bill 166**

**Dr. Mary Rice, Board Member, East Cleveland Board of Education**

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Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Dr. Mary Rice, and I serve as an elected Board Member of the East Cleveland School District Board of Education. I appreciate the opportunity to testify as a proponent of House Bill 166 as passed by the House, which contains provisions that would dissolve academic distress commissions (ADCs); repeals current law providing for the establishment of ADCs; and requires improvement plans for certain low-performing school buildings. I am here to speak with you today to share the devastating impact that the academic distress commission has had on the East Cleveland City School District.

I was a teacher for over 44 years. My home for the past 36 years is located on the East Cleveland and Cleveland Heights border. Our children attend East Cleveland Schools, and our Library is the East Cleveland Library. I value Ohio’s education system, I love our students, and I am active in the East Cleveland Community. I have some understanding of our community, and I have a lot of love for our community.

For the purposes of background, the city of East Cleveland comprises about three and a half miles wedged between Cleveland and Cleveland Heights. Its population has been declining and currently consists of approximately 17,187 residents. One study has declared that East Cleveland is the poorest city in the state of Ohio, and the fourth poorest in the country. East Cleveland is 99.7% racial or ethnic minority. The median income is the lowest in the state at $19,953, compared to $58,500 statewide. Over 38% of our residents do not own a vehicle. Of the 2,122 children in our District, over 97% are considered economically disadvantaged. In spite of these challenges, the Board and the District strive to educate our children and enable them to succeed.

Prior to ADC takeover, the District created a five-year plan focused on educating the “whole child.” The plan aligned with the Ohio Department of Education. In fact, the Board has taken every effort to follow ODE’s recommendations. Because we had closely aligned our plan and improvement with ODE’s recommendations, I find it alarming and disingenuous that the State turned around, labeled the District a “failure,” took control away from the Board, and charged an ADC with overseeing a “new plan”.

The ADC’s new plan, authored by the appointed CEO, while very ambitious and wide-ranging, gives me a few concerns. As an experienced educator, I have seen education plans come and go with varying degrees of success. But the plans for both Youngstown and Lorain promised a great deal of change for the students that, as of yet, has not been delivered. Grandiose promises of change without an understanding of how to effectuate that change are a recipe for disaster.

East Cleveland is more than its overall grade. Details matter. And the details of East Cleveland’s report card support the fact that the District has been improving. Last year, 5 of our 6 schools received overall grades of “C” or “D”. I ask you to stop and think about that. The state has called our entire District a failure. As a result, the entire district has been taken over. However, by the State’s own measures, 5 of the 6 six schools are not failing. Yet, because of one school’s performance the entire district—its students—have been labeled failures. Indeed, under the State’s direction, the entire plan has been thrown out. The students in East Cleveland amount to some of the best in Ohio. And our faculty, staff, and school administrators are some of the best in the state. They help our students succeed despite the many great challenges.

To be clear, all our schools need to improve. As a Board member, I was elected by my constituents to work tirelessly to make sure that our schools improve. I have asked for assistance; the Board has followed the Department’s guidance. As an experienced educator, I know that plans take time. That is why I struggle with the arbitrary throwing out of one plan in favor of another plan. I especially struggle when there is no track record of success for ADC plans.

Several weeks ago, I had the honor of testifying in front of the Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee. As I waited to testify, the State Superintendent testified that we needed alternative pathways to graduation and that tests are not the best ways to evaluate knowledge. He has spoken on an overreliance on testing. Indeed, the State Board of Education has warned of the same thing. Yet, these same tests have been used to label our District a failure and to remove local control from the District. Indeed, two of the three years that we were labeled a “failure” was based solely on those very same tests. This is the definition of cognitive dissonance.

I mentioned that the East Cleveland Board’s own improvement plan yielded successes. Under the Board’s purview—and prior to the ADC takeover—the District implemented several programs that addressed the development of students. By overhauling our approach to student discipline, the District decreased the number of student suspensions by 48%, keeping our children in the classroom and learning. Our wellness center, the first in Cuyahoga County, attends to the mental and physical health of our students. Our staff have had some training in trauma-informed classrooms. The Board ensured that students received medical, mental health, dental, and vision services at no charge. We make breakfast, lunch, and dinner available and free to all students. These are successes that make a difference in the lives of every student who walks through our doors. Our staff knows it, our community knows it, and our students know it. We all rely on it. But none of that success is reflected on Ohio’s report card.

Improvement takes time—certainly more time than three years. That is especially true under a report card that is in a constant state of flux during those three years. It is no secret that the General Assembly has grappled with how to evaluate students, teachers, administrators, and school districts through testing and report cards. It is against the backdrop of safe harbor, delayed grades, restarts, and statewide upheaval that the District received notice that the State was taking over control of the District. That it was taking power away from the community and from its locally-elected representatives. And I know that’s not how the state sees it – they don’t want to call it a “takeover.” But that’s what it is. That’s what it does. That’s how the community sees it.

And here’s what else the community sees: that these takeovers are only happening, so far, in the most poverty-stricken districts in the State. A close look at the three ADC districts and the districts with two strikes toward an ADC reveals that nearly all fall in the top 10 poorest districts in Ohio. What the community sees is that the State isn’t taking over districts because of poor *performance*—but because of *poverty*.

It’s no wonder that ADCs cause tension, and no wonder they have a hard time succeeding. The community inherently distrusts the system. Since the ADC was implemented in East Cleveland, it has been unreliable, and disruptive to the district. The ADC has divided many sectors of the community just like it has divided other communities like it in Lorain and Youngstown. In fact, one of the ADC’s first meetings was moved out of East Cleveland and to another location and held in the middle of a week day because of that divisiveness. Remember what I told you about the percentage of community members without cars? To me, holding a meeting outside of our community was an attempt to disenfranchise the members of our community. It suggests that “they” know better than us – even though a majority of them were appointed by a State Superintendent who does not live here and has only visited our school district on several occasions.

The ADC’s structure cuts off the free flow of discourse that is common and necessary in healthy school systems. Teachers and administrators are uncomfortable and unsure of how to relate to the school board members and in some cases each other. This seeps into the classroom.

And it all falls squarely on the shoulders of the students—students who are our first priority, whom we all want to succeed, and who we all agree need our help. I will not call them failures, and I resist attempts by others to call them that. The way we help our students is not by taking away their voices and the voices of their community. We help them by empowering them with good resources, with better opportunities, and with a united community. This is the fundamental concept of our country. We achieve this not through ADC takeover and despotic rule, but through community-based systems like those proposed by House Bill 166, and local control.

Passage of House Bill 166 with these House-added provisions would be of great help to East Cleveland. It would restore morale by returning the authority and accountability of the district back to the elected local board of education and back to the community that is invested in student success.

This concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions.