Thank you for giving me the opportunity to, address you with a teacher’s appeal to fully support the repeal of House Bill 70 in all school districts in Ohio.

As a teacher with over 30 years’ experience in the Youngstown School District, I can tell you with sincerity that the last three years have been some of the most depressing and stressful of my entire career. It’s hard for me to say that because I love my chosen profession and most especially love teaching in Youngstown. I’m a product of this school system and have never wanted to teach anywhere but in Youngstown. However, what I have witnessed under HB70 is a systematic tearing down of programs that were working, teacher confidence and enthusiasm, as well as children’s love of learning and feeling of safety and security in the school environment. This saddens me to report but I vowed to come before you today and try to paint for you an honest and unbiased reporting of the facts. So I will throw in a few examples along the way to drive home what I am speaking to you about today.

As most of you are aware the initial conception of HB70 was one that would offer wrap around services to those children and their families that are living in poverty within the neighborhood schools. This was piloted successfully in the Cincinnati area and the plan was to expand the idea throughout Ohio. Certainly Youngstown, the first school district affected by HB70 would qualify as being an urban district with high poverty. It was just 2014 when our school district had the second highest number for any big or medium sized city with children living in poverty in the NATION! Furthermore, the census in 2017 put Youngstown right behind East Cleveland in the number one and two spots in the state of Ohio for children living in poverty. Now of course we know that East Cleveland has also joined us as a district affected by HB70.

As teachers we see daily how poverty does affect learning. Children, who don’t feel well, need glasses or dental care, are living in homes where mental illness or addiction is pervasive or are in a homeless situation, will certainly experience some difficulties learning as a result of these problems. I have a number of children in my class this year who are English Language Learners. Many are here as refugees from Hurricane Maria. We are still seeing families leaving Puerto Rico in droves. We need more wrap around services to help these families. Many families are crowded into one small home and the family then has such difficulty ensuring that all the little ones are clothed and fed properly. Transportation is often an issue and ensuring that the families’ health needs, such as vision and dental are met is a major problem.

In my school to try to support our children and families, a teacher started a food pantry and other teachers have caught on and the program has expanded across the district. The teachers donate to the pantry. Our teachers have sought help themselves from various agencies to try to get resources for the pantries. This pantry was ignored by our CEO. I saw in a report in the media that he discussed these pantries as a success under his administration. I’m telling you the true story. He did not help in any way, shape or form in our food pantry. Not even to donate a can of corn. Think about how beneficial these wrap around services would have been if HB70 had stayed intact as the bill it was intended to be.

Believe me, living in the instability that poverty creates does effect children’s learning and clearly creates an achievement gap. If you don’t believe the countless research studies available let me tell you about a little girl in my room. This little one is extremely kind, helpful and intelligent. She works hard and wants to learn. Every morning she walked in with her bookbag, unloaded her homework folder, took out her homework and turned it in. She was kind and helpful to others and I actually partnered her with one of my non-english speaking students, who can be a handful. She always had a way of talking kindly to him and helping him as he worked to become fluent in English and learn. In December she took the mid-year NWEA State approved test and scored very high. She met her learning goal for the year and then some. However, things changed drastically after Christmas. Her mother lost her job. They lost their home. She then was sleeping on the floor in the living room of an older sibling. From what she told me her siblings and their friends were up all night watching TV and smoking. She hates the smell. On other nights she goes to sleep at a different sibling’s, or one of mom’s friends. There is no longer stability in her life. She now spends the first hour, at least, of each school day sleeping. She is unhappy. There is no more bookbag, folder, or homework. I have tried to replace these items multiple times. But they are always misplaced. She does have a winter coat. She walks in with it and will not take it off. I don’t say a word. I understand she can’t lose this coat. This is hers. It represents one thing she can hold onto.

In April this little girl took her end of the year NWEA state test. This is the test in which 50% of my Ohio teacher Evaluation will be based on. She did not do well. She was tired and not feeling well. I could do nothing more than rub her back as I walked past her to encourage to keep trying. A test in which she had already scored so high in during the winter administration she now dropped a number of points and did not meet her goal.

Unfortunately this is not the only child in my room dealing with homelessness. I have other students in very similar situations, no real home just staying with whoever will house them for the night. One child spent time living in a car until a great aunt let the kids sleep in the house while the parents sleep in the car, in the driveway. Trust me, she has good reason for that decision. This is poverty.

Sadly, instead of the wrap-around supports that were the original intent of HB70 here’s what we got instead. In Youngstown, we got a highly paid CEO who came to us from another state, who didn’t understand the unique strengths and needs of our children and was not truly invested in the community. This CEO brought in a number of leaders from outside of Youngstown and paid them 6 figure salaries to pretty much make our lives miserable. We lost our literacy coaches and math coaches. He gave them Ipads to sit in a corner and watch us teach and evaluate us at least once a week. When we pointed out teachers should not be evaluating other teachers and where is the coaching? His response was to make them administrators, whether they had administrator degrees or not. If we had more time I can tell you stories of how that debacle has turned out. However, suffice it to say there is no more coaching as we were used to

Prior to HB70 we had a research-based literacy program that came out of Ohio State University in place. In the four years that we had been using the program our primary students had gone from an F to a B on state tests. NO easy feat. Each year we saw ourselves move up one grade and we were confident we were going to see that A in our fifth year. We also had every hope that as the program expanded through the grades and the children using the program moved into our intermediate and middle grades we’d see improved test scores. We’ll never know because CEO Mohip would not allow us to continue to use that program. As teachers we appealed to him. His response was to disband our Curriculum Instruction Committee, which consisted of a group of educators and supervisors working together to ensure that any program implemented in the district was planned for and continually reviewed so that we could ensure our children were learning and our teachers were supported in their implementation of the program. Mr. Mohip obviously did not want our input. There was no one to appeal to. Here lies the problem that cannot be fixed simply by replacing the person in this position. There is no one overseeing the CEO’s decisions. He has all the power.

Academically he put into place a framework called the Gradual Release of Responsibility, (GRR). GRR is not a bad framework, however, as the very expert trainers that Mr. Mohip paid to come in to provide professional development for our teachers stated, and I quote, “There’s the right way to do GRR and then there’s the Youngstown Way.” This framework was changed by Mr. Mohip and all classrooms are forced to follow the same method of teaching each day for each subject. That includes kindergarten through 12th grade, the same organization of each lesson. Kindergarten teachers in our district stated, “The students became unfocused, lessons became too long and behavior issues increased because we were not teaching age appropriately.” High school teachers report that the students are rebelling because trying to teach through all components of the framework each period is difficult and monotonous. Anyone who has any training in child development knows that framing instruction in the exact same way daily for grades K-through 12 does not make sense. Certainly the GRR professional trainers understood that. These trainers tried to discuss this with Mr. Mohip when he wouldn’t listen to us. His response…the trainers who spoke up were no longer trainers in Youngstown and the following year the training was taken over by his own highly paid administrators.

Now I want you to understand GRR is a framework for lesson delivery, it is not a literacy program. So what literacy program did we adopt when our CEO stopped allowing us to use the successful Literacy Collaborative program? Well the answer is none. We don’t have a reading program in Youngstown. Our CEO doesn’t seem to understand that GRR is not a literacy program. In fact, a Youngstown State University Education Department supervisor, who oversees a program in which university students are paired with our 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade students for literacy tutoring and mentoring, asked him what reading program **we were** using. The reason for her question was she wanted to train the university students to use whichever reading program we had switched to so they would tutor our children using that same program. Mr. Mohip told her GRR. She was confused because this is NOT a literacy program. She understood that and was shocked that he did not.

What happens in Youngstown is our teachers spend a fortune purchasing their own literacy materials for their students to try to fit them into this GRR model. What one teacher uses could be completely different than what someone in a different building or even classroom uses. For those of us who have taught for many years we can try to draw upon resources we’ve accumulated through the years. However, imagine the confusion and difficulty for a new educator. Let’s remember our teachers have not received a raise on their base salary since the takeover. Yet we are forced to spend our own money to try to implement his demands and meet the needs of our kids. However, who are we going to go to for help? Thanks to HB70, All roads lead back to the CEO.

Something that has probably given me the most sleepless nights as a 30 year plus teacher of this district is the change in the environment of our schools that was created under HB70. CEO Mohip made a decision to destroy the Code of Conduct in place when he came on board. So for the first year we had NO code of conduct. It was very confusing for administrators and teachers who didn’t have guidelines for behavior to follow. So what happened was chaos. There’s no other way to describe it. Our students lost their safe learning environment.

The Code of Conduct that Mr. Mohip did finally approve is non-specific in consequences and we have had a constant battle with the CEO to try to make our students understand that we will not tolerate behaviors in which they put themselves or others in danger. I havenever experienced the permitted disruption of learning, disrespect, bullying, cursing, and violence that I have seen in Youngstown in the last three years. Remember, I’m a product of this school system and have taught here my entire career. I love my kids and their families. These are good people trying to make it through hard times. The responsibility firmly lies at the feet of those that approved HB70, the CEO and the Academic Commission that oversees his actions, without seeking input from teachers, who are responsible for implementing his initiatives and work the closest with the children. I promise you I have personally gone to the CEO countless times with my passionate appeal for his support in not allowing our children to think this behavior is acceptable. His response is always to blame his administrators. However they are just following his dictates.

In fact, we have more incidents of bullying and assaults on teachers in this district than are ever being reported. That is the truth. In one classroom a teacher told me, as she cried and shook, about how she was attacked by children in her class, and when she fell over they jumped on her back. This was an ongoing problem. She was the third teacher in that classroom, that year. They would also run out of the room and throughout the halls. The principal’s answer was to stand outside the door and hold it closed so the kids could not escape when they were having a tantrum. This left the other students and the teacher in the class with the child who was having the violent tantrum. Of course we went to the CEO. The problem didn’t get fixed. The unit of children was just moved to another building. That was the fix. Three teachers later in the new building and it’s still rough.

Sadly, this is an all too familiar story. For example I can tell you of young teacher who was assaulted in her classroom while she was teaching in the front of the room by two sixth grade boys who were fighting. Her head was banged up against the board and she suffered a concussion. She’s a young mother suffering with ongoing vertigo and she has lost her peripheral vison in one eye. The specialist she visited told her at this point they will have to wait and see if time fixes the problem. It’s been 6 months. We had to grieve her case because she ran out of sick days and was no longer being insured by the district. They would not call the incident an assault. We did win this grievance because it was so egregious and her insurance was restored. What a shame we had to fight this through a grievance. Yet the assaults on our children and teachers continue.

I want to take a minute at this point to again defend our kids. They are some of the most intelligent, creative, resilient children that you will find anywhere. Three years ago they knew this behavior was intolerable and they would never have behaved in the way I’m describing. However, they are resilient as I’ve said. They are survivors. They know how to adapt. The current atmosphere is survival of the fittest. Therefore, they will adapt and do what’s necessary to survive and fit in. Many of them try so hard to ignore this behavior, but why should they have to? It’s wrong. So many of our kids are so frustrated when their peers behave this way and wish they would stop because they want to learn. But unfortunately, the consequences are almost nonexistent and instead of being supported, teachers are blamed. Therefore, many teachers have come to accept this behavior and are afraid to report incidents for fear they will be blamed as having bad classroom management. That’s another one of our CEOs justifications for his so called “Code of conduct” not working. What can we as educators do? Thanks to HB70 we only have one person to appeal to and he is the one that created the problem. Hear me clearly, changing the CEOs name will not fix this problem.

Finally, let me say this. When HB70 first came into reality I was hopeful that we would be able to survive and come out the other side. I tried to tell new teachers who were struggling to implement a non-existent reading program and control constant classroom disruptions, that this isn’t Youngstown. To hang in there, we’ll survive this and come back to the school district I love, a district that provides a safe place for children to learn, a place where teachers love their job and feel supported by their coaches and administrators. Now I see a place where new teachers are leaving at the end of every school year, with or without other employment. Some even leave mid-year because they don’t feel like they can do it another day. Under the conditions created by HB70, I can no longer, in good conscience, try to talk them out of this decision.

I’m begging all legislators to please repeal House Bill 70. We have to regain **local control** and allow for quality, experienced educators to take over a role of leadership. We have to respect our educators and understand they are truly the ones working the hardest for our kids. We have to allow them to again collaborate through committees, such as our former Curriculum Instruction Committee, so we are truly working in a collaborative atmosphere to benefit our children. We have to understand our children are living in poverty and listen to the countless research studies that demonstrate that children living in poverty will struggle on high stake tests. We have to try to provide support for our kids and families living in poverty, as was the original intent of HB70, and return control of the district to local leaders who understand what our kids are up against and are invested in our schools and community. We have to support educators and quit basing half of their evaluations on test scores that are affected by factors in our children’s lives that we cannot control. Strong teachers who are dedicated to working in some of the most difficult situations, whether it be special education populations, English Language Learners, or children living in the highest areas of poverty should not be punished with an unfair teacher evaluation system, but should be supported.

So what do we do with school districts such as Youngstown, with its high number of children living in poverty and its effect on education? I would have to reiterate what John Jackson, executive director of the Schott Foundation for Public Education, reported as he traveled across the globe and spoke to education leaders in some of the highest performing schools. When asked the question: “What do you do when a school is struggling? What do you do when a school seems to be failing?” Everywhere the same response is repeated, “We support them. We help them improve. We send in whatever they need.”

When asked, “What do you do if you help them, and they don’t get better?”

The response was always the same, “We help them more.”

I’m asking for you to help **us** by repealing House Bill 70, returning control to **local leaders** and returning to the original intent of this bill, through the expansion of wrap-around services, within the school, for our children and their families. Please support us. Please help us.