Committee Chair Lehner and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Neal Whitman, and I’m a member of the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education. In April, our Board unanimously adopted a resolution calling for an end to takeovers of local school districts by unelected commissions or managers. When one such repeal, HB 154, was passed by the Ohio House, and subsequently integrated into the biennial budget bill, HB 166, this was an encouraging step in the right direction. Another one would have been to see the Ohio Senate pass this bill, or a similar one.

However, the Senate Education Committee is now considering exactly the opposite. The so-called “Ohio School Transformation Plan” doubles down on the mistakes of the original school takeover bill from 2015, and adds a new one.

The first mistake that was repeated was the creation of the plan in private. Unlike the plan proposed in HB 154, which was public since at least early April, the current plan came to light in late May, and even then only by way of a leaked document.

The second repeated mistake was an insistence on the state as the final authority on how a local district in distress should be run. Lip service is paid to getting support from local stakeholders, but ultimately, the state has authority to make changes if it is not satisfied with the results.

The additional mistake is to add a new layer of bureaucracy to the outside control. Now, instead of an appointed academic distress committee, there will be an appointed “school improvement commission” for each affected district, plus a state-level, governor-appointed School Transformation Board. Each of these entities will have the power to overrule decisions made by the locally elected boards of education, including their choice of superintendent.

We, the Reynoldsburg City Schools Board of Education, urge the Senate Education Committee to reject this renamed school takeover plan, and as we stated in our resolution, to replace it “with a model that provides constitutional funding and restores local control.”