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Lorain City Schools**



**Proponent Testimony Regarding Amended SB 358**  
Senate Education Committee – December 1, 2020

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Chairwoman Lehner, members of the committee, my name is Jeff Graham and I am the CEO of the Lorain City Schools - a district that has been under academic oversight for nearly a decade. I want to thank you for allowing me to give testimony today which supports the inclusion of legislative language that restores control of the school district to the duly elected members of the Lorain City School District.

Emerging from the control of the Academic Distress Commission does not mean that our activities will be free from oversight. We will have to comply with all of the laws, regulations and policies that govern other Ohio school districts. Senate Bill 358 will enable our district to survive the impact of the pandemic. We need community buy-in by our parents, teachers and community. Adherence to the temporary policies during the pandemic are crucial. Compliance is the key to limiting the negative effects of the virus upon our students. All decisions promoting academic and public health standards need community support to be successful.

I stood in front of you a year ago as the superintendent of the Canton City Schools, a district on the path of receiving an Academic Distress Commission designation. During my comments, I stressed the need for community buy-in and local support in the creation and sustained implementation of the strategic plan required to turn around a struggling school district. . With the community's support, we successfully passed a necessary bond levy to give the district the financial support necessary to implement an improvement plan.

I have been blessed to have served in a variety of school districts as an educational leader - some wealthy, some poor, some very diverse, some less so — but in each district we implemented a plan with our community that resulted in academic growth and the financial support needed to sustain that momentum.

When reviewing the research, it isn't hard to find examples of successful state takeovers. However, it appears that success is only occurring in districts where the community embraced the process. I can assure you that's not what happened in Lorain.

Instead, this is our reality:

Our community doesn't trust immediate past decisions we've made, because we aren't bound to local oversight nor held accountable by local representatives.

Without local oversight, our community has no confidence in how their tax dollars are being spent. 100% of the families in the Lorain City Schools live in poverty — and every cent of their tax dollars is precious to them.

When families lose trust in their schools, they vote with their feet and leave. Prior to receiving an ADC appointed CEO, enrollment was relatively stable. However, since that time, we've lost more than 10% of our student body.

Internally, the state takeover has created a culture of instability and uncertainty that has become increasingly disruptive. There has been tremendous turnover in both district and building leadership, and with that type of uncertainty comes turmoil.

As you can imagine, under these circumstances, it becomes incredibly difficult to attract and retain talented — not to mention qualified — staff.

In one of countless examples, the district lost its treasurer because he couldn't support the lack of checks and balances that existed in the district. He had no functional control over the budget. While the position was posted for an extended period of time, not one person applied with the proper licensure.

I am here today to be part of the solution. I truly believe that student success needs legislative attention.

However, we also need local control and involvement. Only through empowering our board of education to provide oversight and accountability can we restore trust in our schools and in our community. In our district, as in most places, we need our community and our local leaders to march with us, as together, we roll up our sleeves and focus on meeting the needs of the children of Lorain.

In conclusion, we are laying the necessary ground work for a successful academic improvement plan for Lorain City schools, but without community support, the execution of the plan will be doomed to failure.

It is for this reason that I support the language in SB 358 which would allow Lorain City Schools to emerge from an Academic Distress designation.

Thank you for allowing me to submit my testimony, I would be happy to take any questions.