

May 15, 2019

**Testimony on H.B. 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021  
Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education**

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Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, and members of the subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about H.B. 166 today.

My name is Trent Kaufman, and I represent Ed Direction, a national school improvement firm. I began my career as a teacher and then a principal before earning my Ed.D. at Harvard University. I lead a team of fellow former teachers and administrators, and we work side-by-side with educators in low performing schools across the country. My team and I have helped transform hundreds of schools into places where all students, no matter their background, can learn and succeed.

The unfortunate reality is that too many students in Ohio today sit in schools each day where we know they're unlikely to be successful. The question before you now is what role the legislature should play in solving this problem. When faced with this question 4 years ago, you opted to intervene by changing the governance structure of your lowest performing districts. As you consider your next steps, I urge you to pause and think about *why* schools underperform.

The theory of action behind creating an Academic Distress Commission is that schools are unsuccessful because they are mismanaged; if the state can put the right group of people at the helm, they'll be able to turn the district around. This theory falls short on two fronts – 1) it's too extreme, valuing the state's point of view over stakeholder input, and 2) it solves the wrong problem. If district governance was the most important driver of school performance, student outcomes within a district would be far more uniform than we see today. Some of the best schools in the country coexist in districts with schools that chronically underperform – why?

In my experience, the overwhelming reason that schools underperform is that the adults in building – teachers and leaders – aren't meeting their students' needs. That's not because they don't want to, or because they're inherently incapable. The vast majority of teachers in these schools are hard-working and dedicated to helping their students gain access to opportunity. I know from firsthand experience that meeting all students' needs is an incredibly difficult task, particularly if those students come to you with persistent knowledge and skill gaps; many schools simply haven't figured out how to do so systematically and sustainably.

With that in mind, I propose the following 3 principles to guide your thinking as you craft the right solution for Ohio:

**1. Leverage outside expertise**

There are school improvement experts – people who know what it takes to transform a school, and who have done it before – all across the country and right here in Ohio. Ed Direction is only one of many such skilled organizations; find them, and empower them to support your lowest performing schools. They will provide a much-needed fresh perspective, and their vantage point

as outsiders will give them a different type of leverage to disrupt the status quo than someone from the state or district might have.

**2. Ensure educators receive intensive support**

Research shows that traditional professional development, where teachers sit and listen to information about new strategies, technologies, or instructional models, has little to no impact on student learning. Instead, educators need frequent, intensive coaching that includes consistent support, follow up, and accountability for implementing new strategies. Expert coaches can help teachers and leaders understand how to apply best practices to their specific context and hone their skills over time. This type of coaching helps teachers see the value in change and ensures buy-in for, and ultimately sustainability of, long-term goals.

**3. Plan for shared accountability**

If the state is going to spend taxpayer dollars to hire private sector experts, they'd better get the job done. Ensure that outside providers are held financially accountable by tying a portion of their fees to measurable school improvement, and I guarantee those experts will work tirelessly to get the job done.

Some will suggest that the key problem with the Academic Distress Commission model is state overreach. A logical solution to that problem is one that focuses on local control. One such proposal is for the state to simply solicit and approve locally created improvement plans and periodically monitor progress. If Distress Commissions put too much emphasis on accountability, however, I would argue that this model doesn't hold schools accountable enough. More importantly, this strategy – letting schools create their own plans, with no requirement for how to do it or support to make it happen – has been tried plenty of times, most notably through federal School Improvement Grants (SIG). The results? \$7 billion wasted with, on average, no change in student outcomes.

Instead, Ohio should pair local buy-in, through a stakeholder-generated plan for improvement, with a state-funded and vetted influx of intensive, expert support. This model is based on components of successful school improvement initiatives across the country, and was implemented most recently in Utah, where 92% of identified schools saw significant growth in just two years. This type of rapid improvement is nearly unheard of in education, and it's exactly the type of improvement that Ohio's students deserve.

I want to close by thanking you for your thorough approach to tackling this incredibly challenging problem, and by urging you to include these evidence-based principles for school improvement in your ultimate solution.