

Testimony Before the Ohio Senate Finance Primary and Secondary Subcommittee on House Bill 166
Dr. Mary Rice, Board Member, East Cleveland Board of Education
May 16, 2019

Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the subcommittee, my name is Dr. Mary Rice and I serve as an elected Board Member of the East Cleveland 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.

Before being elected to the Board, 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 understand of our community, and I have a lot of love for our community.

For the purpose of background, the city of East Cleveland comprises about three and a half miles wedged between Cleveland and Cleveland Heights, with a population of approximately 17,187 that has steadily been declining. One study has declared that East Cleveland is the poorest city in the state of Ohio, and the fourth poorest in the country. The population of 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, 97.4% are considered economically disadvantaged. In spite of these challenges, the Board and the District strive to educate its 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 directly aligns with the Ohio Department of Education recent guidance, and the District

was one of the first to implement it. In fact, the Board has taken every effort to follow the recommendations by the Department of Education to improve. Because we have been closely aligning our plan and improvement with the Department's recommendations, I find it alarming and disingenuous that the State took control away from the Board and instead 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.

I want everyone to know 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. And when it comes to the State's ability to take over a school and disrupt those pivotal services we provide, the report card is all that matters to the State.

East Cleveland is more than its overall grade. Details matter. Isn't that what the Department has been explaining since the new report card was released? That the report card tells a story that's more than just the overall grade assigned? And the details of East Cleveland's report card support the fact that

the District has improved. Last year, five of our six schools received overall grades of “C” or “D”. The Board is not content with its current scores, but it knows that improvement takes time.

Improvement certainly takes more time than three years, especially under a report card that was in flux during that 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. The state has transitioned through three testing providers in the last six years. The overall report card grade was delayed—supposedly because school districts and students needed more time to adjust. With students Statewide struggling to perform well on tests, the legislature had to address alternative pathways to graduation. And the legislature created Safe Harbor. Safe Harbor protected students from being penalized for lower performance on state assessments during that transition. Safe Harbor also prohibited the Department of Education from issuing overall grades to Districts for the 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017 report cards. Safe Harbor was supposed to protect school districts. And yet, inexplicably, the ODE was permitted to use Value Added and Performance Index measures during the Safe Harbor years as a basis to take over schools. Value Added and Performance Index are based on those same flawed state assessments that triggered the need for Safe Harbor in the first place. So in reality, the school districts the most in need of protection, like East Cleveland, were not actually afforded Safe Harbor.

It is against this backdrop of statewide upheaval that the District received notice from ODE 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 that 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. To me, this was an attempt to disenfranchise members of our community and to avoid their input. These actions shut off the free flow of discourse that is common among 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. But the way we help them is not by taking away their voices and the voices of their community. It is by providing them with good resources, with better opportunities, with a supportive and engaged community. We achieve this not through ADC takeover, but through community-based systems like those proposed by House Bill 166.

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.