

**Testimony on House Bill 166 –
Operating Budget
Before the Senate Finance Primary & Secondary Education Subcommittee
By Susie Kaeser
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Chairman Terher, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, I am Susie Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist on Education Policy and a long-time citizen advocate for public education. Like the vote, public education that is free and available to all, makes all of us equal members of our society. Public education is democratic and essential to our democracy.

I approach education policy from the perspective of an interested community member who believes in the community's responsibility for ensuring that their public schools serve all children. I have been a tutor and volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School in Cleveland Heights since my oldest daughter entered kindergarten in 1988. I spent 10 years on staff of the Citizens Council for Ohio Schools before founding and directing Reaching Heights, a small nonprofit organization that mobilizes the residents of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district as a resource for highly valued and successful public schools. I am grateful that the LWVO is a strong advocate for public education, an essential resource for an informed electorate.

I appreciate the opportunity to share with you League of Women Voters Ohio concerns about Academic Distress Commissions, and to support the dissolution of existing commissions and the end of creating new ones as proposed in HB166.

Our concern stems from our commitment to democratic governance, and to meaningful problem solving. We believe Academic Distress Commissions fail on both counts.

The League supports the constitutionally established governance of local school districts by locally elected boards of education.

Because the community is the beneficiary of our system of common schools, the community has a strong vested interest in the success of this resource. Furthermore, it is at the local level that student needs are best understood and met; where performance in its broadest and wholistic sense is best monitored, witnessed and evaluated; and where the interest and concerns of the community can be marshalled to support children and help an institution

respond. When the community pulls together, it can make the daily life for children and their teachers better.

Schools are responsive to the care and concern of their community. They are also deeply affected by blunt policy directives, like high-stakes testing, or a change in governance. The response rarely improves the dynamics within the school community or the success of its students. They tend to cripple the power of local players to provide the encouragement and engagement that matters. Experience so far indicates that the heavy-handed imposition of a new governance structure interrupts community involvement, and stimulates resistance. It should not be surprising that it doesn't yield positive results.

Public education is a shared responsibility of local communities and state government. However, the Academic Distress Commissions are not a good way to share this responsibility. The League supports the dissolution of distress commissions and an end to this kind of intervention by state government for several reasons.

Academic Distress Commissions are undemocratic. The governance of Ohio's public schools is the responsibility of the democratically elected board of education that is accountable to local voters. The administrative branch has a regulatory role. The appointment of an Academic Distress Commission by the State Superintendent, both ends local accountability and is a misuse of the authority and function of the administrative branch of state government.

Appointed district administrators are unaccountable. The Academic Distress Commission law calls for that appointed commission to appoint a CEO to operate the district. The CEO appears to have nearly free reign, and no accountability to voters and tax payers. In a state that demands accountability, this is a serious blind spot.

Using the report card to identify failed systems discriminates against high-poverty school districts, and it unfairly burdens those communities with a loss of local control. For decades student test scores, the primary ingredient in Ohio's accountability system, have been known to be highly correlated to the poverty level of the population that is being tested. Making a decision about governance based on test scores is a misuse of standardized tests, and it discriminates against poor children. Governance by an unwelcomed, unaccountable, and typically unsuccessful CEO, is having a disproportionate effect on high-poverty school districts including the 10 districts slated for takeover. It's important to end a policy that both ignores the effect of inequality on test performance, and fosters inequality in local control.

Finally, this is the wrong remedy. The needs of high-poverty school districts are not a function of governance. Labeling districts failures erodes public confidence and the desire to engage.

Seizing control without addressing the underlying cause of test scores, does not improve education. A much more robust approach to nurturing public confidence and student success is needed.

HB 154 focuses on mobilizing the local community to support education as it takes place at the school level. This is a good start. It inspires local engagement, and fosters both local control and local problem solving. If supported by flexible resources, and minimal outside interference – it can inspire useful solutions.

Thank you for considering these ideas as you make important decisions that will affect education opportunity in our state.

Respectfully,

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