

Thank you Chair Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor and Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education members for giving me the opportunity today to provide testimony in support of Academic Distress Commissions.

My name is Maria Hoffmaster, I am a former administrator and teacher for Youngstown City Schools. I currently serve as a Special Education and School Improvement Consultant with the State Support Team Region 5. I was also appointed to the Youngstown City Schools Academic Distress Commission (ADC) about one year ago. Because of my role on the Youngstown ADC, I have a vested interest in any legislation that would alter school turnaround efforts in Ohio. I am also someone who personally knows and respects many of those involved in the Youngstown improvement efforts regardless of their political views.

Although there has been much controversy surrounding House Bill 70, I think we all agree that every student in Ohio deserves access to the best possible education. That's why I am asking this body to maintain the current ADC structure and allow Youngstown to continue on the path of progress that began this past school year.

There are two reasons why it's critical for Ohio to maintain its ADC mechanism. First, HB 70 brings much needed accountability pressure to persistently underperforming districts. The state has an obligation to taxpayers and families to step in when academic progress has been lacking for an extended period of time. Prior to its ADC designation, Youngstown had academically struggled for decades. When I was a classroom teacher in the district, many were often discouraged and frustrated by the lack of urgency and consistency of programs. There seemed to be very few sustained, consistent efforts when it came to improving academic achievement.

HB 70, however, changed all that. Under the control of an ADC, Youngstown has been forced to confront its weak spots and work to improve them. For example, districts under ADC control are required to create a strategic plan. Progress toward implementing this plan is evaluated at the district and state level. Initial reviews of Youngstown's implementation of its strategic plan indicated that elementary building level teams were not developing improvement plans that properly identified how schools would make individualized efforts to raise student achievement. This was a serious problem, since the entire point of an ADC is to improve student achievement. In response to the findings, the ADC required the district to provide professional development and support to elementary building leadership teams. Based on follow-up interviews and document reviews, school leadership teams were able to use the quantitative and qualitative data generated from these work sessions to begin development of meaningful school improvement plans.

Similar efforts have been made in regard to professional development for teachers. For the past five years, Youngstown teachers lacked guidance on how to deconstruct standards, use curriculum pacing guides, and create balanced assessments. Despite the fact that this knowledge is a critical part of quality instruction, it wasn't until Youngstown was placed under an ADC, and state review teams began identifying and sharing areas for growth, that the district began to improve curriculum support for teachers. Now, there are ADC work sessions and meetings focused entirely on curriculum, instruction, and assessments. There's still plenty of work to be done, of course, but Youngstown is in a much better place than it was before.

This brings us to the second reason why it's critical for the state to maintain ADCs: To protect the progress that's already been made. It's true that state report cards haven't shown much growth. But that's not because things haven't improved—it's because real, sustainable, and meaningful change takes time. It's undeniable that Youngstown schools are better off now, after a few years under an ADC, than they were previously. For instance, consider the financial health of the district. Initial reviews of the district's monthly financial support revealed deficit spending of the general fund budget. But after the intervention of the ADC, the district began to reduce spending and offer ongoing trainings and meetings. Now, the district has an on-track five-year forecast for the current year and a positive cash balance for the next four years.

But that's not the only way the district has improved. Within the past year, considerable progress has been made regarding our Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). When PBIS is not implemented in a systematic way, inappropriate behaviors actually increase instead of decrease. In Youngstown, school leaders have been very specific about implementing PBIS properly. We've been using a measurement tool called TFI to evaluate how well buildings are implementing the PBIS framework, and the results have been positive. I'm more than happy to share additional data if you'd like it. I'm also very excited about the literacy initiatives that we're currently in the midst of planning for next year.

Historically, the district has had a revolving door of external vendors, products and programs. It has been a merry-go-round of initiatives. The consistent mantra has been "this too shall pass" as each leader has brought his or her own agenda. We know the silver bullet does not exist. True improvement occurs by staying the course. The ADC can support the continuation of progress and sustain the positive changes that are in process.

The Youngstown ADC also recently hired a new CEO, Justin Jennings. Mr. Jennings was hired after an extensive CEO search that was conducted by the ADC in collaboration with two Youngstown City School Board members. This collaboration demonstrates that it's possible for the ADC and the local school board to work together. It is also a clear indication that our ADC-run district is headed in the right direction. With the right leaders at the table, steady progress will continue to be made—and students will continue to benefit.

I am hopeful that, in light of this progress, our local school board, officials from the Ohio Department of Education, and leaders from the General Assembly can work together to decide how to move forward with the best interest of the children in Youngstown at heart. As a school improvement consultant, I believe it would be unwise to abolish ADCs entirely. A complete "repeal and replace" approach for ADCs would be counterproductive and detrimental to the work that has already been accomplished. I urge you to consider alternative options.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Dr. Maria A. Hoffmaster