

OHIO SENATE
FINANCE COMMITTEE
Testimony on
Academic Distress Commissions
&
Graduation Requirements
By
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Committee Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and members:

I am the vice president of the Canton City School District Board of Education and its Legislative Liaison.

I am here today to talk about two elements that have made their way -- or seem to, as there is confusion and conflicting news reports -- into the state budget, H.B. 166.

It is my hope that this committee will consider your responsibility to backstop some of these nostrums pushed by special interests in other committees, in support of making this budget bill the best it can be.

I am not known for subtlety at this point of a critical process, and I am not going to disappoint you now. We're looking to you for leadership, and hope you don't disappoint, either. As a Board of Education member, I am concerned about the future of my school district and the education of our students. I am not concerned about the future employment prospects of lame duck senators or the bottom lines of consultants looking for education contracts.

There is much for public school districts to be concerned about in this budget. I will focus on two -- Academic Distress Commissions and Graduation Requirements.

Graduation Requirements is easy, so let's go there first.

The Instructional Leadership of this state has testified before the Education Committee that the recommendations presented by the State Board of Education should be ratified. Those recommendations were carefully crafted by a wide reaching, thoughtful group of instructional leaders, including the instructional leadership of the Canton City School District.

Imagine our surprise to learn on May 22, a couple of hours before budget amendments were due, that the Senate Education Committee would be considering a new proposal put together by a narrow group of special interests.

Well, it happened, and it happened in exactly that way. In the hearing it was announced by a senator that the proposal being heard (known as the "Joint Ohio Excels, Alliance for High Quality Education and Fordham Graduation Requirements Proposal) "will be the only proposal that makes its way into the budget."

Now, as a school board member I don't need to know every dot and comma in either proposal, and neither do you as senators.

What we need to know is that the proposal was constructed with integrity by a wide range of stakeholders, and has the confidence of those we trust to serve their students with fidelity.

In other words, exactly what the “Joint” proposal is not, which is why it has no business in the state budget and should be rejected out of hand. We’re not in a hurry.

About 6 years ago the general assembly thought it knew better than instructional experts and it listened to special interests, and it screwed up the course competency requirements for Ohio graduates. And low and behold, about 30 percent of Ohio’s high school seniors were adversely affected.

Each year, you have had to pass emergency band-aids to fix the crisis your predecessors caused by not listening, and so Ohio’s graduation rate wouldn’t dip 30 percent more, and tens of thousands of high school students wouldn’t be harmed for life.

Wasn’t that mistake enough for you to learn a lesson?

Ohio used to rank in the top third of states in academic performance and educational attainment. We have now dropped to the bottom third by all published measures, and the drop has occurred over the last 20 years – exactly the 20 year period where the general assembly has become more partisan and more intrusive in the setting of education policy.

You would expect school districts to evaluate our performance and learn things based on data. What’s the lesson you should be learning from that data?

Now I will shift gears to Academic Distress Commissions, which is the matter that is an existential threat to my school district and immediately about a dozen more.

Again, the Ohio general assembly does not seem to learn from data.

State takeovers of school districts has been pushed by ideological anti-public education interests for about 15 years, and in no state where they have been deployed, have they been successful at improving struggling schools. Nowhere.

Let me repeat that another way:

State takeover of public school districts has not improved academic performance anywhere it has been tried. Anywhere! And yes, there is enough data over enough time to clearly see the folly in this philosophy.

And Ohio is one of the worst!

Because of a power grab by your predecessors in 2015, done under the cover of darkness and opacity, three public school districts in Ohio – Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland – have been completely wrecked, maybe for generations.

State takeover of school districts does not work, has not worked anywhere, and will not work, no matter what you call it.

State takeover of public school districts is also:

- Taxation without representation
- Conflict of interest
- Harmful to communities
- Discriminatory against high poverty school districts

The ills you are trying to “fix” with state takeover are not being addressed by you in this budget or anywhere else, and we need to talk about that, too.

The report card, which again was created by the general assembly and special interests against the judgement of instructional experts, (see a pattern here?) is an invalid measurement, and you all admit it candidly. You know that report card is a measure of poverty, and that it is discriminatory. The system is rigged.

It is also at the core of the problem you call “failing” schools. We call them challenged due to poverty and the stacked deck created by an invalid report card.

But you’re not doing anything about that!

Instead, we have more secret meetings with some of the same narrow special interests that gave us the sham of H.B. 70, and drafts of plans not supposed to be leaked that call for “alternative routes to state takeover,” but again, don’t address what we really need to educate challenging populations.

That you are even considering, and that President Obhof has told reporters that “amendments [that include some state takeover scheme] are coming” is another abomination, and Ohio’s school communities are counting on you, Finance Committee, to stop it.

Ohio’s school funding formula is still unconstitutional, too, and still un-addressed in this budget bill.

How sad.

That members of the general assembly accuse school board members of being incapable of solving problems is really rich!

H. B. 154 as reported by the House is acceptable as long as you put a period after it.

That this body is even considering state takeover schemes by other names and other means is disturbing, and more legislative malpractice that is harming school districts.

We need you, Finance Committee, to stop it, and stop it now.

It is not acceptable for this body to be considering harmful state takeover schemes, and the fact that you can’t just accept H.B. 154 as reported by the House is proof positive that too many senators in high places with the wrong motives are not ready to walk away from a really bad idea, even when all the evidence is screaming that you need to.

My colleagues on school boards around this state are capable, and more importantly, we’re accountable. We run for election and re-election in non-gerrymandered districts and at-large in our community.

You do not know better than we do how to represent the communities in which we live, and the disaster your predecessors created in Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland should be enough to cause this committee to stand up, and to right the wrong once and for all.


Again, we’re counting on you, the Finance Committee, to do the right thing.

We need:

- The elimination of Academic Distress Commissions and no creation of anything that approximates Academic Distress Commissions anywhere in the state of Ohio.

- For the state of Ohio to make Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland whole again, and cause no harm anywhere else.
- Local control of local school districts, through elected school boards of education.
- Ohio's report card to be reformed so it can be made valid, and is no longer discriminatory against high poverty districts.
- Ohio's school funding model to be, for once, Constitutional.
- Graduation requirements that reflect the recommendations of Ohio's educators.

I will gladly answer questions.



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