

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of House Bill (HB) 200. I am Dr. Reva Cosby, Superintendent of Trotwood Madison City Schools. I am testifying today in support of HB 200.

Trotwood-Madison is a rural, urban district. It is predominantly African American and the vast majority of our students come from households of poverty. Our level of poverty is such that all of our students are eligible for free meals. We are a midsize school district with approximately 2800 students.

For a district like mine, the current report card sets us on a journey to continually finding ourselves at the bottom of the education totem pole, where we were literally a few years ago. I know you are aware that the level of poverty in a district currently dictates your standing on the rank order of districts. There are statistics that prove it to be true. As a superintendent of a district with great families, students, teachers and staff members and a board that has been designated as a high performing board, why am I not optimistic enough to say we have all of the ingredients to make us successful? Well to be honest, I do say that, I want to believe it, our students and community deserve it, just as much as any other community does. So, what makes us different?

The impact that poverty has on a community is the primary reason. Poverty impacts our students' ability to be their best selves (physically, academically and emotionally). It impacts the ability of a district to attract the most highly qualified teachers and to keep those who choose to initially come to this district for a myriad of reasons. I will share with you how poverty has impacted my district over the years and how a more equitable way to assess districts can help districts like mine have a true opportunity to find success for each student.

To be totally transparent, there are families in Trotwood that are middle class. There are parents who make a great living and who have chosen to move to or stay in Trotwood because of what our district has to offer their children. These families show the potential that we have for all of the students of Trotwood.

That being shared, the majority of Trotwood families do live in poverty. Many students arrive at school well below the level of the students who arrive in financially secure districts. Our Kindergarten Readiness Scores prove that to be true. My Kindergarten teachers get students who have health care issues and emotional issues. Their skills are not where they need to be to learn the necessary information to move on to the next grade. The majority of these students have parents who may have had bad experiences in school themselves, who did not complete high school and who have trouble retaining work. They may have a mistrust of the educational system, particularly if they feel they were mistreated. As superintendent of another high poverty district, I had a mother come to see me about a situation with her child. She did not trust the teachers, social worker or administrators in our meeting. She told me that she was a special education student and no one cared about her or thought she could learn. She believed that all educators felt that way about her and her children. Because of her beliefs, she constantly berated

the staff and accused them of hating her children. It took a lot of work to build trust with this parent and that is just one of many situations that we deal with daily.

Our students are generally taken care of by relatives or daycare centers that do not know expectations of kindergarten and do not have the capacity to do more than keep the students safe. I am sharing this because when our students come to school significantly behind their peers from more affluent districts it is unrealistic to compare them the way the current state report card does.

The elementary teachers spend the first year with their students trying to get them as Kindergarten ready as possible during their Kindergarten year. The students go home to an environment that may be harsh and lead to a fear that manifests itself in school by students being disinterested or acting out in class, making it more difficult for teachers to teach them or their classmates. I do believe all students can learn. It just takes some of them longer to catch up and to gain the skills necessary to become the successful students we know that they can be.

For the students to achieve to their highest potential, particularly coming from high poverty districts, it takes time, a dedicated staff and lots of resources, such as social workers, more individual teacher time and training for their parents or guardians to carry over the lessons learned at school. We generally are able to hire high quality teachers, but some of them come to us because they want to get their school loans repaid after working in our district for five years. Many of them leave after their loan is paid. We do have teachers who choose to stay because they feel this is their calling and helping our children succeed is what they really want to do. Teachers are like all professionals, they have pride and want to be successful at what they do. When your district is rated as a D or F school year after year, it becomes hard to stay because you are perceived by others in our field as a “bad” teacher. We see our teachers leave for high socio-economic districts and they magically become “good” teachers because their district has an A or B rating. The teachers who do stay need Professional Development to learn how to work with students with the high needs that our students bring to school.

When a tornado strikes a high poverty district it can take years to rebuild the community. Trotwood had this happen. We have students who are still homeless, some living in other school districts and/or doubled upped with other families. The families don't always have insurance so for many they will not return to their own homes. For those that do it is hard to get repair companies to come to work in our area. Many of our families fell victim to scams so they are not in safe homes. Add to that COVID and we will struggle in a more severe way than districts where students have parents who can stay home with them as needed. Many of our parents are essential workers who had to leave their children unattended or in situations where they were taken care of but not learning. Our students all have computers now, but unlike wealthy districts, this is new for most of our students. They are having a huge learning curve on computers to add to their other academic struggles. Our community is also a food desert. Health care is a serious issue and we all know it is difficult to focus on education when you are hungry and don't feel well or safe.

So how does this connect with HB 200? Something as insignificant to many of you as using a different way to assess our districts other than A-F system can have a positive impact on a

district like Trotwood. By using six designations that give credit for the hard work that our teachers and other staff are doing in our district, HB 200 would give us the opportunity to retain our staff and develop pride in what we do and who we are. We could possibly have a chance to get businesses to choose Trotwood as a place to locate, giving our families the opportunity to make a living wage. Our families might not be so eager to take their students out of our district.

The use of six designations also takes away the ability to assign A-F to the assessment. A-F is not as telling as most people seem to think. They have no idea what is scored to get those letters. As Legislators, you don't seem to understand why it is not as simple as it appears. Even in regular classes, if we reflect on our own educational experiences we would realize that teachers can grade the same paper and come up with a grade range of A-D depending on what the teacher was looking for. The state report card is the same way. They are comparing apples to oranges in the first place, and all of the things I have mentioned in this testimony show why we are working as hard if not harder, than other districts to get our students back on track for success. The report card should document and highlight this work. I believe HB 200 is a positive step forward in doing that. We know we are helping kids. We know our kids are as smart as any others. We also know it takes a lot to get them caught up and then to get them to believe they can be successful when everything around them says they can't, including a state-issued, state-supported report that tells them their district is one of the worse in the state. Charter schools are not the answer for our students. They are not able to provide our students with experiences and opportunities that public schools can provide. Private schools do not want our typical students and they don't have to take them. They siphon off the students who could improve our state report card scores, which shows how tenuous those letter grades are. Parents seek these other options, that we know don't offer what we do and don't have the same the requirements that we do, because they believe any option is better than a D-F district. This of course, is generally not the case. When a student does not do well in a private school they are put out and they return to our school, now even more defeated, and it now becomes our job to pick up the pieces and get them back on track. The current report card system is unfair. HB 200 answers many of these concerns by giving all districts the opportunity to highlight the hard work we are doing to provide the best education to all of our students, regardless of the issues they come to school with.

For more information on the impact of poverty please read the following article:

Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children Julia B. Isaacs, Brookings Institution March 2012.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as a proponent of HB 200. I am glad to answer your questions.