

## Proponent Testimony Regarding SB 165 Senate Education Committee — May 11, 2021

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing members of the committee, good afternoon. My name is Jeff Graham and I am the CEO and superintendent of the Lorain City Schools - a district that has been under academic oversight for nearly a decade. I want to thank you for allowing me to give Proponent testimony today on SB 165 which provides an avenue to restore control of the school district to the duly elected members of the Lorain City School District.

I provided testimony to you a year ago as the superintendent of the Canton City Schools, a district on the path of receiving an Academic Distress Commission designation. In my comments, I stressed the need for community buy-in and local support in the creation and sustained implementation of the strategic plan required to turn around a struggling school district.

Since that time, we along with every other school district around the world, have struggled with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. That being said, the struggles related to HB 70 of the 131st General Assembly may still be the biggest long term threat to our community.

The Academic Distress Commissions created by HB 70 create major challenges in establishing healthy, trusting relationships with our stakeholder groups. It's critical we address the disconnect we have with our community that exists because of our current governing structure - especially as we consider the academic aftermath that exists as a result of the pandemic.

However, I want to be clear that as a school district, we have underperformed for many decades and I'm not here to make excuses. We know we need to get better and we know that improving student achievement will not occur until we change our adult behavior. We have a solid plan to do exactly that and we have the people in place to execute that plan.

I have been blessed to have served in a variety of school districts as an educational leader - some wealthy, some poor, some very diverse, some less so — but in each district we implemented a plan with our community that resulted in academic growth and the financial support needed to get the work done.

I share that to say this, we know what it takes to turn a school district around because we've done it before. It takes the entire community being on the same page and working together. It takes healthy relationships. It takes trust.

In this community — here in Lorain — this means empowering our board of education to provide oversight and accountability. I've been a superintendent in four different districts spanning almost 20 years. Without hesitation, I can tell you that the members of the Lorain Board of Education are serving for the right reasons. They are true community leaders, people of integrity and trusted by those they serve to represent us.

Simply put, we need your help to restore the checks and balances that can only exist with local control because without it, our lift becomes exponentially more challenging.

This is our reality:

Our community doesn't trust past decisions we've made, because we aren't bound to local oversight or held accountable by local representatives.

Without local oversight, our community has no confidence in how their tax dollars are being spent. Nearly, 100% of the families in the Lorain City Schools live in poverty — and every cent of their tax dollars is precious to them.

Internally, the consequences of HB 70 have created a culture of instability and uncertainty that has become increasingly disruptive. This has resulted in tremendous turnover in both district and building leadership, and with that type of uncertainty, comes turmoil.

As you can imagine, under these circumstances, it becomes incredibly difficult to attract and retain talented — not to mention qualified — staff.

In one of countless examples, the district lost its treasurer because he couldn't support the lack of checks and balances that existed in the district. He had no functional control over the budget. While the position was posted for an extended period of time, not one licensed treasurer applied for the job.

When families lose trust in their schools, they vote with their feet and leave. Prior to receiving an ADC appointed CEO, enrollment was relatively stable in the district for about 10 years. However, since that time, we've lost more than 10% of our student body.

It's important to understand that statistically speaking, the children who left to avoid this chaos have parents who, as the result of their circumstances and means, are able to be engaged in their child's education. Again, statistically speaking, and for the same reasons, those tend to be the same students who tend to be stronger academically and score higher on state tests.

Therefore, in addition to losing our higher performing students, we lost the state funds we once received for those students. To put that in perspective, we have less money to educate a significantly higher percentage of students who struggle academically.

In conclusion, it is only through empowering our board of education to provide oversight and accountability that we can restore community trust in our schools. In our district, as in most places, we need our community, our families and our local leaders to collectively and collaboratively focus on and join us in meeting the needs of the children of Lorain.

We have laid the necessary ground work for a successful academic improvement, but without community buy-in and support, the execution of the plan will be exponentially and unnecessarily more difficult.

I've been championing this cause since becoming the CEO of the Lorain City Schools almost a year ago. So, as I'm sure you can imagine, I've been asked many times, what's in it for me to restore local control? The short answer is, I will lose about \$40,000/ year and a lot of authority — but for all the reasons I've outlined, this is not how healthy organizations operate, and we have a lot of work to do.

Thank you for allowing me to submit my testimony, I would be happy to take any questions.