



**Representative Lauren McNally**  
**59<sup>th</sup> House District**

Good afternoon, Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for allowing myself and my joint sponsor Representative Juanita Brent an opportunity to share details about House Bill 387, legislation eliminating references to Academic Distress Commissions in Ohio Revised Code.

Some version of this concept has been either introduced or passed going all the way back to the controversial creation of Academic Distress Commissions in 2015, during the 131st General Assembly. Calls to end Academic Distress Commissions in Ohio have been made by several champions of all political stripes, including members serving on this committee: Chair Manning and Representatives Jones and Miller for example.

As the state Representative for Ohio's 59th district, which includes Youngstown City School District, I am now carrying the torch of some of the boldest critics Academic Distress Commissions have ever seen: Representative Michele Lepore-Hagan and Senator Joe Schiavoni. In 2015, they served in the 131st General Assembly as part of the Youngstown delegation when Youngstown schools became the first victim of ADCs and state takeovers. I am here to remind our state government that Youngstown did not forget. We are still, very fiercely, calling on the state to put an end to ADCs.

Let's go through a little history since the majority of us who are in this room were not here during the 131st G.A.

In 2015, a 67-page amendment was drafted in secret to House Bill 70 and passed in less than 24 hours. HB 70, originally meant to provide wrap-around services for students, was dramatically changed with these 67 pages, which created the criteria for imposing Academic Distress Commissions based on a flawed state report card system that the state has since abandoned.

The amendment language removed local control of the Youngstown City School District and forced a state takeover of the school.

As the bill laid out, instead of supplementing the diminished resources that resulted from population and tax decline in the region, the actual root causes of the academic strain, lawmakers instead took power away from the school board and installed a CEO and Academic Distress Commission. HB 70 also removed any mechanism for taxpayer accountability in the management of the District.

The state took a page out of the “big government” book and said we couldn’t be trusted in Youngstown to make our own decisions. The state said they were going to decide for us. So, the state put in place a CEO, appointed members to the ADC, and empowered them. They were now in charge of all decisions, education or otherwise, in the district. The state seriously flexed its big government muscles and said we’ll take control. We will be able to do it better than you. We know what’s best for you.

But they didn’t.

They failed. Because of them, Youngstown saw an already troubling school system run further into the ground. In almost every category of academic performance, Youngstown City School District scored lower under the ADC and CEO model, than they performed in the years prior to the state takeover.

K-12 enrollment and the average years in staff teaching experience dropped. Programs and academic support resources were cut. There was no transparency in the spending of public dollars, and, unlike a duly elected school board, there was no way to hold the ADC and CEO decision makers accountable. We were stuck with them and their poor leadership.

Over the course of eight years, YCSD saw two CEOs fail to improve academic standards or teacher turnover. Former YCSD CEO, Justin Jennings, left our district with nearly \$8 million in wasted spending and a U.S. Department of Education investigation. As recently as last year, our schools were being raided by the FBI in direct response to this mismanagement by the CEO.

And I am not done.

The ADC experiment is the gift that keeps giving. You know what else it gave to Youngstown City Schools? A teachers strike. The longest teachers strike the state has seen in 20 years. In the summer of 2023, YCSD’s teachers began a strike that delayed the start of the school year and lasted 25 days, finally ending on September 17, 2023. The main reason for it was confusion about who and how teachers and administrators could negotiate contracts under the existing ADC law language.

Where was the state during all of this?

I don't know. They didn't do an audit of Youngstown School operations despite being asked by my predecessor numerous times. They didn't clear up the confusing language so that teachers and administrators could get back to the negotiating table. I don't know if anyone in this room kept a pulse on these kids or even knew about the FBI raids. I know the Governor didn't step in. Everyone at the state just let this political experiment continue in our neighborhoods and let our kids continue to be their test subjects.

There is no one, not anyone, who can or even tries to say with an honest face that this state takeover made things better. Not in Youngstown, not anywhere. So, I ask the question - what was the goal of the ADC model? If it truly was to improve academics in Youngstown, we have the proof that it failed. And when your experiment fails, you're supposed to clean up the mess, release your lab rats and go home.

The ADC model is a complete failure, a failure that this body has acknowledged in its own part by stopping it from spreading to your communities.

For some reason, we gave up on Youngstown, East Cleveland, and Lorain, the three school districts forced into this state-run CEO model. But other districts had report card scores that threatened their inclusion in this experiment. The following school districts were a heartbeat away: Dayton, Columbus, Canton, Mansfield, Lima, Toledo, Ashtabula, Euclid, North College Hill, and Painesville schools. The next report card was likely going to be the one altering their school boards and administrators.

Rather than see these districts succumb to similar fates, though, this General Assembly, the one we are a part of right now, finally acknowledged this failure and the risks it posed to other districts and our state. We passed moratoriums to prevent more schools from falling victim to the ADC and CEO state takeover.

As for the districts already under state control, they would not be so lucky. They were not let go. Instead, the state gave them this fake way to get out of ADC. Make a three-year Academic Improvement Plan, achieve your benchmarks, and we will consider letting you have control again.

This G.A. acknowledged that isn't the right path forward when it let one school district off the Academic Improvement Plan hook completely. In our most recently passed budget, we gave Lorain a pass on the implementation of this plan. Unlike Youngstown and East Cleveland, Lorain no longer needs to sit and wait three years for the next educational experiment pilot. Lorain gets to wash their hands of it, but we don't.

As lawmakers we have made several value statements about this state takeover of public schools: it doesn't work, no other school should be victimized by it, and the schools in it should be released. We are overthinking about why the kids in Youngstown and East Cleveland should be treated differently and forced to keep living like lab rats in an experiment that has been abandoned. Just let them go and be done with it already.

I mentioned this in the beginning: all of these bills that have come before this one, trying to do the same thing this one is doing in ending ADCs, all had bipartisan support. Ours does, too. To support the end of Academic Distress Commissions in Ohio is not controversial. We've already decided that as a legislative body. All that HB 387 is asking of you is to give the children of Youngstown and East Cleveland the same respect and opportunity that literally all other schools in the State of Ohio have been shown.

HB 387 is simple: it removes any hint of Academic Distress Commissions in Ohio law. No mention, no confusion, no nothing to do with ADCs. Our legislation is a clean slate, restoring Youngstown and East Cleveland to the status of every other public school system in Ohio while ensuring no other district will ever again experience this experimental model in the future. We are getting rid of the slightest utterance of this stupid mistake that cost our kids greatly.

Academic Distress Commissions don't work, they've never worked, and it's time to abandon the moratoriums, the academic improvement plans, and clean up our laws to get our schools back on track. It's time to create a learning environment that empowers teachers and local communities, who proved most especially during the pandemic that they are best able to quickly respond to the urgent needs of our kids. It's far past time we indefinitely restore local control to these communities, whose taxpayers can hold elected leaders accountable when their needs go unmet.

Finally ridding our code and our state of this absurdity is the assurance these children and communities need. It is the step forward these children deserve. We must empower local administrators and staff who prove, time and again, that local control is best for our kids.

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify. I'm proud to turn it over to my joint sponsor State Representative Juanita Brent.