



December 10, 2024
Senate Education Committee
Opposition Testimony on SB 295
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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony opposing SB 295. The Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT) represents teachers in traditional and charter schools, support staff, higher education faculty and staff, library employees, and social workers.

SB 295 will mandate the closure or restructuring of schools every year. Despite these far-reaching impacts, this bill language has only been public for one week, preventing full and accurate vetting and making it hard for parents, students, educators, taxpayers, and other stakeholders to participate in the hearing process.

We should be skeptical of attempts to address school accountability by removing control from locally elected school boards. HB 70, passed by the 131st General Assembly, set up Academic Distress Commissions for struggling school districts. These commissions stripped local control away from voters and taxpayers and failed to improve the target school districts, leading to bipartisan support for a moratorium on ADCs and a full repeal of HB 70. Let's not repeat this mistake.

Because the requirements for closure or restructuring are based upon bottom percentages, there will always be schools that meet the criteria, even if those schools are meeting state standards. As low performing schools are closed, other schools that are higher ranked will now be in the bottom 5% even if they show no decline in their own rating. This cut-off is arbitrary and its potential effect is that eventually well-performing schools will also be subject to closure.

Additionally, most of the alternatives to closing a school that are mentioned in this bill are simply not feasible. One option allows a school to avoid closure if they replace the principal and the majority of licensed staff. Where will these replacement educators come from? There is already a shortage of teachers and other licensed personnel in schools and positions in low performing schools are especially hard to fill. This will also create a further disincentive for teachers to teach in challenging schools.

Another option allows the school to transfer operations to an Educational Service Center, a private college, or a state institution of higher education. None of these entities have experience operating K-12 schools and there is no existing framework for how they would do this.

The bill also allows a district to transfer operations to another school district. This would disenfranchise parents, stripping them of their ability to run for school board and vote in school

board elections for the district that is operating their child's school. This is an insult to democracy and local control of schools.

These poorly thought out options are evidence that this bill needs more vetting and a full, open public participation process to avoid unwanted impacts.

We agree with the intent behind this legislation. Every child in Ohio deserves the opportunity to attend a high quality local public school, and we should constantly be looking for ways to improve and transform low performing schools. However, a punitive approach with an arbitrary requirement will not yield the results that our students deserve.

A thorough discussion on improving low performing schools would require that alternative approaches be considered. One approach, the Community Learning Center model, utilizes community partners to help address the obstacles that prevent students from succeeding at school. Different communities have different needs for wraparound support services, this could include medical, mental, and nutrition health services, mentoring and youth development programs, and broadband connectivity and other technical assistance.

Pump the brakes on this bill for the current legislative session. Its potential to disrupt education for thousands of families necessitates that it be given full hearings with robust public participation.