



Thank you, Chair Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson and House Education Committee members for giving me the opportunity today to provide testimony in opposition to House Bill 154.

My name is Chad Aldis, and I am the Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C.

Every student deserves to have access to a high quality school. Schools that struggle over time are harmful to students, families, and communities. The districts currently under the auspices of an academic distress commission (ADC) have struggled with both academic proficiency and student growth year after year. Too many students will be leaving those districts unprepared for either college or the workplace.

The state has an obligation to step in when students aren't being served well. That's why ADCs were created in the first place. But the good intentions behind ADCs shouldn't discount their very real problems. This body should be commended for carefully considering how to address the flaws in the current model. But House Bill 154 is not the best path forward for a state that must balance local control and transparency with accountability and intervention.

Although it purports to return control to local communities, this bill exchanges one state mandate for another. Instead of releasing control back to local leaders to select a leader who can partner with the community to craft an innovative improvement plan, HB 154 appears to push all low performing districts to implement a single reform—the community learning center model.

Under current law, adopting the community learning center model is voluntary. A school district must decide that a community learning center is what's best for its students and then actively pursue implementation. This includes a public vote in which a certain percentage of parents, guardians, and school staff must be in favor of transitioning to the model, and the improvement plan created as part of the transition process must also be submitted to parents and guardians for their approval. Under HB 154, districts are required to use a community learning center model.

Furthermore, there isn't strong evidence that the community learning model leads to significantly improved academic achievement and growth. Although there are a few schools in Ohio who have put this model in place, their improvements also appears to be limited. This isn't to say that community learning centers aren't beneficial—wraparound services can be extremely helpful for students and families. But districts that are academically underperforming need to make academic changes, too.

Of course, leaving the current ADC mechanism untouched isn't the answer either. We believe the best path forward is to pass Senator Manning's Senate Bill 110 and apply it to current and new academic distress commissions statewide. SB 110 addresses some of the underlying issues of the current ADC model without imposing a single reform strategy (like a community learning model) on the district. Struggling districts would still have a strong impetus to improve, but state intervention would be more transparent and more open to local feedback and input.

Chad L. Aldis  
Thomas B. Fordham Institute  
House Bill 154 Testimony

\*\*\*

The next three paragraphs provide a description of the improvements made by SB 110 if you're interested in how it tackles key academic distress commission challenges.

For example, under current law, an ADC is made up of five members: three who are appointed by the state superintendent, one who is appointed by the president of the district's board of education, and one who is appointed by the mayor. This means the majority of ADC members are appointed by a state official instead of a local one. Senate Bill 110 would shift one of the state superintendent's appointees to the mayor, thereby making the majority of the commission's members local appointees. That is a significant change, since ADC members are responsible for appointing the district's CEO.

The bill also increases accountability and transparency provisions related to the CEO. For instance, it requires the ADC to conduct an annual performance evaluation of the CEO and submit it to the district board. Although the district board has no power to reward, discipline, or dismiss the CEO, an annual evaluation is an important transparency measure. The bill also requires the CEO to appear before the district board to make a quarterly report on the progress being made by the district—an important change, since district board meetings are open to the public.

SB 110 also requires more engagement from the state auditor and Ohio Department of Education. Under current law, ODE can choose to conduct a "site evaluation" of a building or district. The bill would instead require the department to conduct a site visit each year in Lorain—an important change given that successful turnaround efforts in other states have mandated similar oversight and engagement. Meanwhile, the state auditor would be required to conduct annual performance audits for the district, providing independent, third party help that would improve ADC performance and efficiency.

\*\*\*

Improving low performing schools is hard work. But it's not impossible. In New Orleans, school turnaround efforts have led to an increase in student achievement, high school graduation, college attendance, and college graduation. In Massachusetts, evaluation by Harvard researchers has shown strong academic gains for students attending Lawrence School District, the first Massachusetts district to go into state receivership.

House Bill 154 deserves credit for digging into the question of how to turn around a struggling school district. But if Ohio wants to follow in the footsteps of successful turnaround efforts in other states, it needs to do the work to find a balance between local control, strong accountability, and transparency. This can only be done by keeping its options open and allowing for solutions to vary by community.

Thank for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 154. I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have.