

Testimony on House Bill 154
Dissolve Stress Commissions
Before the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
The Honorable Louis Blessing III, Chair
By Susan Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist
April 8, 2019

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Jones, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee: I am Susan Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist on Education Policy. I have been a tutor and volunteer at Boulevard Elementary school in Cleveland Heights since 1988, and have served as the Executive Director of Teaching Heights, an organization that mobilizes community to support schools. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you the concerns of the League of Women Voters Ohio about Academic Distress Commissions created to govern school districts that are low performing on the State Report Card.

This testimony is offered in support of HB 154, which would dissolve existing commissions and takes a school-based approach to trying to improve student educational outcomes. It is also relevant to and supports HB 127, which we have also submitted testimony on.

The League of Women Voters Ohio is a strong supporter of public education. Our advocacy for public education began in the 1930s. Good governance is core issue for the League, and this includes governance of our public schools. The League supports Ohio's approach to governing our system of common schools: the locally elected school board is constitutionally established to provide oversight and direction to the education system in each district.

This approach to governance makes sense. Public schools are the centerpiece of community life, and can be a unifying force in the community they serve. Because the community is the beneficiary of our system of common schools, the community has a strong vested interest in the success of this resource. Furthermore, it is at the local level that student needs are best understood and met; where performance in its broadest and wholistic sense is best monitored, witnessed, and evaluated; and where the interest and concerns of the community can be marshalled to support children and help an institution respond.

It is important to also consider schools as unique human communities. A key element to both student and adult motivation and engagement within a school is relationships. They are the starting point for learning. Trust nurtures success. Interventions that support relationships and trust, and build on them, are the interventions that yield benefits. This dynamic helps explain why parent and community involvement make such a difference to children and their teachers.

When the community pulls together, it can make the daily life for children and their teachers better.

Experience so far indicates that the heavy-handed imposition of a new governance structure interrupts community involvement and does not yield positive results. Schools are negatively affected by blunt policy directives, like high-stakes testing or a change in governance. The response rarely improves the dynamics within the school community or the success of its students. They tend to cripple the power of local players to provide the encouragement that matters.

Public education is a shared responsibility of local communities and state government. However, the Academic Distress Commissions are not a good way to share this responsibility. The League supports HB 154 because:

Academic Distress Commissions are undemocratic. The governance of Ohio's public schools is the responsibility of the democratically elected board of education. Takeover by the State Department of Education is outside the purview of the administrative branch of our state government.

Appointed district administrators are unaccountable. The academic distress commission appointed CEO appears to have nearly free reign, and no accountability to voters and tax payers. In a state that demands accountability, this is a serious blind spot.

Using the report card to identify failed systems discriminates against high-poverty school districts and unfairly burdens those communities with a loss of local control. For decades student test scores, the primary ingredient in Ohio's accountability system, have been known to be highly correlated to the poverty level of the population that is being tested and the education level of parents. State takeover based on tests is skewed against high poverty districts. The loss of local control and the replacement by an unwelcomed, unaccountable and typically unsuccessful CEO, is having a disproportionate effect on high-poverty school districts including the 10 districts slated for takeover. It's important to end a policy that fosters inequality.

Public schools need engaged public support. HB 154 focuses on mobilizing resources to support education as it takes place at the school level. This holds much greater promise for building on the assets of children, parents, educators, and the community that can actually make a positive difference for all of us.

Thank you for considering these ideas as you make important decisions that will affect education opportunity in our state.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.