



**Testimony to the House Primary Secondary Education Committee**

**House Bill 577 <> December 8, 2020**

**Representative Mary Lightbody, Ph.D., Representative Joe Miller**

Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Ohio House Primary Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide joint sponsor testimony on House Bill 577. Unfortunately my joint sponsor could not be here today, so this testimony is a collaborative effort on behalf of Representative Lightbody and myself.

On behalf of my district and those under state control, we are here to express our concern and disapproval of the unjust Academic Distress Commission Model that has evidently failed for years. House Bill 70 was an un-vetted, untested experiment that has left our parents, teachers, administrators, and taxpayers angry that our democratically elected school board members, or any oversight body for that matter, are unable to hold the state-appointed CEO accountable.

Like my joint sponsor and fellow educator, we have spent our entire careers as educators in public schools and I now would like to share her testimony of growing up in the Cleveland area. Rep Lightbody graduated from Orange High School where her mother served as a member of the Orange School Board for four consecutive terms.

She states, “At every election for school board members there were numerous debates and strong voter turnout and involvement. My mother spent countless hours meeting with community members, and always received the most votes of any school board member. She listened to the concerns of parents and those who had no children in the schools, and worked with the administration and teachers to address those concerns. She talked to teachers and visited classrooms. She helped bring in a dynamic new superintendent who hired a balanced mix of outstanding both early career and seasoned teachers. Her dedication and hours of constituent service were impressive, and the inside information she had as a teacher herself helped her and the other board members collaborate to provide an excellent education to the children in the district, ensure the schools were in good repair, and work with community members to pass operating levies and bonds to build new buildings. School boards across Ohio provide the same oversight and control, and have functioned well for decades.”

We are bringing HB577 to your attention today because we want Ohio schools across the state to provide quality education to all students, and yet also recognize the total decline of the school districts which were taken over through Academic Distress Commissions. We have a proposal that will allow us to return control of those school districts gradually, and with oversight to elected school board members and the administrators they in turn, hire. The proposal will allow communities to once again have school boards that operate through an efficient, cost effective, and democratic structure, providing the continuity of leadership, accountability of the elected officials, and local control that is missing with ADCs.

HB577 would create a School Transformation Board (STB), a nine-member board responsible for overseeing actions related to school district academic performance improvement. The Board would prepare a report with its recommendations for replacing ADCs and on improving principal and teacher preparation programs, and require that report be submitted to the General Assembly by January 30, 2022. No new Academic Distress Commissions would be created until that report has been submitted, which will allow districts that have high-need students and lower performing schools, time to work under new report card guidelines. We acknowledge that the current report card system to evaluate the effectiveness of the education provided by school districts across the state is highly flawed and is being reviewed. The disruptions to education in the midst of this pandemic have exacerbated the problems and further revealed additional inequities between school districts across Ohio, especially in Lorain.

The current system for evaluating the effectiveness of schools discriminates against school districts that serve populations with high poverty rates. Teaching in schools with these statistics is very challenging. The middle school in Columbus where Rep. Lightbody started her teaching career had fully 98% of the students on free and reduced lunch, for example. While she had articulate and creative students in her 8<sup>th</sup> grade science classes, they were unable to read at grade level, and had high absentee and mobility rates. Some years, she started with 185 students in six class periods, but only a handful completed the entire school year with her.

Under the previous bill, it was understood that Columbus City Schools would be included in the next round of districts placed under academic distress. A new superintendent had been hired, and she would need time to make a difference, ADC's were not working well and teachers, students, parents, and community members in those districts were asking for help and relief.

Given that student test scores are highly correlated to socioeconomic factors like wealth and education level of parents, ADC's really have just increased the degree of differential treatment between poor and wealthy districts. ADC's have not worked, given what has occurred in Lorain, East Cleveland, and Youngstown. Academic Distress Commissions have not been helpful in improving these districts, nor the outcomes for the students they serve. HB577 would provide a plan through which we can return all school districts under Academic Distress Commissions to the control of local school boards, and the Ohio Department of Education. It would continue a process through which the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio School Board review the ongoing school improvement process and repeal some obsolete provisions.

When school districts like Lorain are torn apart by a corrupt, state-appointed CEO, it's our kids who suffer the consequences. When Columbus labels our teachers and administrators as failures for not being able to solve problems that we all know extend well beyond the classroom, it's our schools that lose out.

I am here before you, because this issue and the Ohioans it affects, do NOT deserve to be disenfranchised, dismissed and deliberately neglected under the failed ADC model. I have no problem using lame duck as a time to undo HB 70 as this bad legislation was crammed through the General Assembly in the middle of the night before summer break 5 years ago.

Chairman Jones, thank you for the opportunity to present this bill for consideration. I would be glad to answer any questions at this time.