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Testimony on Academic Distress Commissions, Stephanie Eichenberg, Toledo Public Schools Board of Education

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the Academic Distress Commission proposals being considered for inclusion in Am. Sub. House Bill (HB) 166. I am Stephanie Eichenberg, President of the Toledo Public Schools Board of Education.

I speak to you from a district that has increased graduation rates since 2014, from 64% to 79% overall, from 60% to 80% for African-American students, from 59% to 77% for economically disadvantaged students and from 54% to 70% for students with disabilities. Our voters see a district where we have improved 3rd grade promotion rates from 71.9% to 85% since 2015. In that same time, we have increased enrollment in TPS schools by over 1,700 students. From the 2016-2018 academic years with the same testing environments students increased proficiency in 21 of 24 test grades and subjects.

We at Toledo Public Schools have worked productively between our Board, our Administration and our bargaining units on innovation and additional supports that lift-up our students. We implemented freshman clusters to add an additional layer of support for 9th grade students, at the most critical time of risk in their high school career. We opened the Aerospace and Natural Science Academy of Toledo, where we graduate both licensed airplane mechanics and urban agriculturalists who become a part of Toledo's growing food production industry. This year we re-invented two elementary STEM schools where we previously had struggling neighborhood schools, better serving the same students with a new curriculum and reimagined spaces. We re-structured our gender separate high school academy as a School of Business.

We have 32 separate Career Tech pathways leading to an over 90% graduation rate, and our AP and CCP enrollment has more than doubled over the past four years, while we implemented new gifted programming in 4th-7th grades, increasing in scope each of the past 3 years.

Just last month, we announced Toledo SMART Academy charter school will close and become a bilingual school within Toledo Public Schools. To emphasize, the board of a local charter school that is considered high performing by the state has opted to close as a growth strategy, so the District can support their students and staff and their inventive curriculum.

We've done this despite having over 2,700 homeless students and 86% of our students on free or reduced lunch. Our community recognizes our accomplishments and approved our last two levies at over 68%. Yet according to the state report card Toledo Public Schools is a failing district, potentially subject to an Academic Distress Commission.

I recently shared this information with the House Education Committee as I testified as a proponent for HB 154, and I was encouraged both by that committee's discussion of HB 154 and the questions they asked of those who testified. Today, though, I speak to you from a place of anger. I generally don't like to bring anger to a discussion as it's not productive, but I believe an exception is called for. Just this Saturday I read for the first time, like many interested parties, a report called the Ohio School Transformation Plan. I object to the emphasis on root cause analysis and reliance on consultants. The seemingly open-ended ability for the state to strip a district of local control based on state discretion is a particularly disturbing element. I also noticed that in no place was there a question as to whether existing metrics are telling the story of our local districts accurately.

In my private life I am a 24-year veteran of corporate America, working in the Market Research Industry, where I work with demographics, data and their interaction. I first worked on root cause analysis 20 years ago. It seems almost preposterous to me that this report discussed root cause so extensively but did not mention the possibility of the root cause being the one thing struggling districts really cannot control, which is the poverty level of our students. Citing poverty is not a reflexive or defensive mechanism on my part. The causes of absenteeism in our district are related to a lack of housing stability; low extracurricular engagement is related to a lack of non-essential transportation for students; failing grades in all levels of our schools are often related to a lack of quality meals due to food insecurity; and our high school students lack sleep in part because they are working and desperately need the funds to support their family. The true root cause behind all these things is undeniably poverty or near poverty conditions. I wonder then, is looking at root cause a commitment from the State to wage a full-scale war on poverty? If not, I think more care should be used with phrase root cause.

Ironically, I first learned about root cause analysis while working for a client who repeatedly told my company our survey data was not accurately measuring their market. They had us manipulate the data into a place where it told the story they felt was accurate. This was my first lesson in how a data model can be controlled to such a degree that it tells the wrong story. The company in that case declared bankruptcy in 2012, due to misreading the market in their heavily weighted data. I've looked at our state report card and the models underneath it. There are notable places where the measurements are skewed, with a value-add calculation that is supposed to be based on a normal curve yet results in a measure that is a near total inversion of a normal curve at a district level. Further, the Third Grade Reading Guarantee criteria bounces around year to year and points to the state test not being consistent in its measurement over successive years, which essentially renders the cut scores illegitimate. I'm taken aback that Ohio is still willing to base policy on these measures.

Finally, as a corporate veteran I am quite familiar with working with consultants. I find it problematic that this report focused so heavily on the use of consultants, but some work group members are themselves education consultants. Quick math indicates these provisions would net education consultants in Ohio millions of dollars in new business. Consultants certainly have their place, and we have used them successfully in our strategic planning in our district, however in a school district as in

the business world, engagement with a consultant needs to be authentic and driven by the people who know the situation or in this case school best. Whether you call it technical assistance or guidance, forced consultation results in the same type of eye rolling and lack of engagement that prevents true collaboration as has been seen under current Academic Distress Commissions.

I became a school board member in part because I was tired of hearing that schools should be run like businesses. Very few businesses have a 13-year production cycle, and metrics are measures intended for production not for people. Let's not forget students are people, including public school students. In 18 years as a hiring manager I never once looked at applicant test scores, instead I looked for critical thinking, communication skills and creativity. None of this is easily measured by tests.

If you hear from organizations purporting to represent business interests in education and they promote the idea that businesses want students tested or that test scores should be a foundation for school reform, they do not represent me as a businesswoman. I don't believe they represent the many local business partners in our district. These partners look for students with specific career tech skill sets, along with a sense of responsibility and good communication skills. No standardized test can measure these desirable employee qualities, and yet these tests are used to measure the success of our districts.

I urge the Senate to support the language around Academic Distress Commissions contained in Am. Sub. HB 166, rather than adopting the state takeover-via-consultant measure as described in the Ohio School Transformation Plan, and I urge you to further collaborate with ODE, SAS and the State School Board to finally fix the grade card.

