



Testimony on Academic Distress Commissions,
Chris Varwig, 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 Chris Varwig, a Member of the Toledo Public Schools Board of Education.

As a member of the Toledo Public Schools Board of Education, I am in favor of House Bill (HB) 154 and in support of those provisions added to the House-passed version of the biennial budget bill (Amended Substitute HB 166). You will hear/have heard district statistics, opportunities and successes today from my colleague, Stephanie Eichenberg, as well as the challenges our students and district face. The data presented today shows how we are succeeding even in the face of insurmountable challenges, sadly some brought on by our own state government.

While running for a second term for the TPS Board of Education, I had the great fortune to meet with my city's Chamber of Commerce to obtain their endorsement. Topics discussed during that meeting were the flawed State Report Card, the state's failure to properly fund our public schools, and HB 70's Academic Distress Commission. While we had a lively discussion, the questions I had for the chamber of commerce, and I propose to each of you here today..... Why do we think high stakes testing is beneficial? When has the state report card ever benefitted our community? And what do you think an Academic Distress Commission's economic impact would be on our city? It was important that my Chamber of Commerce heard those questions, so they may begin questioning the intent behind the Academic Distress Commissions. By the way, I was proud to receive their endorsement.

So, I ask you.... what has the economic impact been on the cities where the Academic Distress Commission has taken over? Would you move to that community? Or start a business there? Or, how about this question...would you send your children to one of the public schools in that district? Take a moment and think about how the average person in those communities would answer those questions. I urge you to consider the negative implications on those communities where schools have been taken over by the state. Please ask those communities about the impact. Maybe it's naive of me to think that our state government should be here to help our local school districts... not penalize them.

As an example of economic impact in Toledo, Toledo Public Schools not only works with our Port Authority on economic development zones, but we also believe our Aerospace and Natural Science Academy of Toledo has the potential to be an economic driver for our local airport, as well as urban agriculture in our region. Our ANSAT graduates have the potential to begin their work lives making \$50,000 via airline partners. That is true economic impact.

Another example: Toledo Public Schools partnered with the Dana Corporation by allowing access to one of our high schools, so the company could interview applicants for its new facility that was being built in one of our impoverished neighborhoods. Many of those applicants were from that neighborhood including parents of our students. That's economic impact. And by the way, Dana Corp. has sponsored one of our high school Robotics teams; our district works with our business community, we have great relationships that continue to grow and are a benefit for our students.



Testimony on Academic Distress Commissions,
Chris Varwig, Toledo Public Schools Board of Education.

The opposite approach to HB 154 is this Ohio Transformation Plan: An Alternative to the Academic Distress Commission that was created by a select group of individuals; I didn't see teachers, parents or students on the list which is certainly problematic. I'd like to address a few concerns I have.

- 1) Lack of local control, a recurring theme in this Plan...creates a Transformation for Student Success Board that does not include a current sitting, locally elected school board member, and it answers only to the Governor.
- 2) My Grandfather always taught me to follow the money....my question then is who stands to benefit from this Plan? Consultants?
- 3) According to the Plan, root cause analysis is mentioned and stressed throughout the document. What happens when it is determined that the lack of progress in areas is due to language in collective bargaining agreements? Is the transformation team going to address those issues? Short-term MOUs, long term solutions by changes in an actual CBA? How will this get done outside of negotiations?
- 4) According to the Plan - It appears that the State Superintendent has control over whether a district remains within the ADC. So, one person gets to dictate? Again, no local control.
- 5) District Superintendent - according to the Plan, districts in substantial or intensive supports, the district must get approval from the State Superintendent to hire a new superintendent when the job is vacant. So, yet again, no local control.
- 6) Those are just a few observations I have of this Plan. I have many more, as I'm sure districts and their locally elected school board members do, or will once they even find out about this Plan.

I'm here because Toledo Public Schools is on the "list" of districts to be taken over by my state. And, I'm angry. I love my city, my schools, my community. I've volunteered for over 20 years in my district, a graduate of my district, sent my child to my district's public schools, continue to pay taxes for my local public-school district because the state does not adequately fund our schools, and even became an elected school board member to help our district. And, I'm here to remind my State Senators that the public wants you to support your local schools not take them over.

HB 154 provides our state the opportunity to do the right thing. This is your chance to make a difference in communities across Ohio by abolishing the Academic Distress Commissions, that penalize school districts struggling under socio and economic issues. Some challenges beyond our control. We need to maintain local control. We need to be able to do our part to improve our community. As a locally elected public-school board, our focus is on student-centered decision making. And because of that, I urge a YES vote on HB 154.

Thank you.