



Testimony on Academic Distress Commissions,  
Chris Varwig, Toledo Public Schools Board of Education.  
June 12, 2019

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.

Public Education is the cornerstone of our democracy. We as Ohioans should cradle it, support it, love it, and protect it.

**As a member of the Toledo Public Schools Board of Education, I am in favor of keeping House Bill (HB) 154 in the budget bill (Amended Substitute HB 166) and NOT including the proposal distributed by Senator Lehner's office.**

The last time I spoke to the Committee, I spoke of our district's connection with our business community; the relationships we currently have with local businesses and how we are creating partnerships that benefit our students. By now, you've received several written pieces of testimony from our business community in support of our district, the abolishment of Academic Distress Committees, and maintaining the taxpayer's voice via local control. I'd like to thank our Toledo Chamber of Commerce, ProMedica, Toledo Community Foundation, Tom Brady – founder of Plastic Technologies, Inc. and 5 other PTI companies based in Ohio and Europe, PNC, Doni Miller – CEO of the Neighborhood Health Association, Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz and Councilwoman Dr. Cecilia Adams and the list goes on for sending in written testimony. I'm sure the Committee will receive additional letters soon.

Years ago, high stakes testing was mandated to public school districts by ODE with the blessing of our then Governor Kasich and then came the Report Card fiasco. I say that because the report card needs fixed. It does not tell the true picture of public-school districts especially in communities with generational poverty, lack of opportunities, inadequate healthcare, homelessness, food insecurity, etc. Test scores don't mean a thing to families suffering from any or all of the issues I mentioned. Public Schools are often the one place children receive resources they so desperately need.

From the high stakes testing to the flawed Report Card to penalizing districts with a state take-over Academic Distress Commission, what are we doing to our Ohio communities? Stop penalizing public schools, help them instead. Please focus on wrap around services and PreK initiatives, and additional professional development for our teachers and principals that are in the trenches day in and day out.

We don't need the state to take our district over. We are making progress, as a matter of fact Toledo Public Schools should be the poster child for public school progress in Ohio. Our graduation rate alone has increased by

- 15% over the last 4 years for all students
- 20% for African American students
- 18% for economically disadvantaged students
- 16% for students with disabilities.

We have created a Partners with Purpose initiative where we have over 40 plus organizations that work directly with our students that must go through training with the district and we measure outcomes from those organizations. And we aren't called Holy Toledo for nothing, we have partnered with over 40 churches in our community where members volunteer in our schools.



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The opposite approach to HB 154 is this Ohio Transformation Plan: An Alternative to the Academic Distress Commission, the Plan that's not a Plan that's now a Plan.... 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) My Grandfather always taught me to follow the money....my question then is who stands to benefit from this Plan? Consultants? Because I don't see a benefit to school districts.
- 2) 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?

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'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 our taxpayer voice. 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.