

Senate Education Committee
Regarding Academic Stress Commission
Interested Party Testimony
September 10, 2019

Chair Lehner , Vice-Chair Terhar and members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Dr. Matthew Petersen, a life-long educator, and current owner of Forager Learning & Design, which works around the country in the K-12 education space to support organizations to achieve breakthrough outcomes for schools and the students they support. I am a proud graduate of Berkshire Local Schools in Geauga County, received a bachelor's and masters from The Ohio State University, and recently received a doctorate from Harvard Graduate School of Education focusing my studies on K-12 educational leadership, innovation, and program design. With the exception of my doctoral studies, I have lived my entire life in the state of Ohio, and have worked in Ohio schools for the majority of my 22 year educational career.

I'm honored to provide testimony on HB 70 and am encouraged at the thoughtful, practical, and practitioner centered approaches that are being discussed to provide a path forward for the Ohio students and schools that are situated furthest from educational opportunity.

Social impact researchers place challenges in society into three broad categories: simple, complicated, and complex. Simple challenges can be solved through quick, universal and repeatable changes, and in fact are generally solved by individuals on their own. Complicated challenges require more careful implementation, collaboration and planning, but, they too can be solved with the

right set of circumstances and procedures (healthcare has many examples of this). Complex challenges, like those of turning around a failing school or underperforming school district, almost never have a universal or repeatable procedure, and no two successful school or district turnaround experiences will ever be the same.

While well-intended, the original version of HB 70 provided a *simple challenge approach* to a *complex challenge task*. A universal approach for changing the leadership and governance structure may be necessary for some schools or school districts, BUT it will likely be insufficient to achieving the long-lasting, sustainable changes that lead to thriving students and schools.

When approaching a complex challenge like our state faces (and that you and other policymakers are hoping to address), it is best to learn from those who have been successful in these types of endeavors.

There are schools, school districts, and organizations that have made dramatic improvements over time. While each school and school district has its own story, history, strengths, weaknesses and needs, there are certain elements that are essential to successful transformations, and I'd like to take a few moments to capture each of them. In essence, transforming failing schools or school districts requires:

1. **Systematic Reflection:** A systematic and honest accounting of the outcomes being produced, and a deep dive analysis into the root causes of what is driving the data.
2. **A Collaborative Plan:** A collaboratively developed plan, informed by the analysis of these causes, which includes both

a realistic implementation timeline and outlines the internal measures for success.

3. **An Attitude of Partnership.** In successful turnarounds, all involved parties feel accountable to the outcomes and, more importantly, feel comfortable asking for and giving the support needed to achieve success.

Systematic Reflection on Root Causes

To begin, every successful turnaround comes from an honest accounting of the “state of the school.” While the school report card provides some indication of outcomes that need improvement, fully understanding and reflecting on the policies, practices, and programs that are driving these outcomes is an important next step. Without defining the root causes of the inequities present, school districts or schools may come up with short term or band-aid solutions that fail to address the full scope of the turnaround challenge, with the result that teachers and other key leaders burn themselves out or, even worse, perpetuate inequities that already exist. This intentional and systematic reflection should involve a focus on all aspects of the work: leadership, governance, curriculum, instruction, finances, operations, community involvement, culture & climate, school and district policies, to name a few. With this full accounting, and a deep understanding of the many areas that they have the ability to change, districts and schools can begin to act with urgency and agency.

A Collaborative Plan

Secondly, successful turnarounds always include **a plan for moving ahead.** After taking full stock of a school district or school’s “current state,” it is important to be explicit about the plan

ahead and what success will look like as a plan is being implemented. The strongest plans are developed with broad stakeholder involvement, and they are informed by the best of what is already happening with students. In my experience, the specific strategies/tactics in a school's transformation plan require the full alignment, commitment and accountability of community stakeholders. These elements emerge when a plan is comprehensive and comprehensible. A good plan addresses all areas, so that everyone can "see themselves in it," and can fully understand what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like to implement and be successful in a new educational reality.

Partnership as an attitude

Lastly, many parties are involved in turning around schools. There are schools and communities, county supports, state agencies, technical assistance experts, partners, and a host of others all hoping to dramatically change the outcomes for impacted students who are situated furthest from educational opportunity. In a successful turnaround, all stakeholders work in partnership with each other, facing the challenges together, grounding their relationships in honesty and trust, supporting the risks, and engaging in the public learning and freedom of choice that are necessary for breakthrough changes to occur. The partnership will require striking a delicate balance of local and state control, internal and external accountability, and constant communication between stakeholders. WHEN partnership is not the attitude and WHEN the delicate balance of collaboration is thrown off, THEN fear, blaming and mistrust begin to take over. The result: essential and positive outcomes for teachers and students fail to materialize.

I applaud the emerging themes I am hearing as new ideas for addressing Ohio's failing schools are being discussed. They include

honest and deep reflection, the development of a collaborative plan, and a spirit of true partnership between state and local authorities.

I am encouraged by this movement toward understanding the complexity of the school turnaround challenge and am hopeful that this will create the conditions for more of our students in Ohio's most underperforming schools to succeed and achieve to their full potential. Ohio students need this to occur for their personal success; the state needs for this to occur to ensure the workforce vitality that we all want for our next generation of high school graduates.