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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 proposed Senate amendment to the Academic Distress Commission proposals in Substitute House Bill (HB) 154. I am Stephanie Eichenberg, President of the Toledo Public Schools Board of Education.

My primary concern with Substitute House Bill 154 is the continued reliance on the Ohio School Report card as the triggering mechanism, when the report card itself has some deficiencies. As codified in the budget, changes may be recommended for the report card on December 15, 2019. Should there be action on any recommendations, Sub. H.B. 154 could be impacting far more districts than you are anticipating today. Just as concerning, there are documented biases towards large districts such as my own in the current iteration of the Progress component's Value Add measure. The current configuration of the Value Added measure ensures that large districts with any but the most infinitesimal growth year over year will produce outlier results on each component of Progress, whether positive or negative. Sub HB 154 requires that districts achieve a C or higher on the Progress Measure in order to exit "improvement" status, yet it is a statistically faulty criteria.

As noted previously, Toledo Public Schools has made great progress for a large, urban school district so it is incumbent upon me to begin by pointing out that this proposed language does not make allowances for progress made before it's reflected in the state report card.

Given the urgency to address the disastrous outcomes for the three districts currently in Academic Distress, I suggest addressing the three districts separately and holding this overall legislation until the Study Committee's report card recommendations are examined and there has been sufficient time to understand what changes will be made to the triggering mechanisms that underpin this legislation.

Secondarily, Sub HB 154 establishes a Director for districts in Improvement status, and this Director is invested with the similar powers that have proven to be fractious in the current Academic Distress district CEO role. While it may seem more reasonable to open the door to the possibility that the Director may be the Superintendent, I ask you, does a Superintendent and/or a Director that needs to be all powerful to be effective really demonstrate leadership? If not for the need to build consensus and gather feedback both from a Board and within a district leadership team and staff, doesn't the breadth of the power invested in one person here simply invite poor leadership? I hope we can all agree with the phrase "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Without delineating some clear lines of accountability for the Director role, it sets up for failure nearly anyone who takes on such a role unless they are immune to hubris.

The impact of the Director on the role of the Treasurer is not clearly delineated, and we can see from real life examples this in itself is very tricky and has resulted in lawsuits in the current CEO / Treasurer relationship for districts in Academic Distress. This requires much greater clarity.

A third specific concern I have follows on the from the power of the Director role. It should not be necessary to have power to suspend collective bargaining agreements in order to make progress. At Toledo Public Schools we have worked collaboratively with our bargaining units to onboard a former charter school into our district for this school year, and in this and the prior school year we developed and agreed to Memorandum's of Understanding with our unions on the establishment of three STEM schools where we previously had struggling neighborhood schools. Because district leadership worked collaboratively with the bargaining units, the staff is buying into the concept and they are in the beginning of turn around at those schools. We modelled on our original STEM elementary that has increased from an F to a B over the past five years. By developing a model and working together collaboratively, our teams in the newer school have much greater buy in to the process of change. Top down leadership is rarely an effective model, yet this is largely what this Director of Improvement would rely on. Our district negotiates MOU's as needed through established labor management committee paths so that total renegotiation is not necessary.

I would suggest that instead of this top down approach, assisting struggling districts effectively might mean leadership training, extra supports for both students and their teachers and many more wrap around services. Asking districts to develop a plan is not a bad thing and providing resources for outside consultation is not a bad thing if the cost is very low, but there must be an implementation mechanism based on trust, not absolute power. Rather than creating an all-powerful board to review plans, it might be more appropriate to have simpler criteria that relies on asking districts to delineate plans, then a simple compliance office to decide if those plans involve some innovative and different strategies than those previously used, and if those plans are being lived once underway.

In summary, Sub HB 154 misses the mark by using triggering criteria that are currently being re-evaluated, then by investing too much power in first a review board, then a single leader. None of these circumstances are likely to lead to collaboration and innovation in affected districts, and without that nearly any district effort is doomed to fail.