

**Dr. Jeff Graham Testimony**  
**Ohio Senate Education Committee**  
**September 17 2019**

Chairwoman Lehner, members of the committee, my name is Jeff Graham, I am the superintendent of Canton City Schools. I want to thank you for hearing my testimony today which opposes the process being undertaken to repeal and replace HB 70.

I agree that education quality is an issue in need of legislative attention. However, I disagree with the process by which it is being created, the manner in which it is being implemented and the current course of action underway to replace it.

In my opinion, the current process lacks two key components necessary for success:

1. Clearly defined expectations that can be accurately measured
2. The trust of the community in need of support

Neither of these can be accomplished on our current trajectory of this legislation.

According to the current law, to be placed in Academic Distress, “The district has received an overall grade of “F” ... for three consecutive years.”

Therefore the only way for a district to be placed in Academic Distress is by scores received on the Local Report Card, a measurement tool in which our current General Assembly has no confidence. This is evidenced by the fact that a select committee of the General Assembly is required to consult with experts and convene a stakeholder group for the purposes of studying it.

The law, in this case, is a strategic plan designed to improve student achievement. As such, legislators should be following a strategic planning process and in my opinion, they have consistently missed several key components - properly engaging stakeholders, understanding and articulating needs and implementing a solution steeped in best practices.

Unfortunately, I don't believe a good solution can come from a flawed process, meaning, one which does not include these components. Let me explain.

I have been blessed to have served in several school districts as a superintendent, all of which implemented a plan that resulted in sustained academic growth or was a plan praised by an expert from ODE.

When I started as superintendent in the Woodridge Local School District, we had received a rating of Continuous Improvement on the Local Report Card for five straight years. After my second year in the district, we earned a rating of Excellent. The following year, we raised our rating

to Excellent with Distinction, a rating we sustained for many years thereafter and as a result of that engagement process, we enjoyed the highest passage rates in the state on our levies.

When I became superintendent of the Parma City Schools, I joined a district that had been crippled financially due to seven straight levy failures. Over the course of the next five years, we passed a levy and proceeded to recreate the school district based on best practices steeped in research. And during that entire time, we were able to maintain our rating of Excellent.

I left Parma when I accepted a position in the Lorain City Schools, a district that had already been placed in academic distress. Twelve hours after I was hired, House Bill 70 was passed. Understanding that it was statistically unlikely to convert our F's to C's in 7 months (the requirement to remove ourselves from ADC oversight at the time), we still created a plan following the same engagement process detailed above. And while we didn't have time to see the results come to fruition, our recovery plan was praised by the ODE's academic recovery assessment expert, Michael White, who wrote, "The Lorain City School District should be held up as a 'light house district' — and their road map to academic recovery broadly shared with the field."

I mention this not to bore you with my resume, but to emphasize what is possible when we create a culture of

trust and follow a plan steeped in best practices. Our plan was simple:

1. After considerable research and engagement, we provided clear expectations - including what constituted excellence as well as failure, and
2. We identified a process that accurately measured our level of success.

Now on to the second component that I believe has been overlooked in this process but is necessary for success: trust.

We can't ignore the voices of those we serve.

Our jobs are all about people. And even when we think we know what's best for them, it won't be of any help if they refuse to accept it. They need to have a voice in the process.

Let's assume that HB 70 was an appropriate solution to provide supports for struggling school districts. It failed in Lorain. The community is now in revolt and the district's finances may never recover from the past two years of unchecked spending.

However, regardless of who the CEO was, House Bill 70 could have been successful in Lorain. The Board, the leadership in the community and the staff chose to approach their new relationship with the state as a

partnership - and as such, the district was poised and unified. Unfortunately, it became very clear very early on that a healthy relationship was not an option.

As a result of the chaos that ensued, the district lost many talented educators and good families, and there was upheaval in the community ...

... and every school district across the state watched, especially those at-risk of a similar fate.

A district needs to feel a partnership, instead of punished or controlled. The current set-up has resulted in these negative dynamics. And a similar approach will have the same debilitating results. My point is, that it's unlikely that a similar bill, one following a similar process, will result in a healthy working relationship between the community in need of support and those providing it. Right or wrong, communities have already seen how this story plays out.

In order for this new legislation to be effective, the support from the state to a struggling school district needs to be viewed and received as a partnership. If it's not, it will fail.

You can pass a law that results in taking a school district away from its community, but you can't legislate a healthy relationship and without it, quality educators and good families will leave. And it doesn't matter what the plan is, you need good people to execute it.

We are now working on the third iteration of this law - I'm assuming because we found flaws with the first two. However, your proposed legislation continues to hold three districts accountable to bad legislation based solely on a measurement system that doesn't measure what we want it to.

Under normal circumstances, I would recommend that you audit those three districts to assess the effectiveness of their new governance structure. However, since no standard exists to measure against and there is no appropriate way to measure it, that's clearly not an option. Therefore, I ask for these districts to be given relief in the form of local control and more appropriate supports from the state.

I'm here today because I want to be a part of the solution. I truly believe that student success is an issue in need of legislative attention. However, passing this legislation - or any legislation - as a solution before we properly engage our stakeholders, fix the Local Report Card, and identify what constitutes an effective education - as well as an ineffective education - is not in the best interest of the people we serve.

I am happy to entertain any questions you have for me today.