

**Testimony on House Bill 154 –
Dissolve Distress Commissions
Before the Senate Education Committee
By Susan Kaeser
September 12, 2019**

Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, and Ranking Member Fedor:

My name is Susie Kaeser. I am the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio, and a member of the Cleveland Heights unit of the League. I am also the former director of two nonprofit organizations that work to engage citizens in strengthening public schools; a classroom volunteer; the product of public education; and the proud parent of two public school graduates.

I offer this testimony on behalf of the LWVO in support of HB154 as it was introduced, and in opposition to several features of the substitute bill.

The League celebrates our constitutional tradition of providing a free, high quality public education to all children. We view public education as fundamental to our democracy and fully support local governance of our public schools. It is both democratic and accountable; it is the best way to ensure that the interests of the community are served by the public system. We also believe attaching high-stakes consequences to standardized test results is a misuse of tests and should not be central to any policy designed to improve learning.

We expect our lawmakers to develop policies that respect the appropriate division of responsibility between the local community and state government, that do not discriminate, and that are informed by experience and evidence. Policies should have a reasonable chance to achieve intended goals. We are concerned about Substitute HB 154 on all of these counts.

First, it does not go far enough to protect local governance. Any form of state takeover simply should not be part of the plan.

Second, the legislation ignores the evidence which shows that standardized test performance, the primary variable used to trigger state intervention, is a function of income more than instruction or governance. The next ten school districts that are at risk for takeover have one

thing in common: they are high poverty systems. By ignoring the role of income in test performance, this bill will knowingly discriminate against high poverty districts. Discrimination is not acceptable.

Third, despite the documented relevance of income to group test performance (Howard Fleeter and others), proponents of the bill equate low test scores with governance issues, reckless educators, or some kind of dereliction of duty. Are we to assume every high poverty district is poorly governed and all of its employees are slackers? Are we to assume that a change in governance will magically alter all of the conditions that have conspired to affect test performance? State intervention so far has proven that a change of governance does not produce miracles. The analysis is wrong and so is the solution.

Fourth, this bill is part of Ohio's obsession with test-based accountability. Test results are the trigger for identifying districts that are failing. But test scores are not an accurate measure of student learning and should not be used in that way. To the degree that they reveal education attainment, the root cause of low performance or high performance is frequently outside of teacher control. It's not a valid approach to determining if a school is functioning effectively.

Finally, testing experts explain that once consequences are attached to test results, the test is no longer a valid measure of what is being tested. The pressure to produce results leads to educational practices that help raise scores but undermine high quality education. This whole scheme is counter-productive to the goal of providing all children in our state high quality education. It's time to abandon the use of test results to make decisions about anything except instruction.

We all share a desire for every child to succeed. But punishing them or the educators who serve them when they don't succeed will not get us where we want to go. This legislation falls short as a strategy to advance widespread success among children in our state.

We urge you to:

- repeal HB70 and dissolve existing Academic Distress Commissions.
- develop a robust way to assess quality in education and support local districts to implement practices that advance quality.
- stop defining children, schools, educators, and districts as failures because they do not perform the same way on a standardized test.

Education is a wonderful road to opportunity. There is no simple solution to achieving equal results. But accountability is only making it harder. We urge the legislature to stop promising miracles with schemes that are both punitive and inadequate.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony, and please feel free to contact us with any questions.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.