



Representative Kent Smith

Ohio House District 8

House Bill 100 Testimony
Primary and Secondary Education Committee
March 9, 2021

Chairwoman, and fellow joint sponsor Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee. Thank you very much for providing us an opportunity to explain why the policy of the state taking over local public school districts should be abolished.

There are 611 public school districts in Ohio. As the members of this Committee are aware, Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland school districts have been taken over by state government as a result of House Bill 70 which was passed in the 131st General Assembly. I have the privilege of representing East Cleveland, so a large portion of my testimony will focus on that community.

East Cleveland Pre-Takeover

It is important to be mindful of the economic conditions in East Cleveland. A June 2018 report said East Cleveland is the poorest community in Ohio and the 4th poorest city in the nation. The median household income (pre-pandemic) in East Cleveland is \$19,953 whereas the median household income statewide is \$69,632. According to Ohio Department of Education data, every single East Cleveland student (100%) are economically disadvantaged. 27.2% have a Special Education designation which is almost 3 times the state average. Despite these substantial challenges East Cleveland City Schools had made tremendous progress before being taken over.

- According to East Cleveland's state report card prior to having been taken over, they had seen improvement in 15 of 21 state performance measures.
- Their suspension rate had dropped 47.3% over the prior three years.
- The 5-year graduation rate was 75% which was only ten percentage points below the Ohio average.
- The District's Career Tech program earned a "B" in Post Program Outcomes.
- The district earned a C on their K-3 literacy rate, which means they were successful in getting struggling readers back on track. Specially 167 students were identified as being off track and EC teachers were able to get 81 of those kids back on track.
- Their four elementary schools received grades of A, B or C for their Valued Added / Progress measure.
- Only one of their buildings (of seven total) was rated an F.

Their progress was due to an extremely talented core of teachers and administrators, over 70% of which had a master's degree and they averaged (Pre-Takeover) 15 years of classroom experience. Have they been successful on all fronts? No. but considering the challenging student population that they are responsible for; they should be lauded for their heroic efforts not subjected to takeover by an out-of-town entity who has zero knowledge of the community and no accountability to the East Cleveland voters.

East Cleveland Immediately Following State Takeover (Spring 2019)

The East Cleveland mid-school year state takeover was announced at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year and it had an immediate negative impact on the academic community. District enrollment dropped by 12% within the first few months of ADC control. As of December 2018, four months into the school year, twenty academic positions had not been filled. That number represented the highest number of vacancies in the history of the district. Mid-year school personnel resignations also exceeded the normal average.

What we saw in the first several months of state control is more chaos and uncertainty injected into an already challenging classroom setting. The bad news is the global pandemic has made things worse in East Cleveland.

East Cleveland Currently

Student population is now down 25-30%. What was a building with only one F rated building is now a district with two F rated buildings, staff vacancies continue above what would be considered a normal rate. The District CEO in December announced he was not going to pay coaches. A staff survey release in Feb 2021 found the following disturbing results:

Teachers were asked to respond on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the best, to the following questions. The average score follows each answer.

1. How would you rate communication from the CEO to teachers? (1.85)
2. How would you rate the professionalism of the CEO towards teachers? (2.1)
3. How would you rate the CEO's concern for teacher safety during the pandemic? (2.93)
4. How would you rate the CEO as an educational leader for the East Cleveland schools? (2.3)

This is not just about classroom results and student achievement; this is also about democracy.

So, while there is evidence that state takeovers are often not deserved and have led to more problems than solutions, perhaps the worst outcome has been that it also hinders the voice of the people by removing local governance. This is not just about the three, or possibly more in the future, school districts, this is also about Democracy and the grand American experiment.

In America, the right to vote is a fundamental freedom. We are the leading democracy in the world and our election system ought to be free, fair, and accessible.

We, serving 11.5 million Ohioans, should be about the cause of advancing the integrity of our elections. There should not be any barriers that prevent eligible citizens from having their voice heard. In short, we should be protecting Democracy, not preventing it.

In Conclusion

Finally, let me share with the Committee part of an editorial posted on March 17, 2019 from The Canton Repository entitled, "Time for Ohio to abolish school takeovers". It reads in part, "What began as a noble carrot-and-stick idea, however, has shown little evidence of improving educational outcomes where it is in place: Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland. It can be argued, in fact, things are worse, with more parental disconnect, low employee morale and high administration turnover reported in those districts. We urge lawmakers and the governor to end this failed idea."

Members of the House Education Committee, that is exactly what House Bill 100 seeks to do.

The "Columbus Knows Best Approach" has not worked. I believe that every Ohio child can change the world. Perhaps the next great Lordstown innovation is currently in a Youngstown classroom. Perhaps the solution to the Lake Erie algae crisis is a Lorain student. Perhaps the next great civil rights leader is walking down an East Cleveland school hallway. These kids, our kids, can do great things. But to help ensure their potential is fully realized, local voices should be listened too, and local voters should be able to exercise their judgment.

We would ask that the Committee support HB 100 and correct this bad policy and end these state takeovers. We would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.

