



**Proponent Testimony: SB 165**  
**Ohio Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee**  
**May 25, 2021**

*Presented on behalf of the [First Ring Schools Collaborative](#)*

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Good afternoon Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide Proponent testimony today on Senate Bill 165 on behalf of the sixteen Superintendents of the First Ring Schools Collaborative.

Established in 2000, the First Ring Schools Collaborative is an association of public school districts which serve communities bordering Cleveland, Ohio. First Ring Schools collaborate on a near-daily basis to address challenges related to poverty, mobility, diversity, and the achievement gap. All of this work is oriented toward a singular goal: to educate, support, and encourage students.

Leading a large school district is a complex challenge. A superintendent navigates resource constraints, managerial conflicts, and complex interactions with other parts of government and civil society which challenge leaders of many large organizations. However, the stakes for a school district leader are uniquely high. A superintendent oversees a system with thousands of interested stakeholders, and at day's end, the most important of these stakeholders are the youngest ones – the students.

These children are our most important stakeholders, and their advocates – the parents and guardians of our students, along with our community-elected school boards – serve as a constant check on our “executive” power. This system of checks and balances not only ensures leadership accountability, it also leads to better outcomes.

To succeed, a leader needs both excellent problem-solving skills and a knowledge of context. The fact that *nearly* every school leader in Ohio has this inherent incentive to converse and collaborate with community leaders (both elected and otherwise) is a strong feature of Ohio's education system.

Nowhere is the incentive to collaborate more important than in districts serving low-income families. System-level problems, including those related to poverty, must be approached in the context of community. This is vital not only from a philosophical perspective (we, as you do,

believe in local control and citizen engagement in taxpayer-funded endeavors, including public schooling) but also from a practical perspective. The engagement of a community is directly linked to the improvement of schools.

There is a plethora of hard data to support the promotion of community engagement for school leaders. As Sarah McAlister, a senior researcher at Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform wrote:

“A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that **family and community participation is a crucial resource not only for individual student achievement, but also for catalyzing and sustaining school improvement and for building school cultures that support all students** (Comer & Haynes, 1992; Epstein 1995; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Sebring et al. 2006; Henderson et al. 2007).”<sup>1</sup>

Each of the 16 superintendents of the First Ring has experience engaging with community members, including elected board members, and each can speak to the benefits of collaboration in problem solving. Collaboration has led to better ideas and better outcomes for our school communities.

Ohio's Academic Distress Commission (ADC) laws, as enacted by [Am. Sub. HB 70](#) of the 131<sup>st</sup> GA:

- Require the appointment of a CEO with “complete operational, managerial, and instructional control of the district,” to include all hiring, budgeting, contracting, curriculum establishment, selection of instructional materials and assessments, etc. [ORC § 3302.10(C)(1)];
- Require the removal of an elected local school board for any district subject to ADC for  $\geq$  four years;
- Curtail the collective bargaining authority for employees of districts subject to ADC.

We understand that the intention of HB 70 was to improve the academic performance of Ohio schools with the lowest standardized test scores. However, **the removal of a school leader's incentive to collaborate with the community is antithetical to the improvement of academic outcomes.** Both the research and the observed, actual impact of these policies demonstrate that.

It is for these reasons, and because of the lived experiences of our colleagues in Lorain City Schools, East Cleveland City Schools, and the Youngstown City School District that First Ring strongly opposes the continued use of the Academic Distress Commission model in the State of Ohio.

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<sup>1</sup> McAlister, S. (2013) “Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround” *The Next Four Years: Issue 36* ([link](#))

We support SB 165 because of its policy of partnership with the community and its alignment with other educational best practices for school leadership, including long-term improvement planning and fiscal transparency. I'll explain further by moving point by point through the bill:

- SB 165 requires that the Auditor of State complete a performance audit of the affected school district. That fiscal transparency measure is a means to restore trust in a community potentially scarred by the effects of a state takeover.
- SB 165 directs the local board of education to partner with stakeholders, including the academic distress commission, to create a three-year improvement plan. This empowers community leaders, while involving outside reformers, to agree upon a long term plan, increasing the likelihood of community buy-in and ultimate success.
- SB 165 provides three years of local school board-supervised time to implement the plan, a reasonable period of time for a school district to implement an ambitious set of goals and make progress.

It is for these reasons and others that we support the reforms proposed by Senator Manning in SB 165. While we look forward to the day that the State of Ohio repeals all state takeover policy for schools, we understand that this is a step toward that goal.

As I said at the beginning of my testimony, leading a school district is a complex challenge. Leading a large school district primarily serving students living in poverty is an even more complex and difficult challenge. Such a superintendent must recognize that every problem they seek to solve has defied past leaders, and that every academic challenge their students face is compounded significantly by non-academic factors. This means that any progress is going to be hard-won, but that each step forward means the improvement of many lives.

In summary, it is the position of the First Ring Schools that local control is essential to the proper function of a school district. Decisions made alongside members of a community – members who know and answer to their neighbors – are not only preferable for philosophical reasons, they are also, in practice, better decisions. If the State of Ohio wishes to improve academic outcomes for its most vulnerable students, it should emphasize community engagement in any public policy decision.

The First Ring Schools Collaborative remains committed to ensuring that barriers are eliminated in order to assure all students receive the resources and support that they need to succeed at the highest levels. We will continue to work with members of the legislature, and with our colleagues in all areas of education, to identify and reform systems in Ohio that affect student success. We thank Senator Manning, and you, Chairman Brenner, for your admirable efforts to reform Ohio's Academic Distress Commission Policy via Senate Bill 165

Mr. Chairman, we thank you for this bill and for the opportunity to submit testimony. We also thank the members of this Committee for their attention to this crucial policy reform. We are happy to answer questions.

## **The First Ring Schools Collaborative**

Berea City Schools  
Bedford City Schools  
Brooklyn City Schools  
Cleveland Heights-University Heights City Schools  
Cleveland Metropolitan School District  
Cuyahoga Heights City Schools  
Euclid City Schools  
Fairview Park City Schools  
Garfield Heights City Schools  
Lakewood City Schools  
Maple Heights City Schools  
Parma City Schools  
Richmond Heights City Schools  
Shaker Heights City Schools  
South Euclid Lyndhurst City Schools  
Warrensville Heights City Schools

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