**Senate Testimony:**

**Wednesday May 29, 2019**

Chairwoman Lehnar, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Education Committee.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Steve Cawthon; I am an appointed member of the Lorain Academic Commission by the board of education and the teacher representative. As a proud educator since 1991 and parent of a Lorain City Schools graduate, it pains me to see what is happening in Lorain and across Ohio. I believe it is my responsibility to express the concerns of those in the trenches and the community on this matter. Our students, parents, staff and community members have been adversely effected by the vortex of HB70, which I oppose along with Academic Distress Commissions and the CEO state take over model. I am in support of legislation that will return local control to districts and allow for true collaboration between communities and the state of Ohio.

Originally, HB 70 targeted providing wrap around services and assistance for districts that were facing academic hardships; it then somehow turned into a state takeover bill, hurriedly passed in June of 2015. HB 70 at its core is a disturbing un-American bill that goes against the basic principles established by our Founding Fathers as the cornerstone of our democracy. The phrase *“no taxation, without representation*” is once again in vogue with this state takeover using local tax dollars without true local oversight as the elected board of education and the community have little say in the decision-making in its own school district.

As well intentioned as this process may have been it has resulted in discord and dysfunction. Let me provide a few obvious examples.

**\*Standards Based Grading**: Its poor implementation created frustration and communication barriers between students, parents and teachers. In addition, grades were due over a 1 week before the end of the school year in the elementary and junior high schools and many parents have not received a proper and correct report card all year.

**\*District Shared SLO (shared attribution):** This evaluation tool goes against what ODE states as acceptable. For example, the Student Growth Measure of attendance used at Lorain High School was 50% of teacher’s evaluation. Quoting the ODE website: *“When using shared attribution, ODE recommends 5-10 percent. Districts opting to use a higher percentage are advised to remain below 25 percent.”* Lorain and the CEO used 50%.

\***Restorative Justice Implementation** has helped to created security & safety concerns for students, parents and staff with an inconsistent level of discipline enforcement and no training on its implementation.

\***Some** **Unqualified and inexperienced administration** have put the students and staff at risk in our schools. The Lorain community were promised these people would have the experience, be properly credentialed and be able to **build trust** with the staff. This has not been realized. In my opinion, this has been an epic failure and has created a climate of distrust and horrible morale throughout the district.

\***Lack of transparency** and communication has been disappointing. My colleague Diane Xander is still waiting for the documents and information she requested back in January. And recently the Treasurer does not have the ability to release records as the CEO has taken them from him.

\***Financial concerns**. Relocation expenses of the new hired admin, expenditures for ANET, TNTP, Trip to Texas, PQ Magazine, increased Administrative hires and salaries and a recent example, $19,209.10 used from the general fund for graduation at LCCC. This expenditure was in the CEO Approval of Agenda minutes (March 11, 2019). Moving the graduation to LCCC involved No community discussion, No school board approval, no ADC approval; just the CEO creating his own policy. This is a very dangerous precedent to set.

\***Levy anxiety.** This could be a major financial issue, as the district would lose $3 million a year, for the next 7 years for a total of $21 million over that span if a levy is not on the November ballot.

**\*Inability to work with the board of education,** as well as community stakeholders, i.e., Mayor Ritenauer & Police Chief Rivera.

\***Curriculum issues** and lack of proper materials still exist at many levels of the district.

\***Lorain High Teachers reapply Fiasco**: Essentially teachers were fired on Thursday Feb 21 & then the CEO retracted the decision the next week.

\***Non-renewal of teachers**: the 3 most recent teachers let go are ones that were building reps and rated skilled on their OTES evaluation. Was the purpose of their dismissal part of an unfair labor practice? Many teachers and staff would like to speak out of what is happening in Lorain but are afraid to do so because of the very thing that happened to the 3 non-renewed teachers that I have mentioned.

**\*Surveys**: The LEA & ADC Survey results from staff showed a true lack of leadership on the administration with high levels of disapproval. In addition, students questioned an administered Youth Truth Survey as an attempt to smear teachers. Then the CEO made comments in an email to only select members of the ADC and not the whole group that these students are not capable of thinking on their own and are being prodded. His comments were “*I would not be surprised if scholars speak on behalf of teachers. My hunch is that it will (be) in favor of teachers in our (College Credit Plus) classrooms, the scholars who have spoken up in the past are in the CCP program and do have good teachers for the most part and/or have parents who are teachers. It saddens me that children may be used for political gain.”* These comments are troubling to say the least as a Lorain High student retorted in The Chronicle Telegram in his response, “Students as a means of political gain? My answer to that is that it isn’t simple ignorance coming from the CEO, but an intended attack at the integrity and perseverance of the very students he promised to promote.”

Recently a few members of the Lorain community including the CEO testified before this body with some rather dubious statements. I will focus on just a few points that were made by CEO David Hardy: In his testimony, he mentioned progress that is “beginning to take hold.”

He stated:

*\*A 54% increase in students who will graduate high school with an associates’ degree and the highest enrollment in our Early College Programming beginning in 9th grade in the history of our district.*

*\*We have gone from (3) 5-star schools with Pre-K programming to 10 schools.*

*\*We moved out of financial caution and have a fund balance that remains steady and a budgetary process that is solvent after eliminating a $700K debt that was handed to me on the first 30 days of my job, along with millions of dollars allocated to multiple lawyers every year. He stated that this all was accomplished in the short tenure of his administration after 20 years of mismanagement and disregard for children.*

The interesting thing is that the points he mentioned were in motion before the CEO’s arrival in Lorain and taking credit is rather disingenuous. The wheels of transition to achieve these goals were working with the previous administration, treasurer and leadership.

I know there is some question regarding components of new legislation to repeal and replace HB70 and the idea it “basically turns the solution back to people who haven’t been able to solve it up to now and if they had the answers, they would have already tried it.” Or that “local control is ineffective” But I would counter, that those statements do not truly reflect the work that was done at the local level and it perpetuates a misleading narrative. In addition, it is important to remember if a community is unhappy with its elected officials or board of education, VOTE THEM OUT! It is the democratic way and has been for 243 years!

Consequently, when the environment of the locker room changes to such a degree that the leader is no longer a positive change agent and the trust in the locker room is lost, it is time to move on. I mentioned in my statements of March 19 at the last ADC meeting, until positive change occurs and is recognized, the perception of chaos will continue in our community. We have an Academic Distress Commission where the first chair of the ADC resigned abruptly and another member also resigned and without an evaluation of the CEO. The ODE then appointed an ADC Chair that lives in Columbus, which is not just 2 hours but miles away from what is Lorain. Another state appointed member lives in Toledo and the other state appointed member is detached from what goes on in Lorain. The Academic Distress Commission model is simply flawed and “out of touch and out of time” as the situation has created many challenges and issues. In fact, Paolo DeMaria Ohio State Superintendent has commented publically regarding HB 70, that is has “too much hostility and too many “challenges” to work well.” And “by having the state impose itself on districts, instead of working with them to bring change, too much acrimony is created.” Amen Mr. DeMaria.

There is an awareness that Lorain City Schools has had its issues over the years, but those shortcomings were being addressed in the spirt of cooperation prior to the arrival of HB 70. The idea that nothing was being done is misguided. For example, under the previous administration, Lorain City Schools was working with the Ohio Department of Education in a collaborative fashion, which included but not limited to helping to introduce and improve wrap around services, advance community involvement, and improve curriculum alignment. Lorain City Schools ranked in the top 3% of public school districts in Ohio for overall value-added in 2014/15 LCS and moved from 214-18. Students displayed significant academic growth even under the trying circumstances faced in the community.

Even with the shortcomings, that district faced, positive change was beginning to occur and the implementation of **The Six Priorities**:

1. **Cultural Competency**
2. **Graduating for College and Career Readiness**
3. **Instructional Standards and Academic Rigor**
4. **Communication & Engagement**
5. **Staff Recognition & Retention**
6. **Professional Learning Communities**

The time has come to end this relationship and carnage with HB70 and create a collaborative new direction for Lorain and all of Ohio. As we move forward with local stakeholders and the ODE as partners in this endeavor to make educating the students of Ohio truly a key priority. This also means not replacing HB 70 with another state take over model with a new name that will invite charters, big money and individuals who are not experienced in the field of education to attempt to use their “magic potion” to fix things.

What should we do to heal the wounds of HB70? I call it “A Common Sense” approach to creating positive change.

\***Restore Local Control and Checks and Balances:** Hostile takeovers have not worked.

\***Build Trust in the school community**:

New leadership is needed for LCS. The lack of experience, credentials and professional leadership skills have hurt our students and has fostered a sense of low morale throughout the district.

**\*Provide Wrap Around Services**: Hire more social workers, counselors, medical professionals and individuals that can help our students.

**\*Institute Smaller Class Sizes:** This will help to deal with the dynamic needs of our students.

**\*Improve Safety/Discipline:** Students have not been giving the proper structure and consistency in the school environment. The increase in violence/misbehavior/disrespect has been alarming.

**\*Strengthen Curriculum**: Needs to be evaluated, the lack of cohesion, pacing, consistency, materials and resources have contributed to major issues across LCS.

\***Restructure the State Testing Model:** It is dysfunctional and needs to be fixed to help improve the student’s educational experience in Ohio’s schools.

\***Improve State Supports:** Help support local school districts instead of punishing them.

These Common Sense ideas along with “The Lorain Plan” which was submitted by the BOE at the State Board of Education Meeting would be a start to a positive academic renaissance in Lorain and all of Ohio.

I will leave you with a quick quote from *Famed African-American military hero Benjamin O’Davis, leader of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, who once stated when he felt that his pilots were being unjustly criticized.*

*“You invite us to a poker game, hand us a fixed deck & then wonder why we can’t win?”*

*I ask you to consider my testimony and vote to end HB 70 and support legislation that will restore collaboration for public education in Ohio. All Lorain and other districts want is a fair and impartial opportunity to allow their unique social and economic realities to shape the structures that will allow their customers to thrive. The time is now to embrace that positive change and move Lorain City Schools and all of Ohio’s schools forward. Let us work together to make the public education experience in Ohio a model for the rest of our great nation to follow.*

Thank you

Steve Cawthon

Lorain Academic Distress Commission Member/Lorain High Teacher