**Senate Education Committee**

**Regarding Academic Stress Commission**

**Interested Party Testimony**

**May 29, 2019**

Chair Lehner, Vice-Chair Terhar and members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Elizabeth Lolli, Superintendent of the Dayton Public Schools. I have had the honor of serving in this role since November 2017. Prior to this position I have served Ohio's students in a number of different capacities as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, Curriculum Coordinator, Curriculum Director, Associate Superintendent, Superintendent in 2 other districts and a university professor. I have served in both urban and suburban districts.

Thank you for allowing me to testify about House Bill 70 and the Academic Distress Commission , legislation that is of immense interest to Dayton Public Schools and the entire Dayton community. Depending on our report card grade this fall, the Dayton Public Schools, under existing law, is subject to a takeover by an Academic Distress Commission. We are the only district that is currently facing this threat. Such action would be disastrous for our community and, most important, for Dayton's students.

On behalf of the Dayton School Board, the Dayton teachers, students and our families, Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley, the Dayton City Commission and the Dayton business community, I ask you to look at Youngstown, East Cleveland and Lorain, the three Ohio communities that have had experience with bringing in outsiders to run their school districts. The degree to which the ADC remedy has worked in those districts is, as you know, very debatable, BUT we are confident that it will not work in a way that serves the bests interests of Dayton.

Dayton should not be the fourth community to be subject to an experiment that has not shown evidence of effectiveness and, on the contrary, has proven to be a distraction that has had the effect of dividing if not setting back the affected school districts. Dayton is urgently and strategically acting to improve our schools, and we can't afford to have that work derailed. We know what has to be done, and we are on a fast and purposeful track.

We have already undertaken a *root cause analysis* during this current academic year and we have developed a detailed Transformation Plan that we believe has the potential to truly transform our underperforming schools, especially if that plan and the instructional methodologies that are part of that plan can be implemented with fidelity.

State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria is absolutely right that imposing an outside czar over districts, no matter how well-intentioned, is questionable public policy. The unilateral nature of the step guarantees public suspicion and hostility when what is desperately needed is community support and buy-in for the hard decisions that turn around schools that have deep-seated challenges.

As much as we might like a simple and quick answer for improving high-poverty schools whose students have experienced profound lack of opportunity and inequity, there is none. If there were, we would have found it by now. If you look across the state and, in fact, the country, the magic that creates successful schools is strong leadership, quality teaching and high expectations for students. Creating a supportive and aspirational culture is what counts. Doing that takes time and an army of highly committed administrators and teachers — not the imposition of outsiders who haven't been on the ground or in our school buildings.

Bringing about high achievement requires painstaking commitment and a deep understanding of local conditions — down to the neighborhood and building level. Expecting outsiders to quickly, urgently and perceptively understand the reasons why some of our schools are failing — **and so many of the schools in Dayton are improving** — is an impossible task. In fact, it would thwart Dayton's documentable progress at precisely the moment we're showing important improvements.

You did hear me correctly. The **majority of schools** in Dayton are improving. Fifteen of the 25 schools that will be open next fall are making positive progress and would not qualify for ADC on a school basis. And we're taking bold steps to sustain the growth in the improving schools just as we are taking steps to improve those schools that have not had the performance our students deserve. The board, represented here today by our Board President, Dr. William Harris, is committed to doing what it takes to see that transformation work through.

By way of example:

* We are reconstituting the teaching staffs at various schools, bringing in new principals and teachers who are specifically selected for their ability to bring about critical culture change.
* We will have new principals at six elementary schools this fall.
* Last year we closed two low-performing elementary schools that also had low enrollment.
* We are offering teachers financial bonuses when their students show significant improvement in achievement scores –which in turn show that we are closing the achievement gap.
* We are using student-level data to understand precisely what concepts each child is struggling with and addressing those gaps accordingly.
* Teachers are receiving additional training in high-impact instruction.
* We are creating new partnerships with local organizations that provide our high-school students with opportunities that put them on a defined path to earning credentials and college degrees.
* We have initiated a public awareness campaign to impress on parents that students must be at school every day and on time to ensure their classroom success.
* This fall we will open our first school-based health facility that will treat students' health needs that can prevent them from coming to school or that limit their achievement.

These are just some of the things we are doing to transform Dayton's schools and to ensure every child, in every neighborhood, can attend a high-performing school. I will gladly share our Transformation Plan with you, but please know that it is a plan that must be implemented with fidelity and with broad stakeholder commitment. We have the latter, but the former will require more resources, with the potential technical assistance of outside providers who possess levels of expertise that we simply cannot access currently with the human capital that is available within and to the Dayton Public Schools.

As you know well, Ohio has a long tradition of local control of its school districts. The rationale is sound — families and taxpayers want to know that they have influence and authority over the institutions and the leaders who profoundly affect their children. Taking away that authority from a community doesn't solve a problem — it simply creates new ones.

As someone who has made the hard decisions of closing schools, installing new leadership, asking bargaining units for difficult sacrifices and, yes, firing ineffective individuals, I can attest that even when a superintendent has the trust of a community, these decisions are never easy and never supported by everyone. If a leader hasn't built strong community relationships and is an unknown, taking invariably controversial actions divides the very people we need to bring together.

I understand the State of Ohio's frustration with the performance of Dayton Public Schools and with all Ohio’s underperforming schools. I share that frustration! We have to do better not because officials in Columbus are demanding that we improve, but because that's what we owe our children.

That's what Dayton families are demanding of me and of the board of education, and I do not intend to let them down. I expect to be held accountable by the elected board, by the teachers and students whom I serve and by all the different stakeholders who have an investment in the success of the Dayton Public Schools. The board and all those within the Dayton Public Schools expect to be accountable to voters who are understandably impatient.

As you consider alternatives to the existing law around Academic Distress Commissions, I would ask you to honor Ohio's history of local control while also upholding your responsibility for legitimate oversight. When communities — such as Dayton — are willing to work with state authorities and provide proof of progress and a well-thought out school district transformation plan, I hope you will give us the opportunity and deference we need to succeed.

We are not objecting to accountability. We welcome accountability. We, however, are adamantly opposed to a top-down "outsiders know best" takeover of our school district.