To: Members of the Education Committee

 Senator Peggy Lehner, Chair

From: Carol Beckerle, (fmr) CCS Teacher

Date: June 12, 2019

**RE: Written Testimony regarding Academic Distress proposal provided by the Chair's office**

I am writing in opposition to the proposed Senate amendments to House Bill 154 that would create a School Transformation and address School Improvement. I am a former Columbus City Schools special education teacher and corporate lawyer who is currently running for Columbus School Board. These amendments will in no way serve CCS’s efforts to improve its failing schools.

At the outset it must be recognized that releasing these amendments on Tuesday and requiring written comments by Wednesday at 2:30 pm (in advance of a Thursday 2:30 p.m. public hearing) is eerily reminiscent of the strategy that brought us House Bill 70 – the constitutionality of that legislation is currently being challenged in our courts due in large part to the absence of an opportunity for public debate. It seems nothing if not ironic that the very legislation slated to dismantle the Academic Distress Commissions created by House Bill 70 – which have been universally deemed a failure – will now also be vulnerable to a similar challenge due to the lack of reasonable time for public debate on these Senate amendments.

Unfortunately, the amendments proposed by the Senate would replace the failed Youngstown Plan top down, take-over strategy with another -- much more complicated – top down, take-over strategy. In addition, the Senate amendments reflect a persistent belief that there are miracle-worker, outside consultants, waiting in the wings, to swoop in and right the wrongs of our failing schools. The Senate amendments actually double down on this ill-founded belief by affording failing school districts 3 years to work with ODE -preferred outside consultants before triggering the *de facto* take-over provisions. If these miracle-worker consultants are not able to deliver – and they haven’t come close in Youngstown or Lorrain – the already failing school district will have lost 3 years doing the outsider’s bidding.

While the Senate amendments do provide for participation of 3 local stakeholders on its School Improvement Commissions, only 2 will be considered voting members. Thereby ensuring that state appointees will direct the efforts to turn around a failing school district. This essentially is replacing the 3-person, state appointed Academic Distress Commissions with a 5 –person School Improvement Commission which is likewise controlled by a 3-person, state appointed majority. This approach has already failed and is precisely why House Bill 154 was proposed in the first place – to dismantle that failed approach. By creating both the State Transformation Board and the local School Improvement Commissions, the Senate Amendments not only repackage the basic approach of House Bill 70, they make it more cumbersome by adding an additional layer of bureaucracy.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the Senate amendments suggest that school districts would be able to utilize their student wellness and success funds to pay for the state-approved outside consultants. Assuming for the sake of this discussion that such funding survives the budget process – other Senate amendments appear to be tapping into these funds to cover supplements for enrollment growth – this puts school districts in the difficult position of opting to pay consultants with funds otherwise earmarked for desperately needed wrap-around services. Services, many educational experts agree, which are critical to enabling students from poverty coming to arrive at school ready to learn.

There are significant concerns about these amendments on multiple fronts. The Senate should not allow them to be incorporated into an omnibus amendment. At a minimum, they are much too important not to be properly debated as stand alone legislation.