Thank you Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor and Education Committee members for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony imploring you to let Youngstown continue on its path of progress. I know you are in the process of changing things and I support any changes that will be made, but I implore you not to throw away what has been accomplished and consider the progress Youngstown has made to date. Please protect what has already been accomplished when planning and moving forward with regards to Youngstown.

My name is Maria Hoffmaster, and for the last year I have served on the Youngstown Academic Distress Commission (ADC). I am a former administrator and teacher for Youngstown City Schools, and I currently serve as a Special Education and School Improvement Consultant with the State Support Team Region 5.

Although there has been much controversy surrounding House Bill 70, we all agree that every student in Ohio deserves access to the best possible education. Youngstown has made some progress this past year, and I believe it is essential that the Youngstown school board and the Commission work in partnership to build on those successes.  Any abrupt changes will cause much if not all that has been gained to be lost.

As a former teacher and administrator in the district, there have been few sustained, consistent efforts focused on improving academic achievement. Historically, the district had a revolving door of external vendors, products and programs. It has been a merry-go-round of initiatives. The consistent mantra has been “this too shall pass” as each leader has brought his or her own agenda. We know the silver bullet does not exist. True improvement occurs by staying the course and we’re making progress. Under the control and support of an ADC, Youngstown has finally started to confront its weak spots and worked to improve them. For example, districts under ADC control are required to create a strategic plan. Progress toward implementing this plan is evaluated at the district and state level.

Initial reviews of Youngstown’s implementation of its strategic plan indicated that elementary building level teams were not developing improvement plans that properly identified how schools would make individualized efforts to raise student achievement. This was a serious problem, since the entire point of an ADC is to improve student achievement. In response to the findings, the ADC required the district to provide professional development and support to elementary building leadership teams. Based on follow-up interviews and document reviews, school leadership teams were able to use the quantitative information generated from work sessions to begin development of meaningful school improvement plans.

Similar efforts have been made in regard to professional development for teachers. For the past several years, Youngstown teachers lacked guidance on how to deconstruct standards, use curriculum pacing guides, and create balanced assessments. Despite the fact that this knowledge is a critical part of quality instruction, it wasn’t until Youngstown was placed under an ADC, and state review teams began identifying and sharing areas for growth, that the district began to improve curriculum support for teachers. Now, there are ADC work sessions and meetings devoted entirely to curriculum, instruction, and assessments. Although there is still much work to be done, Youngstown is in a much better place than it was before.

Another improvement has been the financial health of the district. Last year, reviews of the district’s monthly financial support revealed deficit spending of the general fund budget. But after the intervention of the ADC through work sessions and other means, the district began to reduce spending and offer ongoing trainings and meetings. Now, the district has an on-track five-year forecast for the current year and a positive cash balance for the next four years.

Considerable progress has also been made regarding our Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports. When PBIS is not implemented in a systematic way, inappropriate behaviors actually increase instead of decrease. In Youngstown, school leaders have been very specific about implementing PBIS properly this past school year. We’ve been using a measurement tool called TFI to evaluate how well buildings are implementing the PBIS framework, and the results have been positive. I’m more than happy to share additional data if you’d like it.

Finally, the Youngstown ADC also recently hired a new CEO, Justin Jennings. Mr. Jennings was hired after an extensive CEO search that was conducted by the ADC in collaboration with two Youngstown City School Board members. This collaboration demonstrates that it is possible for the ADC and the local school board to work together. It is also a clear indication that our ADC- run district is headed in the right direction. With the right leaders at the table, steady progress will continue to be made—and students will continue to benefit. Regardless where this ends up, keep the current CEO in place for a few years. We worked with the board to make this decision, and our commission was unanimous in our decision.

I know and respect many of those--on both sides of the issue--in Youngstown. I am hopeful that, in light of recent progress and greater positive engagement between the ADC and the school board, that a solution is possible. Give us the chance to work together to decide how to move forward with the best interest of the children in Youngstown at heart. As a school improvement consultant, I believe it would be unwise to abruptly change course. A change in course at this point in time would be counterproductive and detrimental to the work that has already been accomplished. I urge you to consider allowing the current ADC to stay in place with the addition of local board members.

Thank you for your time and consideration.