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To Whom It May Concern:

The written testimony I am submitting today concerns the School Transformation Board as proposed by Substitute Bill 166. I am heavily invested in the state of education in Ohio, having taught in Columbus City Schools for 22 years, and as a parent of two children who attend the Reynoldsburg City Schools.

First, this new amendment ignores the 89-12 passage of HB 154 on May 1, which would dissolve the previous State Takeover law, which was crafted in secret and passed in a day, a process widely reviled. Rather, HB 154 would dissolve current takeover models in favor of returning control to local boards, structuring more support for districts branded as ‘failures’ (\*I will leave for another time the argument related to the unreliability of the very test scores used to measure ‘failure’ for these districts), and allowing time for improvements to take place.

Rather than simplifying the process of returning local control as proposed by the House, the amended SB 166 provides an overly complicated plan of 54 pages. Most appallingly, this plan, which replaces the word ‘Takeover’ with ‘Transformation’, was also created by a secret committee, as evidenced by the fact that their meetings were not publicized, nor were members of the public invited to weigh in, and the workgroup itself involved no educators or parents, only policy makers. Those with boots on the ground were once again not invited to participate in a process we will be expected to implement, and it is indeed another top-down takeover plan, simply under another name. On page 20, the amendment seems to indicate interest in allowing the local labor union president to participate in the process, but strips that person of voting rights as a member of the commission.

In addition, this new plan directs districts to engage with a School Transformation Board the very first year of a failing grade on the school report cards. As found on page 15 of the bill, the district then would be forced to foot 50% of the bill for this takeover after the first year, then 100% in the third year, adding insult to injury- being forced to use the committee as prescribed by the state, then forced to pay for it.

This is in fact a symptom of the state of education today. In our poorest districts- and make no mistake, ALL of the districts under threat of takeover or transformation are those in which our students and families live in poverty- children and schools face challenges that no one in the House or Senate can really understand, because they don’t live it every day. Schools do not need outside studies to show the root causes of ‘failure’. We need support, by way of nurses, counselors, social workers; wraparound services for families. But, we need help providing those services in addition to academic services for our children. In each district’s budget, there is only so much room for movement- to provide more social service dollars takes away from academic dollars. The same is true for time- to provide 30 minutes of socio-emotional counseling for children takes away 30 minutes of academic instruction and practice time. Both are desperately needed, but our funds are limited, and district personnel spend a lot of time running after grant funding, which is not always long-lasting, to fund proper programming.

Of utmost concern is the fact that any form of a State Takeover or Transformation unfairly grants nearly limitless power to a single individual for all decisions related to the affected district. Checks and balances are necessary to ensure fairness and equity. Instead, this plan allows one individual to reconstitute schools, change the terms of local collective bargaining agreements, change schools’ missions - and then, if people are unhappy, the plan seems to expand parents’ options for school choice vouchers.

Last, I strongly object to the measures proposed to be taken against the ‘bottom 5%’ of schools statewide (p. 47). Someone will ALWAYS, as long as we are ranking and comparing schools, be at the bottom. Why aren’t we proposing ways to help those children, rather than disbanding those schools, dismissing the staff, disrupting those neighborhoods? I’m sure those who work and go to school in those institutions could suggest methods that could be used to improve their success.

I urge you to keep the common sense language of HB 154 in the Senate version, to truly repeal the school takeover plan in favor of a less complicated plan to help districts to succeed beyond improving test scores.

Thank you,

Beth Thompson