Thank you Chair Lehner, Vice Chair Terhar, Ranking Member Fedor, and Senate Education Committee members for giving me the opportunity today to provide testimony today on Substitute House Bill 154.

My name is Chad Aldis, and I am the Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C.

As many of you know, Fordham has been highly critical of the recent efforts to repeal ADCs. We’ve written extensively on the state’s moral obligation to intervene on behalf of students when districts struggle year after year. At the same time, we’ve also recognized some of the weaknesses of the current approach.

We believe that, overall, the Senate’s changes to House Bill 154 are a step in the right direction. However, there are some areas though that could still be improved.

**Strengths**

1. **Local districts drive initial improvement efforts.** One of the most common criticisms of ADCs is that they eliminate local control. This bill addresses those concerns by empowering districts to create and implement their own improvement plans after they are placed in “improvement” status and prior to state intervention. The bill sets guidelines for what must be included in these plans, but districts have plenty of flexibility and control.
2. **Districts—and low performing schools—are subject to improvement plans.** Each school district that is placed in improvement status is required to create an improvement plan for the entire district *and* for each school that received an overall grade of D or F. This is important since many of the most successful intervention efforts in other states have been focused on the school level rather than the district level.
3. **Districts will have access to school improvement experts and financial assistance.** The department is required to create a list of approved school improvement experts and organizations that provide root cause analyses or school improvement supports. Districts with an improvement designation are permitted to contract with these experts and organizations at the state’s expense. This is an important provision that provides districts with access to expertise and financial resources that they don’t have under current law.
4. **There is accountability for districts that fail to improve.** The House’s version of HB 154 would allow districts to continue implementing locally created improvement plans indefinitely, regardless of whether the plans actually improve student learning. That’s a clear abdication of the state’s responsibility to students and families. This bill, on the other hand, requires the state to establish a school improvement committee for districts that continue to perform poorly. This additional, state-level intervention should serve as a strong incentive for districts to implement their improvement plans with fidelity.
5. **Exit criteria from improvement status is clear and reasonable.** In order to shed the improvement designation, districts must earn an overall grade of D *and* an overall value-added score of C. Including a requirement for value-added is important because it will ensure that districts are meeting important student growth benchmarks.
6. **Creates a logical path forward for districts currently operating under an academic distress commission.** Districts currently under the control of an ADC will transition to a school improvement committee, which is a new—but improved—version of an academic distress commission. These provisions allow current ADC districts to take advantage of the same locally-driven opportunities as other districts, without giving them a free pass to start from scratch after years of poor performance.
7. **Makes school improvement committee work transparent and accountable.** Another common criticism of ADCs is that the CEO wasn’t accountable to or transparent with the local community. This sub bill addresses that complaint by requiring the director of a school improvement committee to appear before the district board and give quarterly reports about the progress of the district.

**Areas for Improvement**

1. **Waits for a district to get two consecutive overall grades of F before starting the improvement process.** Language that the Senate previously considered began the improvement planning process after only one year, which is a better approach than waiting for two. It’s hard to get an overall F—not many districts do it. It makes sense for districts that do perform that poorly to be required to craft an improvement plan and to have access to additional resources.
2. **The language related to academic improvement benchmarks within improvement plans is soft.** The Senate is right to require student performance be included as part of district and school improvement plans; however, the bill uses the word “may” rather than “shall” in regards to the use of academic performance measures from the state report card. Since districts are placed in improvement status based on their performance on state report card measures, it makes sense for them to include these measures as benchmarks in their improvement plans.
3. **Ability to put levies, especially renewal levies, on the ballot.** The sub bill reflects many lessons learned from experiences in Youngstown and Lorain. Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear to address the funding challenges that arise when a district board refuses to put a needed levy on the ballot as a means of limiting the power of the commission. If this loophole carries over into the new law, it could allow a district board to strangle the important work of a school improvement committee, despite the fact that the board previously failed—after ample opportunity—to improve academic performance.
4. **Alternative intervention plans aren’t necessary and likely bad policy.** Under the Senate’s proposed language, school districts that contract with an improvement expert or organization have up to six years to improve their performance before a school improvement committee is created. But even with all this time to improve, the bill still allows districts to petition the school transformation board for permission to implement an “alternative district intervention option” rather than become subject to a committee. This is unnecessary and a bad idea. If districts have promising, innovative ideas that could improve performance, they should be implementing them as soon as they’re placed in improvement status—not saving them for later as a means of avoiding state intervention.
5. **Consistency with ESSA.** ESSA requires school level interventions for the state’s lowest performing schools. Ohio, while implementing those provisions, has long required district level intervention on top of that. While these requirements can coexist, the Senate requires school level improvement plans as well. It would be wise to make sure that these improvements plan are done in coordination with any ESSA-related improvement plan and don’t put additional bureaucratic duties on the districts and schools.

Improving low performing schools is hard but necessary work. This policy is always going to be controversial which makes it even more important to make sure that you get it right.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I’m happy to answer any questions that you may have.