**Community Leadership Coalition on Education**

**Witness Statement**

**(September 17, 2019)**

I, Rev. Kenneth L. Simon, representing the Community Leadership Coalition on Education from the Youngstown City School District, join this effort today in support of HB 154 to end academic distress commissions here in the State of Ohio.

The Youngstown City School District has been under an Academic Distress Commission since January 2010, in which we have witnessed yearly changes in academic recovery plans that have added to the instability and failure of the district. Staff, teachers and most importantly, the students, have been subjected to numerous building changes, performance standards adjustments, unsuccessful programs and personnel changes that have created an environment not conducive for academic achievement. The Commission, comprised of mostly business persons, ignored the elected board and assumed control of the district’s decision making, without meaningful input from the board or community that elected the board. There was no intent to collaborate or address the concerns of the board about the district, because the Commission seemed to be more concerned about carrying out the agenda of the persons appointing them than improving the academic performance of the district.

Of major concern in the district is the issue of accountability. With the implementation of the Youngstown Plan and CEO model under the Commission’s oversight there has been no accountability to the taxpayers, parents, concerned citizens or the elected Board that the community voted to oversee the governance of the district. The creation and hiring of dozens of high paid executive positions which have no direct impact on classroom learning, nor job descriptions that are accessible to the public is just one of many examples of the lack of accountability that’s been created in the district. Separate meetings of the CEO and their cabinet of executives where decisions are made for the district, started out with no community input or ability to ask questions or express concerns, not even the elected Board. And for the last year there have been no public meetings at all of the leaders of the district who are making critical decisions for the district. So, when the community has concerns that are addressed to their elected Board (who do conduct regular public meetings) no answers can be given because they are denied access to critical information, particularly concerning the finances of the district.

Another critical area of concern is the financial state of the district under the commission’s watch and the CEO’s authority. Prior to the implementation of the Youngstown Plan, the district had a $23 million-dollar surplus. Two and a half years later, the district is nearing a deficit because of the unchecked decisions created by this model that has no accountability. In addition, the district is spending approximately $8 million dollars less in the classroom, which means more is being spent on personnel that have no direct impact on classroom performance.

Of greatest concern is the bottom-line results from all of the reckless spending of the district’s finances: the same failing grade the district received prior to the implementation of this plan under the academic distress commission’s watch. There has been no significant improvement in the academic performance of the students in the district, and the community has no power or authority to change the course of its’ own school system. The taxpaying citizens and concerned parents have no say or opportunity for meaningful input in the functioning of the school district their children attend.

A successful model that produced results was introduced by some of our legislators a few years ago in the original HB 70 that included wrap-around services and community involvement to eliminate some of the barriers to learning that inner city children experience in our schools. That successful model never got a chance to be implemented in the Youngstown City School District because the original Bill was high-jacked and replaced with this CEO model under the Academic Distress Commission’s watch. That is why we stood in support of HB 166, because we don’t want to see any more children of any other school district around the state experience what we have in the city of Youngstown. We were pleased, however, to hear that the House passed HB 154 with overwhelming bi-partisan support. HB 154 gets rid of unaccountable district CEOs and Academic Distress Commissions and restores local control, giving every community a voice in improving the schools in their neighborhood.

Our concern, and appeal, is that we preserve the right to a good public education for our children, which is constantly being threatened by this move to privatize schools and make them for-profit institutions at the expense of the students.

Recently, our community was informed that our local elected school board would be removed according to the HB legislation by the end of the year. We have an election in the city of Youngstown in November where among other races, four seats are up for election and eight candidates have filed to run for those seats. The election will go on and those names will be on the ballot. In the end four candidates will be elected by the citizens of Youngstown who will not be given their right to serve the people that elected them. An appointed board, who some panel will select for the mayor to choose from, will appoint a new board. Our democracy has been stripped from us and our rights have been violated.

We stand firmly along with thousands of residents from our district, whose signatures on petitions we bring to this hearing, to appeal to you our legislators to preserve public education in the State of Ohio, remove academic distress commissions and restore and maintain local control in the communities the children of those school districts attend. The future of our children is at stake.