

Testimony to the Ohio Senate Education Committee
Connie Hathorn, Former Superintendent, Youngstown City School District
June 24, 2015

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chairman Hite, Ranking Member Sawyer, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Connie Hathorn, and I am the former superintendent of the Youngstown City School District. I want to thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of the amendment you are considering today that would change the way that academic distress commissions function in the state of Ohio, and I encourage you to include this amendment in the bill.

During my tenure as superintendent, Youngstown's schools faced a series of challenges, and I was encouraged by the way that many in the community sought out solutions. However, it was clear to me that the structure of the academic distress commission did not move us into the position we needed to be in to address the many needs of the district.

By adopting the amendment proposed today, it is my belief that you will be empowering the Youngstown City school district, and any other district in Ohio that might find itself in an academic emergency in the future, to truly transform themselves into a system in which children have a chance at success. These reforms, like so many that you consider, are not about buildings and systems, but rather about the young people they are meant to serve.

Youngstown is in a unique position to comment on these reforms, as the district has been in academic distress for the better part of the last decade. Further, as superintendent, I saw firsthand the shortcomings of the current academic distress model. A lack of clear authority invested in the academic distress commission led to skirmishes between the commission and the elected members of the school board. These disagreements often led to decisions by the commission and the board that were counter to each other, making it impossible for me as the superintendent to set a course and follow it.

By creating a new model for the academic distress commission that includes appointments by the state superintendent, mayor and schoolboard, and by empowering them to hire a CEO who is

clearly in charge of management decisions, I am confident that districts who find themselves in distress will have a better road back to higher achievement.

I encourage you to include the amendment in House Bill 70, and to vote yes on the bill. Thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your leadership on this issue.

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee
Tom Humphries, Youngstown Warren Regional Chamber

July 24, 2015

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice-chairman Hite, Ranking Member Sawyer, and members of the Senate Education committee...

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning. My name is Tom Humphries, and I am the President and CEO of the Youngstown-Warren Regional Chamber of Commerce. The Regional Chamber represents over 2,900 members from across Trumbull, Mahoning and Columbiana Counties in Northeast Ohio.

As a chamber of commerce, we represent businesses, so it's no surprise that my perspective on the education reforms that you are considering today come from a business point of view. And, as you all well know, education issues and business issues do not exist in separate silos removed from each other. Issues that you all work on every day, from pre-k all the way up through workforce training, are important to our members. Rather, the two are intertwined at every turn.

A good education serves as the bedrock foundation for a successful career. I would venture to say that everyone in this room has had the benefit of access to quality educational opportunities throughout their lifetimes, and have taken advantage of those opportunities to pursue career and life goals.

Unfortunately for many young people and families in the City of Youngstown today, those fundamental opportunities simply are not available.

I am not here today to rehash the past, point a finger or seek to assign blame for the current state of affairs in which we find our city's schools. Teachers, administrators, parents, state education officials, previous legislatures and community leaders have attempted to solve these problems, and despite best efforts and genuine, well intentioned reforms, we have not seen meaningful change.

No one believes we should give up on the children of Youngstown. No one believes that they somehow deserve less of a chance than their peers born elsewhere.

For the better part of the past year a group of Youngstown community leaders, including myself, University President Jim Tressel, Diocese Bishop George Murry, Superintendent Connie Hathorn, various business leaders and retired Judge Robert Douglas have been meeting to find a way forward.

The legislation that you have before you for your consideration today is the product of that work and our collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education.

As you know, the modified academic distress commission will empower both the mayor and teachers in the district to be involved in creating the path forward. Under the new model, the mayor will appoint a member to the academic distress commission, and a teacher will be appointed by district school board. The final three members will be appointed by the state superintendent.

By reinventing the academic distress commission model, establishing a CEO to run the district and tasking the CEO with developing an improvement plan to implement over the next three years, we believe that students in Youngstown will begin to see a better future.

We believe these changes will make the Youngstown Schools a better, stronger school district, and will give families hope and children a real and meaningful opportunity to succeed. We know that they deserve it, and we owe it to them to do the hard work required to make these changes.

On behalf of the Youngstown Warren Regional Chamber, our members, and the community leaders involved in this effort, we urge your support of this amendment and ask that you include it in this bill to give our community and our kids a better deal.

Madam chair, and members of the committee, thank you for the work you are doing today to change lives for the better, and thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee
The Most Reverend George Murry, Bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown
June 24, 2015

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Hite, Ranking Member Sawyer and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Good morning. I am George Murry, Bishop of the Diocese of Youngstown. Thank you for the opportunity to be here this morning to provide my support for the amendment to House Bill 70 that would reform the academic distress commission model for school districts in Ohio who find themselves in academic distress.

As you know, the Youngstown City School District have operated in academic distress for the better part of the past decade. During that period, various stakeholders have worked to improve outcomes in the district for the students they serve. Unfortunately, the current academic distress commission model does not provide the tools needed to achieve those goals.

By adopting this amendment into House Bill 70, the district will have the necessary tools to make the schools work for the children who might otherwise be left behind and never be given the opportunity to reach their God-given potential.

The language before you today reinvents the academic distress commission and empowers local stakeholders, including the mayor, to be at the table. Further, for the first time ever, it spells out that a current teacher from the district will have a seat at the table on the distress commission. Those five people in turn will hire a Chief Executive Officer who will be accountable for developing and executing an improvement plan in the district.

As the Bishop of the Youngstown Diocese, I have an opportunity to be a part of a dynamic community. The children of our city's schools should not be left out of becoming fully engaged in that community as they grow. Every child must be given the chance to dream, to work hard, and to one day fulfill those dreams. And we must commit ourselves to the task at hand to give them those opportunities.

Madame Chair, members of the committee, I thank you for your leadership on this issue, I urge your support of this amendment, and I pray that what we do here today will change the lives of young people in my city and in our state.

At this time, I'm happy to take any questions you may have.

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee
President Jim Tressel, Youngstown State University
June 24, 2015

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Hite, Ranking Member Sawyer and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my support for the amendment to House Bill 70 that would reform the academic distress commission model for school districts in Ohio who find themselves in academic distress. Having traveled to every Metropolitan school district in Ohio and many cities nationwide, in an effort to recruit students, it is apparent to me that we need to be much more effective to serve our young people.

As you know, the Youngstown City School District has had an academic distress commission in place for the previous five years. During that period, teachers, administrators and other stakeholders have worked hard to improve the district for the students they serve. Unfortunately, the current academic distress commission model does not provide the tools needed to achieve those goals.

By adopting this amendment into House Bill 70, you will be empowering the adults in the district to take the necessary steps to make the school district work for the children who might otherwise be left behind and never be given the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The language before you today reinvents the academic distress commission as a five member board composed of three people appointed by the state superintendent of public education, one appointed by the mayor, and one teacher appointed by the district board of education. Those five people in turn will hire a Chief Executive Officer who will be accountable for developing and executing an improvement plan in the district.

These two changes, the reinvention of the commission and the creation of the CEO position, are essential because they ensure that state and local leaders work in partnership to form the commission and that there is one person who is expressly responsible for the day-to-day operations of the district.

Since being installed as the President of Youngstown State University, I have joined together with an array of community leaders and state education leaders to develop a plan to bring our schools back. This is the culmination of that work, and I urge you to support this amendment and House Bill 70.

Thank you.