



Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 165
Academic Distress Commission
Before the Senate Education Committee
The Honorable Andrew Brenner, Chair
By Susan Kaeser, LWV Ohio Specialist
May 25, 2021

Chairman Brenner, Vice-Chairman Blessing, Ranking Minority Member Fedor, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. My name is Susan Kaeser. I am a public education advocate, a kindergarten volunteer, and the education specialist for the League of Women Voters of Ohio.

A basic principle of the League of Women Voters is that every person should have access to free public education that provides equal opportunity for all. Our system of public education is critical to our democracy. I am grateful for the League's commitment to public education. We do not take lightly shortcomings in public education, and are concerned about the most effective use of the tools of government to ensure all children and communities benefit from this wonderful part of our collective history as a nation, our system of public schools.

A paramount duty of the State of Ohio is to provide for an efficient, safe, secure, and high-quality school system. It shares this responsibility with locally elected boards of education who provide oversight and direction to the local school district as it delivers education that serves the community. The locally elected board of education is close enough to the daily life of schools to monitor their quality, and close enough to their community to know if public expectations are being met. As elected officials they are also accountable to the voter. It is a solid approach to governance.

We opposed HB 70 that created Academic Distress Commissions in large part because they are not accountable to voters and taxpayers, and lack the trust of the community.

We are glad to support SB 165 because local governance matters. This legislation provides a reasonable path to return local governance to the elected board of education, focus on educational improvements, and demonstrate a graceful transition away from the unaccountable Academic Distress Commissions. While it focuses narrowly on the Lorain City Schools, it addresses the League's primary concern: the need for oversight and accountability by the elected board of education.

The elected board of education is fundamental to ensuring that public funds serve their intended purposes, and for making school districts accountable to taxpayers. ADC are neither responsive nor accountable. An elected board is the legitimate body to guide the decisions in the interest of the public.

The Academic Distress Commission strategy assumes that school performance as measured by standardized tests is an accurate measure of quality, and when students fail to earn high enough test scores, it is a governance problem.

The LWVO rejects this thinking. First, because test scores are a more reliable measure of income than of student learning or the quality of instruction provided, they should not be used for any other purpose than a snapshot in time assessment of student performance. They are not robust enough for making serious judgments about other issues such as the quality of education or the ability of the elected board to govern.

Second, it is unclear why low test scores should be solved through a change in governance. It is not clear why something as disruptive, untested, and unaccountable as an Academic Distress Commission is the logical solution. It is a stretch in logic to conclude that the elected board lacks the commitment to student success or cannot be trusted to think about the best interests of the community it serves.

LWVO supports SB 165 as a first step, but we urge you to reconsider the wisdom of state interference in the local governance of public schools. We urge you to focus on providing school districts the resources they need to do their jobs effectively, and on supporting families so they can provide their children the safety and security they need to make the most of the opportunities afforded them in their public schools.

Thank you for considering this testimony.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio was formed in May 1920 out of Ohio's woman suffrage movement. The League is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The League has over 4000 members and 32 local Leagues across the Buckeye State.