

Jan Resseger: Cutting State Funding while Intensifying Test-and-Punish Won't Improve Public Schools—March 24 blog.

Jan Resseger takes a deep dive into the continuing saga of the state's HB70 of the 131st General Assembly. Via HB70, the State of Ohio took over the management of Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland school districts due to their low test scores. These districts were all among the lowest income districts in the state.

The state takeover legislation was slipped into HB70, passing without public hearings. The issue in these 3 districts is poverty. Even legislators should know that poverty equals low test scores. But state officials look for easy fixes while appropriating less funds than necessary for school district success. Many state officials suggest that the problem of low test scores is a function of low performing teachers and administrators. Most of them don't believe that but they pontificate the party's talking points, nonetheless.

Jan's thoughtful article should be required reading for all state legislators.

[Cutting State Funding while Intensifying Test-and-Punish Won't Improve Public Schools](#)

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Just over a decade ago, the Ohio legislature added a huge amendment to another bill, passed the bill without hearings, and thereby established the state takeover of Ohio school districts deemed to be in academic distress. Over several years, under the provisions of Ohio House Bill 70, the state took over the public school systems in Youngstown, Lorain and East Cleveland and imposed state-appointed Academic Distress Commissions to operate the public schools.

What became known as the Youngstown Plan was unpopular from the beginning, and in the biennial budget that passed in 2021, the legislature provided that these school districts could once again be governed by their locally elected boards of education if they proposed a school improvement plan and after three years, improved their standardized test scores. Lorain and East Cleveland school districts have managed to escape state takeover; only Youngstown continues to be operated by a state-appointed Academic Distress Commission.

[East Cleveland, Youngstown, and Lorain all rank](#) in the bottom ten of the state's over 600 school districts in terms of median family income. It is well known that a school district's aggregate standardized test scores correlate with family income. In his 2017 book *In [The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better](#)*, Harvard University testing expert, Daniel Koretz explains the problem with test-and-punish school reform based on comparing school districts by their capacity to raise test scores quickly: "One aspect of the great inequity of the American educational system is that disadvantaged kids tend to be clustered in the same schools. The causes are complex, but the result is simple: some schools have far lower average scores.... Therefore, if one requires that all students must hit the proficient target by a certain date, these low-scoring schools will face far more demanding targets for gains than other schools do. This was not an accidental byproduct of the notion that 'all children can learn to a high level.' It was a deliberate and prominent part of many of the test-based accountability reforms.... Unfortunately... it seems that no one asked for evidence that these ambitious targets for gains were realistic. The specific targets were often an automatic consequence of where the Proficient standard was placed and the length of time schools were given to bring all students to that standard, which are both arbitrary." (*The Testing Charade*, pp. 129-130)

The Youngstown plan epitomized the Ohio legislature's long commitment to test-and-punish school reform. The state did, however, research and begin to phase in a new school funding formula that measured school districts' real costs and the added cost for services needed in school districts serving concentrations of poor children, English language learners and other students with special needs. The

legislature began phasing in the Fair School Funding Plan in the two year budgets passed in 2021 and 2023. Although the final phase-in was to have been completed in the budget passed in June, 2025, the legislature failed to complete and fully fund the phase-in. In the recently passed budget, the legislature also diverted what [Policy Matters Ohio identifies](#) as \$2.4 billion over the biennium to private school tuition vouchers. And the legislature reduced state revenue with a major income tax cut.

[Policy Matters Ohio provides data](#) documenting how the state's funding for every Ohio school district in the FY 2026-2027 state budget passed last June compares to what the school district received from the state in Fiscal Year 2025. Here is the amount of state funding lost in the three districts affected by the Youngstown Plan:

- Youngstown's funding gap below FY 2025 funding over the biennium is -\$4,373,668.
- Lorain's funding gap below FY 2025 funding over the biennium is -\$4,093,602.
- East Cleveland's funding gap below FY 2025 funding over the biennium is -\$1,009,996.

There is something seriously wrong here. The East Cleveland and Lorain school districts, which have managed to climb out of state takeover, do not have adequate local property taxing capacity to cover the loss of millions of dollars in state funding, and Youngstown clearly cannot afford to make up for lost state support. Last week, "[Lorain City Schools announced](#) it must cut nearly \$17.5 million from its budget, terminating 167 staff positions in its next budget." The school district has an 11 mill property tax levy on the May primary election ballot; only if it passes, will the school district be able to balance its budget.

As school funding experts, [C. Kirabo Jackson, Rucker C. Johnson, and Claudia Persico demonstrated](#) in their well-known 2015 paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, "For children from low-income families, **increasing per-pupil spending** yields large improvements in educational attainment, wages, family income, and reductions in the annual incidence of adult poverty. All of these effects are statistically significant and are robust to a rich set of controls for confounding policies and trends." (Emphasis is mine.)

In a surprising move, a federal government agency, the U.S. General Accounting Office (the GAO) has recently released a report criticizing the federal government's adoption of a test-and-punish strategy in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act—the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that replaced No Child Left Behind (the original federal test-and-punish law). Last Friday, *Education Week's* [Alyson Klein reported](#):

"Schools that educate large numbers of students of color and children from low-income families are far more likely than others to be identified as the lowest-performing in their state, according to a [recent report from the Government Accountability Office](#), Congress' investigative arm. One eye-popping data point: For every 5% increase in the percentage of students living in poverty, a school had a corresponding 42% increased risk of getting flagged as seriously low-performing (a designation called "comprehensive support and improvement" school under the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, the primary federal school accountability and funding law)."

Klein continues: "Some factors identified by the GAO made schools less likely to be flagged as low-performing. For instance, suburban schools were 24% less likely to be identified as seriously struggling, even controlling for other factors, the GAO found. And large schools were 46% less likely than small schools to be singled out as very low-performing. Schools with fewer students per teacher were also less likely to make the lowest performers list. If a school gained five more students without adding more teachers, its odds of being identified as low-performing increased by 2%, the GAO found. What's more, academic performance in these struggling schools appears to have taken an even larger hit from the COVID-19 pandemic than in other schools... Educators in schools that got out from under the lowest-

performing status said in the latest GAO report that they were able to improve academic performance by focusing on school culture, getting staff on board with improvement efforts, fostering staff collaboration, relying on student data to inform teaching and learning, and figuring out ways to sustain improvement.”

Interestingly in Ohio’s state school takeovers over the past decade, the Academic Distress Commissions in Youngstown and Lorain hired out of state technocratic reformers as CEOs whose leadership was rejected immediately and persistently by their communities. In East Cleveland, [the Academic Distress Commission hired Henry Pettiegrew, II](#), a public school administrator in another greater Cleveland school district, and a leader who engaged students with an education philosophy much like what GAO recommends today: “When you have children earning drone certifications and esport competitions, we’ve now opened up, in our career tech, we’ve added new programming like exercise science and manufacturing... We are coming back. We are fighting back. We will show and demonstrate success.” After East Cleveland was released from state takeover and the state’s Academic Distress Commission, the elected East Cleveland Board of Education retained Pettiegrew to continue leading the district as superintendent.

However, the kind of school leadership and school improvement led by educators like Pettiegrew and described in the GAO report are far harder to accomplish when lawmakers reduce a school district’s funding by millions of dollars.