



## Youngstown school district needs strong guiding hand

Tuesday, July 1, 2014

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the academically challenged Youngstown City School District has state education officials worried. The failure of the system to climb out of the academic cellar has State Superintendent of Public Instruction Richard Ross and his staff warning of dire consequences if significant progress isn't made.

Ross, like his predecessor, has also made it clear that the Youngstown City School District Academic Distress Commission, which is a creature of state law, is ultimately responsible for the system's academic recovery.

In this regard, the individual who chairs the commission has more power than the superintendent and all seven elected board of education members combined.

That does not sit well with the board, others in the system or some Youngstown residents, but that's the price of failure. The district is only one of two in Ohio being overseen by a distress commission.

The panel was appointed four years ago, and in that time has had three leaders. The first was Dr. Debra A. Mettee, superintendent of the Springfield Local School District. Then came Dr. Adrienne O'Neill, a veteran educator from Canton, who clearly established the pecking order — with her at the top.

O'Neill rubbed most of the board members the wrong way because she did not buy their argument that since they were elected by the people, they therefore were of equal standing with the commission.

Much to our regret, O'Neill had to step down for health reasons, but she has left a detailed road map for arriving at the destination — namely a C grade (which roughly translates to continuous improvement on the state's former rating scale), or better on the state's proficiency tests.

O'Neill's successor was sworn in last week, and while he has the credentials and experience to lead the distress commission, we wonder if Joffrey Jones has the intestinal fortitude to deal with the push back that's bound to come from board members and others.

It is encouraging that Jones has served as superintendent in a school district similar demographically to Youngstown. Jones retired from the Euclid City School District in 2012 after a 10-year stint, and before that worked for 12 years in the Mentor Exempted Village School District. He was the assistant superintendent for seven years and a building administrator for five years.

In his comments to The Vindicator after his swearing-in as the distress commission chairman, Jones

talked about collaboration, but also left little doubt about who's in charge.

"I like to be collaborative unless being collaborative is not working, and then I have to make decisions," the new chairman said.

### Substantive improvement

Given the demand from the state that the Youngstown schools show substantive improvement in their test scores, Jones and the other members of the commission must guard against getting bogged down in the kind of narrow-minded thinking that has been the bane of the school system's existence for too long.

During her two years as chairwoman, O'Neill was unapologetic for the no-nonsense way she conducted business. And, she refused to be cowed by members of the school board and others.

Jones, as chairman, will need all his expertise and experience to keep the district on the path to academic recovery that has been approved by the state superintendent.

We would remind the community that the district is on thin ice, and there has been an informal discussion about the possibility of the failing schools being turned into state-run charter schools.

If we've said it once, we said it numerous times: The clock is ticking.