

# Giving more than grants



This edition's *Conversation* features two Philanthropy Ohio members serving on school district academic distress commissions in Lorain and Youngstown. State law requires the Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction to establish a commission for any school district declared in academic emergency, failing to make adequate progress for four or more consecutive years. Jennifer Roller has served on the Youngstown Academic Distress Commission that was established in 2010 and Patricia O'Brien was appointed to serve on the second Lorain City Schools Academic Distress Commission. Under state law, the commission recommends a new CEO for the district, who is paid by the Ohio Department of Education, has the authority of the district superintendent and school board (except for putting a levy on the ballot) and reports to the commission. Youngstown and Lorain are the only such designated districts in the state.



**Patricia O'Brien**  
Executive Director  
The Stocker Foundation

**Q** What led to your appointment to the academic distress commission?

**A** Although you would have to ask State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria for confirmation, I feel certain my appointment to Lorain's Academic Distress Commission (ADC) happened for a combination personal/professional reasons. I was born and raised in Lorain.

A few months before entering first grade, my parents purchased their first home on the Eastside to be closer to Lake Erie. My parents worked hard, instilling in my sister and me the importance and value of education. In our house, it wasn't "if" we were going to college, it was "when" we would be going to college. I am a product of Lorain's public school system, having attended Emerson Elementary, Longfellow Middle and Lorain High School. Professionally, for the past 19 years, I have worked for The Stocker Foundation which has a longstanding and deep connection to the Lorain community and school district.

**Q** Why did you agree to serve?

**A** I felt a sense of civic responsibility to serve, helping change the academic trajectory for Lorain's children. I also agreed to serve because of The Stocker Foundation's work in the early childhood education space, promoting kindergarten readiness, increased parental engagement along with helping students read at or above grade level by third grade. Because The Stocker Foundation supports programs (e.g., in-school, afterschool, summer reading enrichment; book distributions; reading tutoring; teacher professional development and special initiatives with public school districts) in nine communities across the United States, I am able to share best-practice information with other ADC members and CEO Hardy as appropriate.

**Q** What has been the biggest challenge? And how did you overcome it – or attempt to?

**A** Many challenges exist, one of the biggest being a lack of time. On

Friday, May 26, State Superintendent Paolo DeMaria appointed Tony Richardson Chair during the first Lorain ADC meeting. And, just like that per HB 70, the 60-day clock to hire a CEO started ticking. Remember, superintendent searches take three or four months to complete (maybe longer). We had 60 days to hire a CEO. To overcome time constraints, we worked with a national consulting firm instead of conducting the search on our own and kept to a very strict interview and hiring timeline. During those 60 days, the significance of Lorain ADC's ability to stick together and work as a team in a hostile environment cannot be understated.

**Q** What's your biggest lesson learned?

**A** Lorain is still at the beginning of its journey. I know there will be many lessons learned along the way. For now, the most profound thing I have learned is if lasting change has even the smallest hope of taking hold, the first thing a community must do is fundamentally change the culture of the district (e.g., from focus on adults to focus on students; from professional isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility; higher levels of parental engagement; and diagnosing and responding to students' learning needs, starting with prekindergarten instruction, etc.). I would add that Lorain City Schools has a lot of great teachers and 6,500 students who deserve better. All of the work CEO Hardy completed to develop *The Lorain Promise* is exceptional and exemplifies this approach to urban school turnaround/transformation. I am genuinely excited to be part of what comes next!

## Q How does your participation impact your foundation?

**A** Already, The Stocker Foundation has begun having deeper-level conversations about educational systems and policies on a local, state and national level. We are also open to opportunities to collaborate with other funders toward the betterment of public school districts. Right before the start of the 2017-18 school year, the community foundation's executive committee announced the establishment of a pass-through fund, *Lorain City Schools - Road to Excellence*. This is a fund that will be used to drive educational change and/or serve as a springboard to improve student achievement. To get things started, each local Lorain County foundation (Nord Family, Stocker, and Nordson Corporation Foundation) matched the \$25,000 already contributed by the community foundation. Foundation directors will continue to meet with CEO Hardy to listen and consider possible uses for the dollars. It is important to acknowledge and thank The Stocker Foundation Board for supporting my participation on the ADC in terms of time away from the office during the interview process, ongoing meetings, classroom visits, etc.



**Jennifer Roller**

President  
The Raymond John  
Wean Foundation

## Q What led to your appointment to the Academic Distress Commission?

**A** In spring and summer of 2015, there was an abundance of news articles, television reports and community stakeholder meetings regarding HB 70, the state's takeover of "failing" school districts. I had conversations with local leaders who had been approached about membership of what would become the new ADC. We discussed the up and down sides to participation, where the ensuing work aligned with the foundation and what the foundation might offer in terms of support.

I also had been a part of meetings where the state of the Youngstown schools had been discussed. At the close of one meeting, I was asked my opinion on next steps and whether I'd be interested in participating. At that time, and every other occasion, I made my opinions clear. The district was indisputably in trouble with decreases in student enrollment and achievement and increases in suspensions and student behavioral issues. And, compounding those issues was a growing dysfunction in the operations of the school board, a system that allowed a few folks of influence to make decisions that would affect all residents. I had concerns that the school board had become undemocratic and that any participation on my part would be one that was inclusive of the voices of residents.

My initial conversation with then-Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Richard Ross began with my recommendation of two other notable community leaders who could serve and represent the Valley well, with a strong focus on students and families. My opinions and ideas about the schools and the state involvement were received. I explained my disappointment with the process up until this point, as well as my personal and professional views regarding the critical nature of resident and community engagement for positive and lasting change.

## Q Why did you agree to serve?

**A** I have a personal stake in this system having attended elementary, junior high and high school in the Youngstown City School District. Further, I am now, and imagine that I will always be, an advocate for and ardent supporter of public education and I am also a realist and a problem-solver. I think of the Youngstown Plan and the Academic Distress Commission as a temporary response to challenges as they currently exist. I joined the ADC as a devoted steward working with the goals of returning the Youngstown schools to their rightful owners: the residents of Youngstown.

## Q What has been your biggest challenge?

**A** If we thought HB 70 unclear in policy, practice has been a serious

challenge. The role of the school board is now one that is seemingly less about community engagement and more about confronting what is now law. The latter brings with it barriers that distract us from what I believe to be our true focus of ensuring the district operates in a manner consistent with fostering student achievement and success.

## Q How did you overcome it, or attempt to?

**A** I'm sure that I haven't overcome it. We're talking about a huge shift in culture, meaning changing attitudes and behaviors. What I do is attempt to engage friends and foes, having learned that working only with those with whom you agree doesn't strengthen your argument or the cause; focus on keeping those who have the most to lose – students and families – central to the conversation; and set goals, those we can achieve and some that we likely won't, but will have a grand time trying.

## Q Biggest lesson learned?

**A** Not as much a lesson learned as reinforcement of what we all know: change doesn't come easy. And, we're very much in the thick of it. I'd be happy to answer this question in a couple of years.

## Q How does your participation impact your foundation?

**A** The Raymond John Wean Foundation has made significant investments in Youngstown and realizes how critical its schools are to the future of the city and the entire region. There are times when I tread lightly, being thoughtful to keep distinct my role as president of the foundation and vice chairperson of the Academic Distress Commission. There is, of course, overlap. One such occasion was using the foundation's role as convener to assist in outreach and engagement of students, families, school personnel and community to an open forum to solicit input on the characteristics and experiences a successful CEO for the district would possess. Overall, my participation has been positive – allowing me to remain connected and informed of what matters most as the foundation seeks to increase school, college and career readiness. ■