Hidden deep in the woods about 4 miles south of Sunbury in Delaware County — a site so remote that the gathering was interrupted by mice at least twice — the Columbus Board of Education held a special meeting Tuesday to talk frankly about its own perceived dysfunction.

Leading the counseling session in a rustic structure at the district’s Spruce Run Environmental Study Center was Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, which represents more than 70 of the nation’s largest urban school districts.

Casserly said he was there to try to get the board — in danger of being taken over by the state — in a place where it was moving more students forward.

“We’re not going to blow any smoke here,” Casserly said. “We’re going to talk frankly about what fuels improvement and what doesn’t.”

Casserly said he’s been monitoring the board’s twice-monthly meetings, and noticed that they’re all over the place, and didn’t deal much with student performance. That sends a message, he said.

It didn’t take long for the board, particularly its two new members, to get frank.

Board member Jennifer Adair, appointed in January, said she is “frustrated” because it seems to her that the board’s internet-televised meetings are for smiling and taking pictures, and nothing gets accomplished.

“We are dysfunctional,” Adair said. “We have to own that.”

The Tuesday evening meeting, set in a dark wooded lot accessed by a long gravel road that is about a 25-mile drive from the administration offices Downtown, was a perfect example, Adair said.
“I didn’t even know where I was coming,” Adair said. “That’s dysfunctional. I’m here to do a job.”

Board Vice President Michael Cole responded that he was frustrated, in part, over “disrespectful” comments from two former board members with whom he often disagreed. He alluded to another member, Eric Brown, who is still on the board, who often voted with the other two.

“Let’s just put it on the table,” Cole said. “I’m glad two-thirds of it is gone.” But he added that he disagrees that the board is dysfunctional.

At one point, board President Gary Baker chimed in, saying he hoped that the newspaper wouldn’t write a story saying the board is in disarray. Just then a mouse interjected itself into the meeting, startling Superintendent Talisa Dixon and bringing a laugh to the room.

But member James Ragland said he wasn’t in a laughing mood, with 51,000 students counting on him. He asked his fellow members if they were willing to lose an election for the sake of helping kids.

“That’s what this is about,” Ragland said. “What is real is that we have to do better.”