

State of the Schools

Eric S. Gordon, CEO

September 30, 2014

Good afternoon, and thank you for attending today's *State of the Schools Address*.

I want to begin by thanking The City Club of Cleveland for again hosting this event, my fourth *State of the Schools Address* as your CEO. I'd also like to take a moment to thank the sponsors listed in your program for making it possible for The City Club to host the Address here at the Renaissance Hotel Ballroom, thereby expanding our audience and allowing for a number of my students and families to be part of the event.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to recognize a number of people in attendance today who have been constant supporters of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and our important work. First, I want to acknowledge Mayor Frank G. Jackson, who continues to be a strong advocate for education in our community, both in his long-term vision and expectations for our city's children, in his daily work as Chair of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance and in monitoring the execution of *The Cleveland Plan*. Mayor Jackson, thank you.

I also want to thank the members of the Cleveland Board of Education. Led by Chair Denise Link and Vice-Chair Louise Dempsey, the nine members of the Cleveland Board of Education are truly remarkable servant leaders who, again over the past school year, have put in countless hours ensuring the effective execution of *The Cleveland Plan*. Several Board members are here today; please join me in recognizing them.

I must also thank all of 6,875 CMSD Educators, who work in our classrooms and schools, on our buses and in our offices, in our cafeterias and on our playgrounds – people who serve in countless ways to support our children



every single day. While most of our Educators are at work right now with our scholars, a few are here today and I ask that we take a moment to acknowledge each of them for their hard work as well.

I would especially like to acknowledge the members of my senior leadership team who are here with us today. A lot is expected of me and of us and none of what we have accomplished to date would have happened if not for the strong work of many effective leaders.

Thank you also to our partners, who helped form *The Cleveland Plan* and who remain highly engaged with its implementation today, including the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Cleveland Teachers Union, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation and Breakthrough Charter Schools.

And to the countless other friends, partners, and supporters, too numerous to mention by name but worthy of recognition, a special thanks to each of you for your individual and collective contributions to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and our schools.

One year ago, I began the 2013 State of the Schools Address with a sobering message. We had just received our State Report Card, and the news was grim. It was grim, and all too familiar. We had failed in achievement. Failed in progress. We had failed to close the achievement gap and our grade when it came to graduating kids was an F.

Plain Dealer columnist Phillip Morris captured the essence of the less than inviting introduction to my speech last year, calling CMSD's lack of progress "painfully obvious". He also said, "Cleveland's Public Schools' CEO Eric Gordon is noticeably thinning out. He also appears to be losing hair."

Describing what he saw as the replacement of my boyish face with that of a grimaced visage of King Sisyphus, the reporter said, "It's the face of a man tasked with rolling an enormous boulder up a steep hill...A hill that may prove impossible to crest."

Certainly the writer wasn't the first, and won't be the last, to lament on the task of turning around long struggling school districts like Cleveland's. In fact, many, many others over the years have acknowledged the magnitude of the challenges we face, and expressed fear that these challenges may indeed be insurmountable.

Without a doubt, the task of raising achievement scores and graduation rates in a district that had long failed both academically and fiscally is an incredibly heavy lift. Under the weight of years of declining local economies, cuts in state and federal funding, and a general distrust of public education, especially in America's cities, it is easy to see the glass as half empty rather than half full.

Fortunately, CMSD's story is not the story of Sisyphus – the story of one man alone, pushing a boulder partway up a hill only to watch it roll back down. One thing that makes Cleveland unique, in fact, is that our story is one of many people, all working together, some pushing from behind and others pulling us forward, all with a common goal of ensuring we reach the top. And our top, of course, is measured in student achievement.

After last year's State of the Schools Address, the *Plain Dealer* writer called for tangible evidence of progress, while at the same time acknowledging the steep climb and the fact that at the beginning of *The Cleveland Plan* journey, small victories do matter.

"Sometimes the needle of cultural change," he wrote, "moves imperceptibly before it suddenly accelerates."

As we started school last school year, the ground-breaking House Bill 525 had been passed into law, setting the stage for real reform in our city's schools; Issue 107 had passed, enabling us to reverse devastating program cuts as we began the school year; and, the District and Cleveland Teachers Union had just completed negotiating a new labor agreement with significant changes in how teachers were hired, fired, and paid, and how they used their time. When I began my State of the Schools address last year, we were just 27 days into the school year – our first year with needed reforms in place – and CMSD was already different, albeit imperceptibly at first.

In fact, changes that were still imperceptible one year ago accelerated dramatically during the course of a school year that can only be described as a year of disruption. The 2013-14 school year will likely be remembered as the year that CMSD shook the status quo to its core and kept our promise to Cleveland voters that the District cannot and will not tolerate business as usual in any area of operation.

With *The Cleveland Plan*, House Bill 525, Issue 107, and our new collective bargaining agreements fully in place, we introduced entirely new processes and procedures throughout the year, turning a backward-thinking system into a forward-moving one. The changes we made abolished decades of long-held practices and put many in our district and community outside their comfort zones. With *The Cleveland Plan* fully underway, the bold and dramatic changes so many people envisioned for Cleveland's public schools were suddenly becoming real.

Gone were the cycles of layoffs and callbacks for a staff that became used to budget deficits and revolving doors. In its place was a much healthier District, positioned for the first time

in 10 years to recruit and attract new talent to fill hundreds of teaching positions.

Gone were the work rules that put the privileges of adults before the needs of children. A landmark collective bargaining agreement reduced the sway of seniority and for the first time allowed the District to make staffing decisions based on what's best for kids.

Gone were the subjective checklists that declared nearly every educator to have "Exceeded Expectations," even when the ratings of their students were scraping bottom. In the year of disruption, more thorough teacher evaluations differentiated the very best from the most struggling educators and included real student achievement and growth data as part of every teacher's and principal's performance ratings.

Gone were the days when every educator got a raise, simply by working another year. Under new differentiated compensation systems, pay, for the first time, was tied to measurable progress and outcomes.

Gone were the days of top-down management and a bureaucratic central office that governed the work of 100 schools with a one-size-fits all approach. In the year of disruption, student-based budgeting shifted spending authority away from the central office to those who know the needs of their students and schools best.

Gone were the days when poor performers continued to work in the district year after year without consequence. The non-renewal of a small number of underperforming employees last May drew great attention across the district and community, and for many, the changes accelerating throughout the year became real.

Last year, I stood before you on the 27th day of school and promised you that, because our report card looked the same, the district must

be different. One year later, after a year of disruption, I am here to reflect on the results of the dramatic changes we implemented last year. So what's different? A lot.

- After years of program cuts and staff layoffs, 232 new teachers and 27 new principals and assistant principals have been recruited to and hired by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District in the last year.
- In a decentralized school system, 85% of the teachers selected for positions in our schools were chosen by teams of principals, teachers, and parents instead of being assigned by central office based upon seniority rules.
- With a comprehensive new evaluation system 14 percent of CMSD's 2,861 classroom teachers were rated as Accomplished, the very best possible performance on a new rigorous rating system; 4% were rated as Unskilled and are now on growth plans. The remaining 82% of teachers are rated as either Developing or Skilled and continue to work on their own professional improvement.
- With a differentiated compensation system in place, those 14 percent of CMSD's teachers rated accomplished received a raise this school year based on their performance. Many other skilled educators are making progress toward salary increases in the coming year, also driven by their performance and growth instead of simply their longevity.
- With student-based budgeting, schools now control 70% of their annual budget compared to the less than 2 percent last school year.
- With greater autonomy given to our schools, money now follows the student, and CMSD schools have more authority over spending, hiring, and enrollment as they are increasingly held accountable for outcomes.

- With an unwavering commitment to delivering a quality education and ensuring results for Cleveland's kids, 42 poor performing teachers and administrators were recommended for non-renewal and exited from our schools last May.

The disruption of the 2013-14 school year was more than a shift in organizational culture; it was truly a top-to-bottom overhaul of the entire Cleveland public school system – a year of disruption that yielded real, tangible results.

Those system changes were all designed with one goal in mind; to expand the number of high quality school choices for our students and their families. And, in 2013-14 CMSD continued to focus on school quality and choice as well.

First, the inspired work of school design teams during the 2013-14 school year enabled us to start this year with four additional new high school models:

- The locally designed Cleveland High School for Digital Arts now offers students hands-on experience in game design, recording-arts technology and digital filmmaking, integrating digital arts with core courses.
- Bard High School Early College, operating in partnership with New York-based Bard College, enables graduates of this early college model to earn both a high school diploma and a two-year college degree in four years.
- Two more high schools developed with a \$3 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation opened this year: E³agle Academy, which uses the Socratic Method of inquiry to engage students in problem solving, and PACT, the Problem-Based Academy for Critical Thinking. Both are pioneering systems among a handful of their kind in the nation and are based on mastery of standards, using flexible scheduling and a blend of classroom and online instruction.

All of these new schools take advantage of flexibilities the schools now have in how student and teacher schedules are constructed, on the length of their school day and the design of their school year calendar, to make learning – not seat time – the constant for our students. To ensure college and workforce readiness, each of these schools are also distinguished for by flexible learning spaces and use of modern technologies. These four new models join a growing portfolio of choices for Cleveland students and families, including Campus International School, our four Gender Academies, our three New Tech High Schools, our three John Hay Academies, Ginn Academy, and MC²STEM High School, to name a few.

Similar design work is in progress today on new programs to be offered at three of CMSD's existing high schools – John Marshall, Max S. Hayes and the Cleveland School of the Arts – in the fall of 2015 when their dynamic new school facilities open as well. And through a partnership with Ford Next Generation Learning, CMSD is actively working to engage employers, educators, and community leaders in building and sustaining career and interest-themed academies to reinvent CMSD's remaining three career centers in the year ahead too.

In addition to the District's own work to offer new school choices, CMSD has additionally partnered with 13 high-performing community or charter schools. Carefully screened and selected based on past performance or, in the case of new models, the likelihood of strong performance, these schools not only offer additional choices for families across our community but they also model a much needed shift in Ohio and the nation away from the fight over which schools own our children toward who best serves our children's academic needs.

By forming partnerships instead of rivalries, the district and charter schools now explore together how to serve all students more effectively, how to create easier access to a family's school of choice, and yes, even how to use existing school buildings more effectively.

Even as we continue our work to build new schools and launch new school models, the District takes seriously its responsibility to take aggressive corrective action in our lowest performing schools.

With 13 Investment schools identified last fall, and an additional 10 schools identified in the spring for corrective action this year, CMSD educators, along with local and national partners are fully focused on improving results across our city.

In addition to the implementation of such nationally recognized learning models as *Expeditionary Learning*, *The New Tech Network*, the *Center for Transformative Teacher Training*, and *The Leader In Me*, which is based on Stephen Covey's work around the habits of effective children and teens, our Investment Schools have benefited from a strong partnership with Cleveland's United Way and several local agencies, each of which have implemented a community wrap-around strategy in these schools and with a rapidly growing partnership with MetroHealth to bring school-based health services to these students and their families.

Even as school-based design work continues across the city, CMSD is leading the charge in rapidly expanding access to early childhood education across the city as well. Since March 2014, the Pre4CLE initiative added another 468 preschool seats as part of its effort to make high-quality early childhood education available to as many children in the city as possible. CMSD was able to expand access to

four year old pre-school by 392 seats this fall and our community partners were able to add an additional 76 seats.

The design of new school options with flexible spaces and modern technologies, the investment in wrap-around services in our schools, the exploration of space needs for charter schools and the expansion of early childhood classroom spaces across our city underscores the need for a comprehensive facilities plan for our district and our community.

Here again, the District has taken deliberate action in the last school year. In June 2014, the Board of Education adopted a Master Facilities Plan aligned with *The Cleveland Plan* to ensure that CMSD continues to have the flexibility it needs to introduce new school models, to recruit and retain families into an increasing number of quality school options, to expand early childhood learning spaces and improve our overall facilities footprint in the next five years.

On October 7, Cleveland's citizens can begin casting their vote on Issue 4, the District's critical bond campaign which will allow CMSD to replace approximately 20 schools, to improve an additional 20 to 23 schools, and to maintain our entire facilities footprint while protecting our state's generous 2 to 1 matching investment. More than 30 neighborhood meetings and a protracted informational campaign illustrates the District's commitment to helping citizens to fully understand how the current bond issue, which won't increase taxes, is designed to support the robust school design strategy that is the cornerstone of *The Cleveland Plan*.

Again, outputs mean little if they do not result in outcomes, and I am pleased to share some of CMSD's early outcomes.

As part of *The Cleveland Plan*, last year we focused aggressively on increasing meaningful parent and family engagement. We worked to

ensure that every parent attended at least one open house, student support team meeting, parent-teacher conference or other similarly meaningful event with their child's teacher and as a result, 73.2% of parents district-wide engaged in a positive, meaningful engagement by the end of the year. At this year's Open House events, which occurred three weeks ago, schools reported a 9% increase in participation among high school parents and a remarkable 26% gain in participation in our K-8 schools. With a newly designed school calendar, which this year added specific days throughout the year specifically designed to engage parents and families, we expect this high level of meaningful parent engagement to continue to grow. And we all know how vital meaningful parent support is for our students and their academic success.

By offering an impressive array of new school choices, deploying recruiters to help families identify quality school options, working with *The Cleveland Plan's* Transformation Alliance to market best choices for all families, and focusing on an improved customer experience when interacting with the District, we slowed student enrollment loss in 2013-14 and this year's early enrollment figures are looking even better.

But engaging families more effectively and attracting and retaining students only matters if our academic outcomes are improving. Here again, CMSD is seeing early signs of progress.

Last fall, when new State reading requirements for third grade went into effect during the 2013-14 school year, only 37% of CMSD's third graders were on-track to meet state requirements. However, with intensive support that extended into the summer, we raised that number from 37% to 86% by the start of this school year. Additional supports already in place are providing needed intervention to put every third grader on track for promotion.

The forward movement is evident in even more ways on the 2013-14 report card. This year, CMSD improved on 15 state achievement indicators while losing ground on 7. Fortunately, the positive rate of change is more than 2 to 1, with CMSD clearly making not only gains, but more gains on more indicators. These positive gains are only a beginning, as CMSD met no state indicator goals this year. However, the result shows the movement we are looking for, in a Performance Index that was one-tenth of a point shy of a district record high set in the 2006 school year.

One of the most reassuring signs we saw this year was significant movement in our gap closing report card measure. The state's measure of Cleveland's success in closing the gap in reading, math, and graduation rates regardless of race, gender, or income increased by 20.1% this year.

We also saw some positive movement on our three-year value-added growth measures as well this year. CMSD's lowest performing students maintained a grade of C, meaning students earned a year's worth of growth for a year's worth of instruction, while our three-year average score for students with learning disabilities improved from an F to a C this year.

Perhaps the most significant indicator of our forward movement is the continued progress we are making on our graduation rate – up another 5% this year and up a total of 12.1% since I became your CEO. The continued growth is true for every single student subgroup: Asian-Americans, up 5%; African-Americans, up 10%; Students with Disabilities and Limited English Proficiency students, up 12%; White students, up 14%; Hispanic students, up 18%; and multi-racial students, up 22%, all since I became your CEO. Our graduation rate this year is a District record high!

So what is the State of our Schools on this September 30, 2014?

Is the glass half empty? Or is it half full?

Is CMSD a real life incarnation of the myth of Sisyphus?

Or are we a myth-buster; an example of what Sisyphus might have been able to do had he had a plan – a plan like *The Cleveland Plan*?

Two years ago, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District faced academic and fiscal bankruptcy. The District's assignment to an Academic Distress Commission seemed inevitable. Skeptics scoffed at any suggestion that CMSD could survive. But the pulse of this remarkable city proved them wrong.

Were it not for the vision and courage of Mayor Frank Jackson, our Cleveland Coalition partners, and their followers and supporters in the creation of *The Cleveland Plan*, my message today would be drastically different.

I want to close my report on the State of our Schools by expressing my heartfelt gratitude, on behalf of CMSD students, families and educators, to the individuals and organizations across this city who made *The Cleveland Plan* more than an elusive goal two years ago. Today, I feel privileged to share real, substantial progress on a recovery model that was made possible by a city that literally banded together to save the life of its schools.

When a patient is gravely ill, medical practitioners work quickly to replace harmful effects with healthy effects. Unless it happens in the movies, no patient goes from near death to winning a match or a marathon in a day. Instead, in the real world, physicians check the patient's vital signs for evidence of progress, day by day, altering their treatments and building on what's working. That is not unlike the daily challenge and the potential

risks of working to save a system of schools – schools on which tens of thousands of children rely for their own survival and their own hopes for a bright future.

As old practices dissolve, as new processes take hold and as new school models continue to emerge, the energy and spirit of a healthier CMSD are becoming more and more evident.

Today, even with relatively flat performance on the overall report card, CMSD's vital signs are improving.

Data, which comprise the vital signs of any system, shows that CMSD can move achievement. Strong achievement grades in schools like Campus International School, Douglas MacArthur Girls Leadership Academy, MC²STEM High School, the John Hay Campus and Whitney Young and equally strong value-added gains at schools like Hannah-Gibbons, Harvey Rice, Louis Agassiz, Clark, Memorial, O. H. Perry, R. G. Jones, Scranton, and Warner Girls Leadership Academy show us that we can achieve for any student in any school in the CMSD. Our overall flat performance as a District average, however, reminds us that we have not yet achieved for every student in every school. That, of course is the goal, of *The Cleveland Plan*.

If 2013-14 was the year of disruption, 2014-15 must be the year of clarity, in which we focus exclusively on teaching and learning, using the systems and tools implemented last year to catalyze our work. When we do, CMSD can and will shift from incremental improvements to more substantial gains in the years ahead.

The Myth of Sisyphus is that of a never-ending task that is, in the end, a completely futile effort, because his final goal of reaching the top is never realized. The end result may be the same one, over and over again, in mythology, but the story is a different one for those with a Plan.

The Cleveland Plan requires us to execute ten years of education reform, twice as well, and in half the time. To some, that might seem Sysiphisian. And yet, throughout this room are hundreds of people who believe otherwise and are part of that Plan.

After witnessing and reflecting on a year of dramatic change and progress, and as I look across this auditorium filled with those who helped to make both possible, I can say with certainty that the State of our Schools is improving.

Thank you for being “Part of The Plan”!

