

State of the Schools

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
August 24, 2015

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about CMSD's vision, goals and progress. I'd like to extend a very special thank you to Dan Moulthrop and The City Club of Cleveland for hosting this event—my fifth State of the Schools Address as CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

I would also like to acknowledge the sponsors who made it possible for The City Club to host the event here in the Renaissance Ballroom so that more of my fellow educators, our student scholars, and their families and caregivers could attend.

Before I begin, I'd like to recognize a number of people who have been instrumental to the progress I will share with you today. First, Mayor Frank G. Jackson, the city's strongest advocate of education in Cleveland. Thank you, Mayor Jackson, for your daily work, not only as our city's distinguished Mayor, but also for your direct leadership as Chair of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance and your tireless work in monitoring the continued execution of The Cleveland Plan.

Thank you, to the nine members of the Cleveland Board of Education for the vital role you play in the success of our schools and in the rising achievement of the students we serve. I don't think we can underestimate the importance of a high quality Board of Education and ours is simply one of the best in the nation! Please help me thank the members of the Cleveland Board of Education for their leadership!

Because it is the first day of the second week of the school year, most of our Educators are at work today, but I ask those educators who are in attendance to stand in representation of our classroom teachers, building leaders, school employees and District support staff. Thank you for all you do for our scholars, every single day!

I'd also like to acknowledge the Senior Leaders of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. A colleague of mine who knows



CMSD well shared with me recently that he believes we have one of the best school leadership teams that Cleveland has had in over 20 years. I agree! Please help me recognize one of the best administrative teams in urban education! Thank you to my colleagues for your tireless work on behalf of Cleveland's kids!

I am grateful to see so many of our partners here, who have helped to shape and who continue to support *The Cleveland Plan*—The Greater Cleveland Partnership, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Breakthrough Charter Schools and the Cleveland Teachers Union. Thank you to these and countless other friends and supporters who are key influencers in the state of our schools today.

And finally, to the people of Cleveland, thank you for your extraordinary support of Issue 107 and Issue 4, that provided not only the resources we need to achieve the goals of *The Cleveland Plan* but also the affirmation of the work we are doing to ensure all children are successful.

Thank you, to each and every one of you.

As I was reflecting on the past year, it occurred to me that today, there is most likely one question on everyone's minds: "Is it working?"

"Is *The Cleveland Plan* working?"

Most of you already know about the unprecedented changes we have made throughout the District.

You know from our changing culture in the last three years that our large urban public school system has undergone a complete—top-to-bottom—inside out—overhaul of the way we operate.

You know from our changing headlines that

we have restored stability to a system that was in Academic Emergency, on the brink of bankruptcy and destined for a state takeover.

But there's still this nagging question, "Is it working?"

When I've been asked this question over the past year, I've always answered with a qualified, "Yes."

Yes, *The Cleveland Plan* is working, but it's hard to tell because the state of Ohio is implementing its third set of achievement tests in three years; new tests with higher standards that will once again push down achievement scores statewide, at least initially.

Yes, *The Cleveland Plan* is working, but unlike previous years when our report card results were available at the start of the school year, we won't have the data on the progress we are making until January, due to a delay in issuing state report cards this year.

Yes, *The Cleveland Plan* is working, but Ohio doesn't rate schools as Excellent or Effective anymore so we aren't easily able to compare where we are today to where we were when we started.

All of these answers are true, but none of them is truly satisfying.

And then it came to me. Perhaps I've been answering the wrong question or responding to the question too narrowly.

You see, the way I've been answering the question "Is it working?" is similar to the way I rely on my car's GPS device. GPS's are certainly convenient, and they're usually reliable, but, frankly, mine spends an awful lot of time recalculating.



In fact, just last weekend after visiting a friend in Youngstown, my wife and I decided to pick a local Italian restaurant using the “points of interest” tab of my car’s GPS, only to find when the GPS guided us to the location that the restaurant had been closed AND torn down years ago!

The truth is that, like our GPS devices, Ohio has a state reporting system that can be a convenient and reliable way of knowing whether our schools are improving. But right now Ohio’s system is recalculating.

So, if our accountability system is recalculating, how can we determine if *The Cleveland Plan* is working? What did we do before we had GPS devices?

Those of you who know me personally know that I love The Great Lakes and that I am fascinated by the ships and shipwrecks of The Great Lakes. In the days before GPS devices, or even maps, the sailors of The Great Lakes navigated by following the stars.

You may not know this, but there is one, and only one, star in the sky that NEVER appears to move. It’s called Polaris, or the North Star. And no matter what season it is or what your location is, all of the other stars appear to move around the North Star, even while that one star never moves.

Finding the North Star isn’t always easy. After all, which one of the billions of stars in the sky is the North Star?

Sailors answered that question by looking for a set of Guiding Stars. In navigation, it’s called finding the “plough.” We actually know the plough as the Big Dipper. You see, the Big Dipper is always in the same relative position compared to the North Star, and no matter where the Big Dipper is in the sky, the outsides of the Dipper point directly to the North Star!

That means, regardless of where the Big Dipper is in the sky, its relationship to the North Star never changes, and it will always dependably point the way.

So that was my answer.

All I needed to do to show you that *The Cleveland Plan* is working was to find the guiding stars that point to our North Star, and then I could answer the question “Is *The Cleveland Plan* working?”



Our North Star was easy to identify. That's our mission. It's any school district's mission, really—high academic achievement for each of our scholars! But where were the guiding stars?

Fortunately, these were relatively simple to find as well. For CMSD, we actually have three clusters of guiding stars that, together, can show us the way.

The first cluster is those that support our mission of high academic achievement. *The Cleveland Plan* can only work if the organization is able to support it. There are three guiding stars in this cluster.

The first is sufficient financial resources. If we liken *The Cleveland Plan* journey to a sea voyage, perhaps no fog has hampered our view more than Ohio's school funding system. It seems that every time the State of Ohio passes a new state budget, they introduce a new way to fund Ohio's schools. And every time, it seems to result in less money for Cleveland's kids.

This year's State budget reduced CMSD's funding by \$13 million a year, beginning next year. That budget cut is approximately 25% of the value of the levy voters passed in 2012 and will be asked to renew in 2016. But despite the continued challenge of school funding in our state and nation, CMSD is on track to keep our promise to the people of Cleveland that the 2012 levy will last four years while investing, not disinvesting, in our children!

Although the next year will be challenging financially, CMSD is well positioned to stay on course in *The Cleveland Plan* investments we've made as we approach the levy renewal.

The second guiding star that points to our goal is quality learning environments for Cleveland's children. As you all know, last year Cleveland

voters overwhelmingly approved Issue 4, enabling the District to construct 22 new schools and remodel 23 more in the next five years.

Those new and remodeled schools, together with the already completed construction and renovation of many other District's facilities, including the new John Marshall High School, the new Max Hayes High School, and the new Cleveland School of the Arts, will provide the community 88 new or refreshed school buildings that will serve the District's needs for the foreseeable future.

The third is human capital. After all, *The Cleveland Plan* is essentially a bet on people. The bet is that if we have the right people in our classrooms and leading our schools, and if these educators are given the resources they need and the autonomy to make decisions they know are best for their students, then we will achieve our mission of high academic achievement across the District.

Here again our guiding star is bright. Through our TEACHCleveland campaign, CMSD's principal and teacher teams have hired over 750 new teachers into our classrooms over the last three years.

And last year alone 81% of CMSD's teachers were rated as Skilled or Accomplished on our new, rigorous Teacher Development and Evaluation System and 71% of our teachers had student achievement growth scores that met or exceeded the State of Ohio's learning expectations.

With a firm foundation in place for our school system—quality teachers, adequate resources and modernized, 21st Century learning environments to support our academic goals—we are positioned to support our academic mission.

But these supports mean nothing without the public's trust in us and in our mission of high academic achievement. *The Cleveland Plan* simply cannot work if the people we serve don't trust in the work we're doing. Here again I point to a second cluster of three guiding stars.

The first is parent engagement. Research over the last 40 years has provided substantial evidence that strong parent involvement positively impacts a child's academic performance and social competence. Two years ago, as part of *The Cleveland Plan*, we began measuring parent engagement in our District. At that time, just over 73% of our families were participating in meaningful family engagement activities like parent-teacher conferences, family literacy nights, IEP conferences and other significant events.

That was a pretty good start, and many people would have guessed CMSD's parent involvement to be a lot lower. But last year, with increased efforts to raise awareness of the critical role families and caregivers play in student success that number increased to 80%.

That means, eight out of 10 CMSD families participated in active, measurable, and meaningful ways in their child's education last year—a 6.8 percent increase in parent engagement in just one year!

The second in this cluster is student enrollment. Cleveland, as you know, is one of the original cities of "choice." In the 1990s, vouchers offered families the choice to attend any parochial school in the city. And the charter movement in the 2000s brought even more choices to Cleveland. And Cleveland's families chose!

Since 2001, CMSD has lost 34,000 students, at a rate of more than 2,000 students a year! This year, however, CMSD opened school not with

2,000 fewer students, but with 88 more students than the year before. While the increase is not staggering, just 88 kids, our current enrollment of 39,146 students far exceeds the 36,000 students the research firm FutureThink predicted we would have today, based on past trends.

The third in this cluster is public opinion. We are, after all, serving our city's most precious natural resource—its children. And in the end, the public must believe we can and are doing what's right for their kids.

The passage of Issue 107 in 2012 clearly showed that Clevelanders were willing to give us a chance to fulfill the mission of *The Cleveland Plan*.

Last November, the overwhelming support for Issue 4 showed that Clevelanders are still invested in our success at CMSD.

But in March 2015 when residents were asked to rate the quality of education in Cleveland's public schools, we got what is probably our best indicator of growing public trust. Last winter, CMSD commissioned an independent survey firm to better understand what residents of Cleveland think of the District, and here's what we learned. Among Cleveland residents surveyed, 73% rated CMSD schools as fair or better, up from just 66% five years ago, and 72% of those surveyed think the Cleveland schools are moving in the right direction. These are significant and positive changes for a system that was in Academic Emergency, near financial bankruptcy and on the verge of State takeover just five years ago.

So, parent engagement is better, enrollment is growing and public attitudes have improved. But to fully gauge whether *The Cleveland Plan* is working, we need to look to the final cluster of guiding stars—those that illuminate our academic mission itself.

I'll point to four stars here.

The first is early childhood education. During the past two decades, research confirming the importance of early learning and development has increased in volume and significance.

Study after study shows that early childhood education delivers short-term academic gains and lifelong benefits for students. Yet, in 2013, only about 2,800 of the nearly 17,000 three- and four-year-olds in Cleveland, were enrolled in a PreK program known to be of high quality. That's only 16% of our kids!

In March 2014, the Cleveland Early Childhood Compact was formed. You know this group by the name PRE4CLE. And in less than a year and a half, our combined efforts have increased access to quality preschool education by over 1,500 seats. That 52% increase in just 17 months led President Barack Obama to herald the PRE4CLE initiative at a White House summit on early childhood education last year as one of the nation's best examples of "bringing entire communities together on behalf of children" and today, over a quarter of our community's three and four year olds are in high quality early childhood programs.

CMSD's performance on Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee is another point of illumination. In the fall of 2013, the first year of Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee, only 29% of CMSD's third graders were on track to pass the reading test that is now required for a student to be promoted to fourth grade.

By the end of the 2013-14 school year, with carefully differentiated instructional strategies, increased one-on-one tutoring and targeted interventions for struggling readers, 85% of CMSD's third graders met the Guarantee,

qualifying them for promotion to fourth grade. That's a 56-point gain.

But last fall, we faced an even bigger challenge when the State of Ohio raised the score needed to pass the third grade reading test. We started the 2014-15 school year with only 26% of our third-graders on track to pass. But as of last week, when we started school, 86% of our third graders had passed the test and were promoted to fourth grade. That's a 60-point gain, four points more than the previous year, despite the State raising the scores needed for our kids to pass.

That means, even when our kids start further behind, on a harder test, CMSD made more progress last year on the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Looking at our preliminary data for our third-graders this year, I am confident that we will do even better in the year ahead.

Another bright star is the number of CMSD families who have access to better performing schools and who are choosing to enroll in those schools. This was clearly outlined in a recent report released by The Cleveland Transformation Alliance showing that there are now 10,526 students sitting in mid- to high-performing seats in Cleveland schools. That's a 19% increase since we began *The Cleveland Plan* journey four years ago.

In that same period, CMSD has eliminated 10 failing schools, either by improving them, redesigning them or closing them and the Alliance's data shows that nearly 2,200 fewer students attend failing schools in the city, an 11% reduction.

While this is good news, the Transformation Alliance's report also showed a decrease in the number of students accessing our very best

performing schools. That means some of the city's best schools—both District and charter—wavered this year between high and mid-performing, an important reminder of how much more work needs to be done to maintain high levels of performance in our top schools.

The fourth and most significant star in this cluster is our graduation rate. Nowhere is there a clearer sign that we are on the right course to raise student achievement across the District than our graduation rate, which was just 52.2% when I became CEO four years ago.

Since then, CMSD's graduation rate has increased by 12.1 points and is a District record high since Ohio began recording cohort graduation rates in 1995. Our graduation rate today is higher than the graduation rates in Atlanta, Denver, Milwaukee, Washington D.C., and several other major U.S. cities. And we expect continued growth when Ohio releases the 2013-14 data later this year, putting us on track to not just meet, but to exceed the Higher Education Compact's goal of a 71% graduation rate for this year's juniors—the class of 2016-17.

I can't think of a better indication of how meaningful this gain is than when I heard CMSD's increased graduation rate championed by President Obama this spring. When I was invited to the White House, as part of a select group of school superintendents, the President discussed the positive impact that rising graduation rates in Cleveland and other large urban districts has had in increasing the national graduation rate to a record high.

If you look at what's going on in Washington D.C., Fresno or Cleveland, the President said, singling out our District, "These are school districts that, despite enormous challenges, have made real progress."

Collectively, these guiding stars point toward our North Star.

Our mission.

Our goal of high academic achievement for every child in Cleveland.

I am not suggesting, by any means, that all of the stars are aligned just yet. CMSD has not completed its mission, and it's clear we have a long way to go.

Each of the stars I pointed to today can and must burn even more brightly if we are to ensure that every child takes advantage of the quality programs, educators and options available to them every day. That's why we are aggressively tackling the very real challenge of student attendance this year.

Third grade reading scores are up, more kids are attending better schools and the end result is an increasing graduation rate. CMSD's teachers and other educators have done our part. We've changed our system and we're getting better results. But far too many of our students are chronically absent. The simple fact is—my teachers can't teach students who aren't here.

The evidence is clear. Cleveland students who miss more than 10 days of school are 9% more likely to fail the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Our students who miss more than 10 days of school are likely to score 12 points lower on Ohio's reading exams than their peers, and 15 points lower than their classmates on Ohio's math exams. And, ninth and tenth grade students who miss more than 10 days are 34% less likely to ever graduate from high school.

That's why, this year, we've kicked off our "Get to School—You Can Make It!" student attendance campaign.

This campaign—a grass roots effort to educate students and families (and, in fact, our whole community) of the dangers of missing just one day of school a month—is designed to end failure by absence. And when we do, our guiding stars will shine even more brightly!

No single star that I have pointed to today can alone answer the question, “Is *The Cleveland Plan* working?” But like the Big Dipper, they collectively point to high academic achievement for our scholars—our North Star.

I can think of no better way to conclude than by putting a face on the shining stars I pointed to in my address today. I am so honored to have a number of guests who are living examples of our guiding stars with me today.

Meet Rashee and Wadell Brooks, along with their daughter Sasha, who along with her siblings, earned acclaim at our attendance campaign kickoff for her 100% perfect attendance from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Raechel Sommer actively sought and chose a quality preschool this year to give her daughter Madeline the skills and readiness she needs for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Meet Alexander Moore and his mother Christine Turner. Alex is one of our Marion-Sterling scholars who, as a third-grader last year, achieved a 96-point growth from fall to spring on his Ohio Achievement Assessment, promoting him to the fourth grade.

Tremont teacher Kaia Abdur-Rasheed, Watterson-Lake teacher Susan Samlley and Buhner Dual Language Academy teacher Tonya Dunlap both earned the rating of “Accomplished” in CMSD’s rigorous teacher development and evaluation system last year.

Kaia and Tonya also earned the rating of Most Effective on their students’ student growth measures.

Lydia Ford and her daughters Courtney and Kayce Caesar are with us as well. While they were enrolled in a non-CMSD school last year, they researched and actively chose quality CMSD schools to begin their high school journey. Courtney now attends the Cleveland School of Science & Medicine and Kayce is a student at the new Cleveland School of the Arts this year.

Meet Santina Crawford whose son Jeremiah attended a charter school before she worked with her son to thoughtfully explore the growing high school options across the city. They found the perfect fit, they say. Today, Jeremiah is “thrilled” to be a student at MC²STEM High School—so thrilled he has become one of the strongest advocates of this quality school choice in Cleveland.

Max Hayes Principal Kelly Wittman and Chelsey Cook, principal of the new John Marshall School of Information Technology, left their jobs in Indiana and Texas to be part of *The Cleveland Plan*. Principal Cook summed up best why talented educators across the country are coming to CMSD:

“I saw what Cleveland was trying to do and I wanted to be part of it,” she said. “If not as a principal, then as a teacher or anything in between.”

Patrick Henry School’s Site Coordinator Cynthia Shelby and the school’s Dean of Engagement Michael Jester are models for the kinds of above-and-beyond efforts taking place at schools across the District, where educators are engaging whole communities in their school’s academic achievement strategies.

Finally, meet two new teachers, Briana Guevara and Josh Brossman, who are among the 325 new teachers hired this fall. Briana said she was drawn to CMSD for its diversity and for the opportunity to serve students with backgrounds similar to hers. And Josh, who chose to teach in one of our Investment Schools, came to Cleveland with a desire to make a difference in the city's most struggling schools.

Thank you, to each of these shining stars, for putting a face on the results we are seeing.

Ladies and gentleman, achievement is up in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, more kids are in better seats, graduation rates are increasing, trust is returning and we have the people and resources we need to continue the journey. *The Cleveland Plan* is working!

Thank you for joining me today and allowing me to share our progress on *The Cleveland Plan*. And thank you for your continued belief in and support of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Thank you.

