

2020 STATE *of the* SCHOOLS ADDRESS

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
September 22, 2020



Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me for this City Club virtual event, marking my tenth State of the Schools Address as CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to take a moment to thank our third through fifth grade All-City “virtual” Choir for the inspiration that brings us all together today.

Thank you City Club for hosting this address again, particularly this year, as our school District and community faces unprecedented challenges brought on by this global pandemic.

I want to thank a number of people across Northeast Ohio for all you have done for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, especially over the past six months as we’ve all responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. To those listed on your screen and to anyone else whom I may have forgotten to include, please know how incredibly grateful I am for your community leadership and your individual or collective contributions and support.

And to all of you, thank you for joining this forum today. I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the state of our schools with you.

2020!

Very bad! Would not recommend!

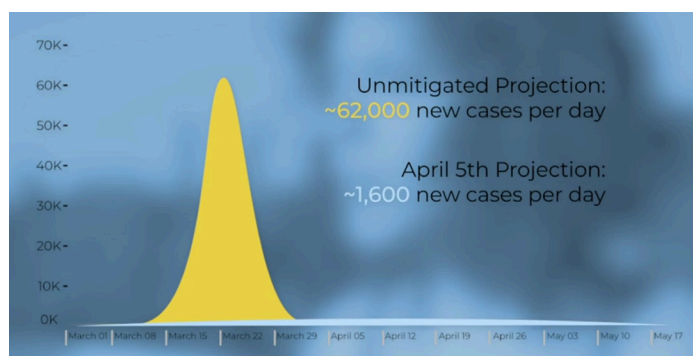
2020



Very bad, would not recommend.

Last year, I spoke with you about Newton's laws of motion. Remember? "Any object in a state of uniform motion will remain in that state of motion unless an external force acts on it"? Who could have guessed last September that a year later we would be recovering from an external force so significant that the entire world stopped. If I had asked you then where we would be in a year, how many of you would have answered "living in the midst of a global pandemic?" In fact, if I had asked you even last April, I doubt that any of you would have imagined that a 100% virtual delivery of education would be our current reality in Cleveland. But it is.

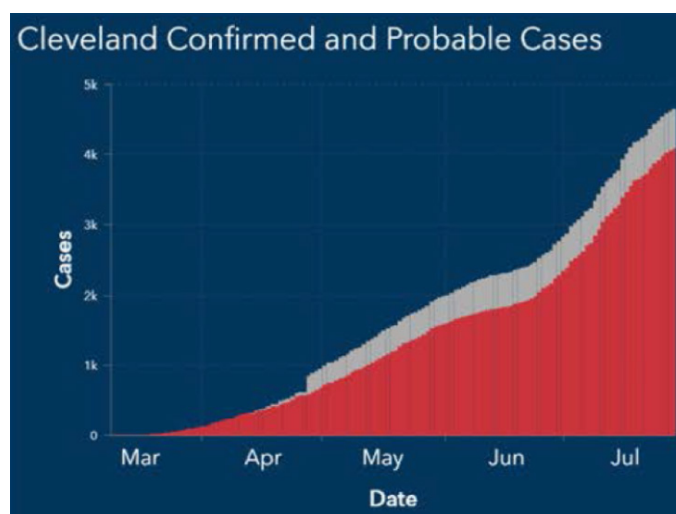
Last spring we were told to shut down schools, first for a three-week "extended spring break," and then subsequently asked to close schools for the rest of the school year. Through emergency legislation, we were told to do our best to keep our students enriched and engaged. And we were told that if we did that, we would "flatten the curve" so we could get things back to normal.



But as Ohio began reopening, it became increasingly clear that the model didn't work.

While Ohio did flatten the curve, the virus wasn't eradicated by spring as hoped. Instead, it became clear that we would be operating indefinitely with the virus still in our midst and, unlike last spring, CMSD would have to reopen schools this fall in a radically different way.

Compounding this challenge was the realization that not only had the novel Coronavirus not been eliminated, but it had, in fact, begun to spread more rapidly across Cleveland and other areas of Ohio. Early modeling had predicted the virus would be all but gone by May, but in late June and early July the actual trend showed that exposure to and the spread of Coronavirus in Cleveland had increased by 54% in just 21 days as we learned to live in this strange new world.



After reviewing public health data, and after surveying our parents, caregivers and educators, it became clear to the Board of Education and to me that beginning the 2020 school year in a remote learning environment was our only legitimate choice.

COVID-19 has disrupted education in Cleveland and across the state and country. It has altered how we operate our schools and deliver instruction for our 37,000 kids. But it did so much more. In, literally, a few short days, the novel Coronavirus also put on full display the glaring inequities that my scholars, their families and our educators have faced for decades.

Make no mistake, inadequate access to food, affordable childcare, access to technology and reliable high-speed Internet has existed in our community for decades, and all of us knew it! But when overnight people everywhere were told to stay home and use the

Internet to get information, to connect with their school, to apply for unemployment or public assistance and even to go to the doctor; the world went dark and silent for nearly half of our kids and families.

COVID-19 didn't *cause* these inequities but it did make it impossible to ignore them; to pretend that they don't really exist or don't really matter.

At the same time, something else happened to jolt the American conscience. The killing of George Floyd exposed not just another singular, unique tragedy, but it illuminated a compounding series of tragedies that have persisted in communities like ours for years and that have not only continued, but have seemingly accelerated since that awful Monday, May 25th, when our nation's racial divide moved front and center on the news and spilled into the streets of America.

Just as COVID-19 made it impossible to ignore the inhumane disparities in access to basic human needs that my kids and families experience, the killing of George Floyd made it impossible for us to ignore the ravages of racism and social injustice in the lives of the poorest and most disenfranchised among us; it made it impossible to ignore the unconscionable inequities that have plagued people and children of color for generations.

The Earth Is Angry! A wise man spoke those words to me even before this pandemic erupted. *The Earth Is Angry!* I think of those words often as I watch our nation become more and more polarized on the kind of issues that should unite us in times of crisis: Equity, Social Justice, Civil Rights for all Americans, a Global Public Health Emergency. It appears Mother Earth has gotten just angry enough to hit the pause button!

So. What do we make of all of this? What do we do?
How do we respond?

As we began planning for this school year, Cleveland Teachers Union president Shari Obrenski said, "I don't know what this fall is going to look like, but I do know what it's not going to look like. It's not going to look like last fall." She was right.

It is only Day 15 of the 2020-21 school year, and only our third week in a fully remote learning environment. Ask any teacher in the District, and he or she will tell you how much we all wish we could be back in our classrooms with all our kids every day. But we can't. I'm not saying we shouldn't. I'm saying we can't.

Public health rules now require us to put no more than 14 kids on school buses built for 50. To maintain social distancing, we are restricted to putting only 12 kids in classrooms designed for 25.

It is no longer safe for hundreds of high school students to pass simultaneously every 50 minutes for three-minute class changes in our hallways. We can't push our desks together to work on a group task or teach without wearing masks and shields.

Like districts across the nation and, in fact, around the world, we've adapted to these current circumstances. We've moved into remote learning and planned hybrid models too. But these are all temporary solutions. We all know there will come a day when COVID-19 is conquered, a day when we can "go back to normal."

But should we?

What if this isn't just a pause? What if this is, instead, a reset? What if this is our chance to closely examine the inequities that exist in our communities and think differently about how to address them?

Indeed, this is an opportunity for all of us to examine the American experience for people of color living in a country whose systems and institutions were designed for white people by white people. And this is an opportunity to design them differently.

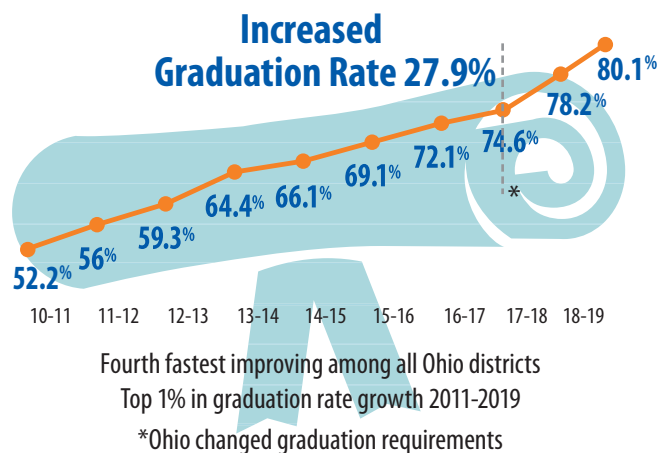
The late Audre Lorde wrote, and I quote, "...the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

The people of Cleveland know that perhaps better than anyone. Nine years ago, when I became CEO, I assumed responsibility for Ohio's worst performing school district. CMSD was facing crushing budget deficits and had lost all public trust. At that time, a friend and colleague of mine told me, "Eric, you will either be our best superintendent or our last superintendent." That, of course, remains to be seen!

Seriously though, look at how we responded.

We didn't improve over the last eight years by doing more of the same. Instead, we banded together as a community and reinvented our school system. The result? In the city with America's highest childhood poverty, in the city rated worst-connected in the country, in the city ranked as the United States' ninth most segregated community, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District went from being the worst performing school district in Ohio nine years ago to one of Ohio's fastest improving school districts today. Our graduation rate, a mere 52.2% in 2011, soared to 80.1% this year. Our 80.9% graduation rate for Cleveland's Black students and our 82.6% graduation rate for Hispanic students each bested their statewide peers by over five percentage points. And thanks to this community's collective efforts to create Say Yes Cleveland, every one of those graduates now has access to a postsecondary trade school, 2-year, or 4-year college, tuition free. If that is what we could do with our own self-generated reset, imagine what we can do now. What new tools have we been given, and how will we use them?

In the pre-COVID world, it was considered nearly impossible for CMSD to be a one-to-one district, providing each child with an iPad, Chromebook, tablet or laptop to support his or her learning. In fact, as late as last March, our Advanced Placement



Computer Science teachers assigned "low-tech" homework, knowing that their students didn't have the computer or the Internet to practice actual computer science at home. Imagine that – in an Advanced Placement class! In CMSD today, every student now has a tablet or laptop computer, and their families and caregivers have hotspots or other access to the Internet – a large number of them for the first time in their lives.

In the old system, time defined learning as we dutifully marched children through 180-day school years, sitting in one 50-minute class after another, collecting semester after semester of Carnegie Units so that each student earned a diploma "on time."

Today, students and teachers are experiencing new and different ways of using time to support each student's unique learning needs. Teachers are recording lessons so that students who can't attend the synchronous class "on time" can instead watch the lesson at a time that is more convenient for them. These same recorded lessons give struggling students the ability to replay their teachers' live lessons as often as they need, taking as little or as much time needed to learn and master the content, and all without the discomfort of raising their hands in front of their peers and disclosing that they didn't understand it the first time.

In our remote learning environment, every Wednesday is now dedicated to providing time for all teachers to work with small groups of students, to provide individual tutoring and supports, to hold office hours and to check in with parents and caregivers to help them access their child's lessons and monitor their progress. Every teacher is doing this! And today, teachers are assigning students asynchronous content – projects, activities, self-guided instruction and more, empowering students with more voice, choice and flexibility when and how their learning is completed.

Imagine for a moment if we retain this one new, more sensible way of operating as part of our reset! Why would we return to having 25 students sitting in one room for the same period of time if we know we can better serve the 5-10 students who have mastered the content by empowering them to move on without waiting for the rest of the class?

By enabling those students who are ready and able to do so to work on independent classwork that augments and continues their acceleration, we simultaneously decrease the teacher's class sizes by 5-10 students for the moment so that he or she can focus on the kids who need more support. And what if, in the post-COVID world, we kept Wednesdays devoted to working with only those students who need the extra support, while students who are already on-track complete their own independent work as well?



There's a lot of talk right now about "lost learning," and our need to return to school as soon as possible to curtail "the loss." But that approach to reopening schools is really just another manifestation of *Time* as the driver of learning and a "getting-back-to-normal" response. The concept of making up for "lost learning" essentially roots us in the ancient method of measuring our kids' learning against a predefined schedule of what content should be learned and by when, and then comparing student progress with their peers across the state to determine how much learning was "lost."

But here's the secret: We did not lose *learning*. What we really lost was *time for learning*. Don't get me wrong. It's a matter of educational science that learners who do not remain actively stimulated in a content until it becomes solidly anchored in their brain's schema will forget much of what they were taught. But that's different than "lost learning." We didn't lose the ability to learn or to teach. Instead of focusing on "lost learning," which forces teachers to identify the deficits in a student's knowledge compared to what they are supposed to know at any given time, we need to focus on identifying each child's *unfinished learning*, so we can teach him or her precisely what they need to continue and complete their learning.

Sound radical? What do we have to lose?

For all of the efforts to improve education here in Cleveland and across the nation now and over several decades, America's students still consistently rank far lower than many of their international peers. After all these years, and despite all of our efforts, achievement gaps can still be absolutely predicted by the wealth of your community and the color of your skin. Is that really what we want to return to?

We have a chance this winter, next spring or whenever it is finally safe to reopen our school buildings, to re-emerge better than when we left them in March. We will return this time with full access to technology. Students and teachers will return having

defined and practiced a new learning relationship, one that is far more flexible and nimble than the practices they left behind.

Beyond this increased capacity, we will emerge with the opportunity to rethink longstanding conventions, the very conventions that have, for generations, perpetuated the enormous inequities COVID-19 and George Floyd put on full display for everyone to see.

In this time of crisis, when the entire world has been forced to hit the “pause” button, we have an opportunity to look back and reflect on where we were. More importantly, we have the opportunity to look forward, and to replace conditions and practices that have too long put Cleveland’s kids at a disadvantage with their peers.

The hard truth is: It won’t be easy.

History tells us that often in times of crisis, the very opposite of what we hope for happens. In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein documents decades of evidence suggesting that in times of crisis or when disaster occurs, not only do the privileged and powerful retain their privilege, more often than not, their power actually grows. In her view, this increase in power and authority is deliberately achieved. She claims that the privileged and powerful, whether conservative or liberal, use “the public’s disorientation following massive collective shocks – wars, terrorist attacks or natural disasters – to achieve control.”

I’ll leave it to you to debate the merits of her argument. But what is clear to me is that in every American city, in every state, and as a nation, we are making critical decisions as we respond to this global pandemic. With our words and actions, we are deciding whether this will be a moment until we can get back to normal, or whether this will be a movement toward a nation of cities and states that are more fair, just and good!

We can choose to look away and pretend that we cannot see the vast inequities that continue to perpetuate racial disparities

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across our country, or choose to redistribute power and privilege more fairly.

We can work to perpetuate the status quo or disrupt it. And we can choose to either pause for the moment or to reset. In either case, like every other organization’s recovery, our District will take time.

If we had received a state report card this year, we would most certainly have lost ground because of the school shutdown. But I know we can do this. In fact, what makes the possibility of a reset in CMSD so desirable to me is that there is no place in America that is more prepared to do so than Cleveland. Our last decade of work together is proof of it. As LeBron James said so powerfully about our city and its resilience, “In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.”

Our city’s “Defend the Land” attitude continues to drive our choices and our actions. And it’s time to Defend the Land again. Our District is at a critical crossroad for our children and their future. All of the progress, the record-breaking increases in graduation rates, math and reading scores and gap-closing will be lost without the continued support of the people of Cleveland this year.

Issue 68 in November represents as much a decision point for Cleveland as COVID-19 does for the world. Eight years ago we passed a school levy to enable our implementation of

The Cleveland Plan. Four years ago, to continue our progress, our community renewed that levy. And here we are again. Eight years may seem like a long time, but it's actually only a brief moment in our District's 183-year history. In fact, eight years is only two-thirds of the way through a child's school-aged journey. And we've seen what we've done so far.

The Transformation of Cleveland's public schools was never just about changing Ohio law, enacting *The Cleveland Plan* or passing a levy. The gains we have made together, the reforms that we have worked so hard on over the last eight years and the strategies that are working in CMSD during the worst public health crisis of our lifetime, are a matter of social justice.

The success we continue to achieve against incredible odds can only be achieved with the kind of creative thinking that emerges in times of crisis, the kind of action that is bold enough to reject the status quo and the kind of courage it takes to replace failing systems with ones far more meaningful and relevant to the lives of our children and their future.

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What will we do to finish that journey? With Issue 68, we will ask Cleveland's voters to once again Defend the Land, to renew our commitment for Cleveland's children now when it's more important than ever, and to signal that, in Cleveland, this is not just a pause and not just a moment. In Cleveland, it is indeed already a movement, something my students call "a moment for life."

On behalf of our scholars and their families, thank you for your partnership and your unwavering belief in Cleveland's kids. Thank you most for your continued investment in, and support of, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.



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