

State of the Schools Address

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In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued the landmark report titled *A Nation at Risk* that highlighted the crisis in American education.

The Commission issued a shocking conclusion that American students were at risk of falling behind students from around the world.

The report said the status of our education system, unless changed, would imperil our national security and future prosperity.

The conclusions of the committee were alarming, but one dire warning of the Committee was even more frightening when it stated:

“The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Twenty-eight years later, the American education system remains in a state of crisis, a message that was reiterated in a recent visit to Cleveland’s public schools by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

The Secretary’s clarion call to the Cleveland community challenged each and every one of us to play a part in changing our education system.

The Secretary’s message was clear: The nation’s education system is broken, and we can no longer wait for the school reforms urged 28 years ago to come from anywhere but here, where our needs are seen and felt.

We simply cannot continue to wait for help to come from Columbus or from Washington.

To ensure our schools are what they can and must be for the children of our community, it is clear the solutions to the academic and financial challenges we face in Cleveland, (or for that



matter in Detroit, in Washington, in Chicago, in Los Angeles and elsewhere), must come from within our own school community.

In attendance today are representatives from every stakeholder group in the city:

- parents, teachers, and students,
- young, average and senior citizens,
- government and corporate executives,
- clergy,
- philanthropists,
- young professionals and small business owners,
- heads of neighborhood and service organizations,
- and representatives from our arts, medical, legal, science and educational communities.

Many of you have invited me in the last two months to address your groups or you have called me personally to congratulate me on my appointment to the position of Chief Executive Officer.

The most frequent comments I have heard are expressions of hope that,

- “At last, we have a leader who knows the district and will carry out the mission of the Academic Transformation Plan...”
- “Finally, we have a school leader who will make things right,”
- and “For once, we have one of our own.”

To each of them, and to all of you present today and those listening, I want to make it clear: I am both humbled and grateful for the opportunity to lead the Cleveland Metropolitan School District at a time of enormous challenge and a time of enormous importance and consequence to our community.

But, as I’ve said many times before, I clearly understand that my selection was not only a vote of confidence in me, it was a vote of confidence *in us*, in the work we’ve started, and in what we can accomplish as a city if we *work together* for our schools.

For as we all know, I am not *Superman*.

If Cleveland were “Waiting for Superman,” as a widely publicized film last year said urban districts in America are, then Cleveland will surely still be waiting for another 28 years for academic transformation that will never magically appear.

Today, not only is our Nation *still at risk*, but the education system that the children of the Cleveland community rely upon for any hope of a future is at risk.

In January of 2010, CMSD unveiled an aggressive Academic Transformation Plan.

Dr. Michael Casserly, the Executive Director of the Council of Great City Schools in Washington, D.C., traveled to Cleveland to applaud the vision of our school community that funded, supported and participated in the development of this Plan.

He joined an entire community in praising those who made it possible, and those who were charged with carrying out the reforms we were implementing. He declared that, if our Plan is successful, Cleveland would be at the forefront of the educational reform movement in the nation.

While recognizing that Cleveland was bold in its vision, Dr. Casserly warned us that it isn’t simply enough to have a good Transformation Plan in place, nor is it enough to have strong leaders in place to carry out the plan on their own.

Investing in quality schools is not a spectator sport,

- where *you* can buy a ticket,
- *you* can bring the snacks,
- and *you* can watch from the sidelines and cheer us on.

Each and every stakeholder in the Cleveland community must realize the role that a strong education system plays in our neighborhoods, in our city and in our lives, and be willing to invest in our city schools to ensure the Academic Transformation Plan works as it is intended—for the benefit of all children in Cleveland and for the colleges and workforce that await them in our region.

We cannot continue business as usual, waiting year after year for “Superman” to transform our schools for us.

In Ohio, we’ve waited for over a decade for Columbus to figure out how to lead, support, and finance our schools, watching as governor-after-governor has attempted to craft solutions for us.

We’ve waited for the U.S. government to transform us, and bought into promises that No Child would be Left Behind.

We’ve lived through the implementation of parochial school vouchers and the creation of charter school laws, so families could choose to transform themselves if they really wanted to.

And we have continued to invest more resources in high-performing school systems and in private school tuition for *some* children, while we have often disinvested in low performing school systems, blaming them, their students, and their families for their failure.

Unfortunately, the achievement gap for too many cities in America has been defined

around a simple premise: “Who is valuable in this society and who is not – Who we have high hopes for and for whom we have no great expectations.”

It’s time to loudly reject that definition and show the nation that here, in Cleveland, we value our children—not just some of our children, but all of our children.

We know and understand the consequences of the failure of any of them for our community, and we must be willing to invest in their future.

That recognition, of course, is at the heart of the Academic Transformation Plan.

In the months following the launch, when we should have been able to put our full attention on the implementation of the Academic Transformation Plan, we found ourselves constantly focusing on the greatest roadblock to meeting our goals — the declining financial condition of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Cleveland, like every public school district in the nation, grapples daily with a budget that takes needed attention away from our academic challenges to deal instead with recurring and ever-compounding financial challenges.

State and federal governments, from where K-12 education support has traditionally been guaranteed, are dealing with huge budget deficits of their own, resulting in states like Ohio slashing education budgets at unexpected and unprecedented levels.

Our heavy reliance on federal grants is now a thing of the past.

The millions of dollars that the U.S. government invested to keep school budgets intact during a stalled economy are gone.

Ohio has cut \$8 billion from its own budget,

leaving school districts, cities and counties to fend for themselves.

Dwindling tax revenues at the local level further compound our financial problems, and in Cleveland we've offered no new operating revenue to our city schools since 1996.

That was 15 years ago.

Over that same 15 years, Cleveland has lived with small, incremental gains in achievement in their public schools, while watching wave after wave of employee layoffs, ballooning class sizes in many of our classrooms, the use of outdated textbooks, and the reduction of extended day programs and extra-curricular activities.

In fact, with no help in sight, Cleveland was forced to take drastic measures to address mounting deficits, cutting over \$104 million in just the last two years alone.

For a moment, I challenge you to envision what it would look like if we *truly invested* in a transformational approach to education in Cleveland?

Fortunately, we already have several examples to look at within CMSD:

CMSD has a portfolio of New and Innovative Schools that have significantly outperformed many other more typical CMSD schools.

These innovative schools, including four single gender schools, two New Tech high school academies, the Ginn School for boys, Design Lab Early College High School, and MC2STEM High School all serve typical CMSD students, and each has earned a rating of Continuous Improvement or higher on the Ohio State Report Cards.

These schools and others were created with the generous support of The Cleveland Foundation, The Gund Foundation, and many other donors

that have provided the upfront investment capital needed to start new schools.

These schools also have unique labor-management agreements, including new guidelines for length of school day, for hiring and assignment of staff members, for professional development, and for work conditions.

These agreements, crafted in collaboration with the Cleveland Teachers Union, allow for more autonomous school level operations.

While these proven models have worked successfully in Cleveland over the past several years, we have yet to commit as a community to the creation of an innovation fund that will allow the District to replicate these start-ups at a more aggressive pace to serve even more of our students.

Nor have we secured the resources needed to ensure the long-term success of the innovation schools that are already in operation, many of which are now threatened by necessary staff layoffs and severe budget cuts.

In another example of transformative thinking, the collaborative development of a new, forward-thinking Teacher Development and Evaluation System is being implemented in 25% of the district's schools already this year.

This 21st century model abandons the traditional checklist style of teacher evaluations created decades ago based on civil service workforce models.

CMSD's new Teacher Development and Evaluation System measures teacher performance against a rubric of research-based skills that professional educators should know and be able to do in the classroom.

The system is based on multiple observations and both teacher and student work samples.

Multiple sources of student achievement data are also planned for use to assess teacher performance with the goal of helping teachers improve, and removing those teachers who are not able to demonstrate needed improvement.

As you know, I believe there are laws in Ohio that limit our ability to make the systemic changes we need to fully transform the field of education.

But the work we've already done in Cleveland to improve Teacher Development and Evaluation demonstrates that there is quite a bit we can do on our own to transform the way Cleveland's teachers and school leaders are recruited, trained, supported, and paid when we have the vision and collective will to do so.

As we continue this ground-breaking work together, we must accelerate reforms that shift our perception of educators from that of civil service employees to that of professionals in a system that respects and rewards them for quality work.

We can also look at our charter school work in Cleveland as an example of transformative thinking.

CMSD has taken a very proactive stance regarding high performing charter schools as one way of providing better opportunities for more kids in Cleveland.

In fact, CMSD currently sponsors a number of the Breakthrough Network of high performing charter schools, one of which is even housed in our own Garrett Morgan Campus.

But while we have championed these high performing charter schools, we have done nothing to stop the flood of thousands of students into incredibly low performing charter schools, and more and more of them are enticed to these failing schools with the promise of free gift cards, ice cream socials, bouncy games,

and school supplies; free lunch, transportation, and tuition — aggressively enticed, in fact, by everything BUT the promise of a quality education.

Recognizing that we have a tremendous amount of work to do to improve our own CMSD, I fully support helping families choose higher performing schools for their children.

However, our solution to transforming Cleveland's schools cannot simply be to replace one system of struggling schools with a new system of failing schools.

A recent *Plain Dealer* editorial urged the State of Ohio to find a better and more timely way to put poorly performing charter schools out of business.

While the State has failed to address the issue of a rising tide of enrollment in poorly-performing charter schools, we as a school community can play an active part in stopping the annual flow of over **\$113 million** into these failure factories in our city.

For another example of transformative thinking, we can look toward the progress we have made in our efforts to reinvent some of our own low-performing schools.

This is surely the hardest part of the work of school reform here and nationally where almost no one has seemed to solve this problem, nor do many seem truly interested in doing so.

But here in Cleveland, business and community partnerships with schools like the Max Hayes Career and Technical Center, the Promise Neighborhood work beginning in Cleveland's central city, and the P-16 work now developing in the Slavic Village neighborhood are promising and inspirational efforts aimed at changing ineffective schools in ways that will better serve the needs of their community.

To meet our transformation goal of having *every* school in the district at Continuous Improvement or above, we need a *city-wide* reinvestment strategy to support such meaningful and effective partnerships broadly and immediately instead of becoming victims of highly restrictive federal mandates for restructuring schools.

Twenty-eight years after the warnings of *A Nation at Risk*, the fact remains that no city in America has yet *fully invested* in the transformation of its education system.

As a result, urban school systems across America have suffered a recurring, familiar and cyclical fate — with one reform agenda replacing another in a cycle of change that comes and goes with each new Plan and each new school leader.

Here in Cleveland, we have already broken that all-too-familiar cycle that results in too many city school districts moving two steps forward, then three steps back.

As other districts abandon reforms in progress and bring in new leaders and new academic teams, the Cleveland Board of Education, Mayor Jackson, and the Cleveland community put their faith in the Academic Transformation Plan and the team in place in Cleveland.

The Board of Education's and the community's faith in me, I continue to remind my staff, is an expression of faith in "all of us" — in the Plan we have put in place, in the people who continue to lead us on the path to premier.

Equally, the Board's faith in our present course is both a recognition and protection of the investment some have already made in our programs and our progress.

But no less important is the question of whether we are, as a community, truly willing to make a full investment in our Transformational vision.

At a time when our nation wrestles with yet another Jobs Act that, at its best, would bring only temporary relief to local communities, and when our state is forced to balance its budget on the backs of its own schools, cities, and counties, will we continue to take a traditional path?

Before we answer that question, let me offer one final Cleveland example.

In parts of Cleveland, we have already decided that investment in education matters.

Consider, for example,

- Shaker Heights where the 2009-10 per pupil expenditure was \$17,061;
- Cleveland Heights-University Heights where the per pupil expenditure was \$17,394,
- Beachwood where the per pupil expenditure was \$19,506;
- Or, Orange City Schools where the per pupil expenditure was \$21,191.

Consider the costs that some people are willing to pay for a private education at Hathaway Brown, University School, or Western Reserve Academy, where tuitions range from \$17,310 to as much as \$30,500.

Now I'm not trying to say that money is "the answer," and I need to note that there are also a number of other public and private schools in our region who actually operate for less than the \$14,503 it currently costs to educate a CMSD student.

But, what I am saying is, it's important to consider the value placed on education in some parts of our community, especially when you consider that many of the students receiving these same pricey educations began school far ahead of their CMSD peers in the first place!

Fundamentally, the state of our schools today is largely dependent upon the decisions we will

make in Cleveland today, tomorrow, and in the critical days to come.

If we choose, as so many have, the traditional path of waiting for Superman, CMSD will continue to make only incremental gains at best, while deepening cuts to our already strained programs and resources, essentially undoing the transformational work we've begun.

But, if we as a community, over the course of this year, become the first city in the nation to *truly* invest in transformational change, the evidence we have already seen right here is clear: Together, we can do so much more!

Let's embrace the notion that the Academic Transformation of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District—real, meaningful and lasting change in our schools, is change that we ourselves not only believe can happen, but **WILL** make happen.

If it sounds today like the State of our Schools is a serious matter, that's because it is.

The focus of my speech today certainly could have been on the victories we've achieved over the last year:

- Our 8.5% increase on the Ohio graduation rate;
- Our increased reading and math proficiency rates on 13 state tests;
- The increased number of schools that have earned ratings of Continuous Improvement, Effective, Excellent, or Excellent with Distinction;
- Or, another 14% drop in serious safety incidents in our schools

If I had only focused on these incremental gains, I would be ignoring the fact that far too many CMSD students still lag behind their peers here and across the state and nation.

Today, when we are finished here, my team and I will go back to the administration building to work on reducing our budget by yet another \$15 million, to address yet another round of state-imposed budget cuts.

But, even as we continue to make these difficult choices, we will do so knowing that we have the opportunity to make quite another choice in the days to come.

We have the choice to fully invest in the kinds of reforms that have already worked in some Cleveland schools:

- Expanding and supporting new and innovative school models;
- Creating modern work rules where educators are viewed as professionals, not civil servants, and are rewarded for doing so;
- Supporting only school choice strategies that direct students and families to high performing public and private schools in Cleveland; and
- Developing business and community partnerships to collectively address the challenges facing Cleveland's lowest performing schools.

On your tables today are cards indicating six ways you can immediately help Cleveland's public schools.

These choices include: Your personal commitment to doing something as ordinary as:

- offering an after-school program for the children of your community;
- volunteering in your neighborhood school's classrooms, hallways, cafeterias or offices;
- partnering with a school to provide internship and mentoring opportunities;
- Or, collecting school supplies at your workplace for donation at your neighborhood school, as a simple and immediate first step.

The State of our Schools today and in the days to come depends on the investment each and every one of us is willing to make now.

Working together, we can forge a partnership that says, in Cleveland, school by school, community by community, we are banding together to provide the quality education our students need today to be able to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

The children of Cleveland deserve to have great schools.

They deserve to have wonderful teachers, they deserve to have a quality education and a chance for a promising future.

But there is no magic bullet to fix our schools and to save our kids.

There is no Superman.

And as we enter the second year of our Academic Transformation Plan, there is simply no time to wait.

