

State of the Schools Address

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
September 27, 2012

Good afternoon.

I would like to thank The City Club for inviting me back this year for my second State of the Schools address. It's hard to believe that it's already been a year since I last stood before you. Last year, I closed my speech with these words:

The state of our schools 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 so they are able to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

While it's difficult to believe it's been a year since my last State of the Schools address, it's even more difficult to believe that it's ONLY been a year since my last State of the Schools address. That's because so many people have accomplished so much for Cleveland's schools in just one year.

Last year, I asserted that "No city in America had yet fully invested in the transformation of its education system," and I called on citizens to make Cleveland the first city to do so.

Today, I am pleased to report that, because of a coalition of courageous and visionary people that came together over the last year, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District is better positioned than ever to realize the transformation we have long envisioned. But I'm also here to caution us that we have not yet done all that is necessary to ensure that we achieve our transformation goals.

As I begin my remarks today, I want to first recognize the determined, unrelenting leadership of so many in Cleveland who, over the course of the last year, delivered The Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools.

First, I must acknowledge the amazing leadership of Mayor Frank G. Jackson, who inspired a coalition of Clevelanders, not to



mention our Governor and nearly every member of the Ohio legislature, to champion our massive reform efforts. If you didn't know it about Mayor Jackson before this year, you certainly know it now—he will lay his career and his own political future on the line for the children of Cleveland.

We must also thank the leaders of our business and philanthropic communities who answered the mayor's call to draft a plan that quickly garnered community-wide support for systemic change for our schools, including our partners from the Greater Cleveland Partnership, The Cleveland Foundation, and The George Gund Foundation.

We must also thank the members of our education community, including the leadership of the Cleveland Teachers Union and of Breakthrough Charter Schools. These are two unlikely partners in the best of circumstances. But in Ohio, where public and charter school relationships are strained at best, this bold and collaborative leadership is particularly remarkable. In fact, in most school communities across the nation, it is unfathomable.

And we must thank Cleveland's delegation of legislators, led by Senator Nina Turner and State Representative Sandra Williams, who pulled from the front and pushed from the back to move our reform efforts forward.

Finally, I am so grateful to the members of the CMSD Board of Education, led by Board Chair Denise Link and Vice Chair Louise Dempsey and to members of my own Senior Leadership Team, including my Chiefs – Christine, Michelle, John, and Pat – all of whom have worked tirelessly on so many key elements of this important legislation.

In fact, it's because of this coalition of leaders that the Academic Transformation of Cleveland's schools is no longer simply a vision.

Instead, as of July 2nd 2012, after bi-cameral and bipartisan support in Columbus, the Academic Transformation of Cleveland's schools is now Ohio law!

Now, in Cleveland, teachers and leaders will be hired, placed in schools, evaluated, paid, and if necessary, fired based upon their performance, skills, and specialized training, and not simply based on tenure and seniority.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, it's the law!

Now, in Cleveland, the length of the school day and school year can be designed around the specific needs of students and school models, and not simply based on a 19th century agrarian calendar designed for people who needed summers off to plow the fields.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, it's the law!

Now, in Cleveland, teachers and leaders are required to seek advice and input from students about how best to improve their schools, and parents are required to participate in meaningful school activities like parent-teacher conferences and open house events.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, it's the law!

Now, in Cleveland, community charter school authorizers must be screened against authorizing standards before they open in our neighborhoods, and they may also be rewarded for performing well for our children.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, it's the law!

Now, in Cleveland, administrators, teachers, district employees, and labor union leaders have the collective responsibility to take corrective action in our lowest performing schools.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, it's the law!

And now, in Cleveland, if Ohio's laws get in the way of implementing real reforms for Cleveland's children, the state superintendent has the authority to waive those laws to help our city's schools improve more quickly.

It's not just good practice; in Cleveland, even changing the law, is the law!

We shouldn't underestimate the magnitude of our collective efforts. In fact, our Cleveland Plan has drawn a national spotlight on our progress and our potential.

- The *National Review* called The Cleveland Plan "an impressive, encouraging break from the trend of conflict and stalemate."
- The *Wall Street Journal* called The Cleveland Plan a "rare example of collaboration" and a "departure from the bitter animosity over school funding and treatment of teachers that has divided many U.S. cities."
- The *Washington Post*, hailed Mayor Frank Jackson, school and union leaders, politicians and citizens in Cleveland for not being afraid to "clash over what's best for children," for being emboldened by reforms that work and for being one of the nation's "exceptions to the rules" that have too long failed America's children.
- And *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* said that, "with so much at stake," The Cleveland Plan was indeed "a plan worth fighting for."

And, if that's not enough to convince you of the magnitude of change won in The Cleveland Plan, you only need look to Chicago where, after seven days into a bitter teachers' strike, leaders "won" a longer school day and an

improved teacher evaluation system – only two of the core elements of The Cleveland Plan. But, because of the animosity caused by the strike, they have "lost" the working relationships necessary to collaborate with the very people who implement these reforms in the classroom.

The *Wall Street Journal* called it right. The Cleveland Plan is indeed a "rare example of collaboration" and a true "departure from the bitter animosity" that continues to divide so many U.S. cities.

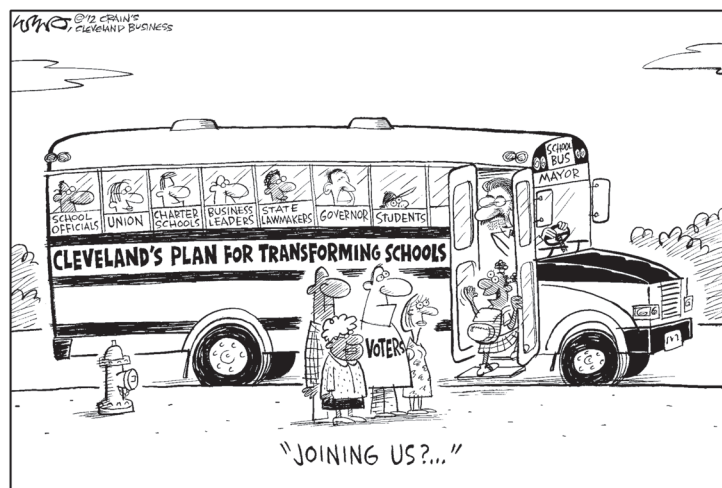
In Cleveland, instead of clashing over what was most comfortable for adults, we collectively fought for what was and is best for children, and the children of Cleveland won.

Many of the people who were directly involved in the development of and the advocacy for The Cleveland Plan are in this room today, so I'd like to pause a moment and ask those people to stand and be recognized for all they've done for our schools. Please join me in a round of applause for them all.

I am so grateful to each of you.

Clearly, we can celebrate the reforms these legislative tools provide in Ohio's law books, but passage of The Cleveland Plan is only the first step in our three-part strategy to Transform Cleveland's Schools. Now, we must resource our transformation plan.

This again will take an "all in" effort from every member of our community. *Crain's Cleveland Business* portrayed it best with their July 9th editorial cartoon showing School Officials, Union Leaders, Charter School Leaders, Business Leaders, State Lawmakers, the Governor, and Students all peering out of the windows of a school bus driven, appropriately, by our Mayor, with a caption asking Cleveland voters the simple question, "Joining us?"



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Crain's Cleveland Business.

The truth is, our coalition for reforming Cleveland's schools in the year ahead must be broader and deeper than ever. Changing the law, it turns out, was the simple part. In Columbus, we only needed to convince 132 senators and state representatives, and one governor, that Cleveland's kids and community were worth their investment. Now we must convince 88,371 or more parents and citizens that our children and our city are worthy of their support as well.

So what does support of Issue 107 buy? After all, that is the \$85.4 million dollar question, as certified by the county fiscal officer or, at our current collection rate, at least the \$67.4 million dollar question.

What it buys is real reform.

Issue 107 buys us the ability to implement new school models in schools where we have failed to get the results we desire. We know that new models work, because we have examples with proven results across the district. And we've built most of those new models with the very same teachers and students that were already in the district, but with modern, flexible work rules and the resources to implement new school designs.

Our Transformation Plan demands the aggressive replication of these school models. We now have the legislative tools necessary

to bring these models to scale, but starting new schools also requires the capital needed to invest in new materials and equipment, professional training, school infrastructure, and technology, if these models are to succeed.

Issue 107 provides us the investment capital to bring our New and Innovative Schools portfolio to scale.

Issue 107 also allows us to deepen the investments necessary to ensure that students graduate ready for college, careers, and the workforce. Those investments start early by expanding quality pre-school education so that every CMSD child can start kindergarten ready to learn. It means investing in our K-8 schools so that all students have access to academic reading and high level mathematics courses that ensure students enter high school with appropriate literacy and numeracy skills, and that students are richly educated in the sciences and social sciences, visual and performing arts, physical and health education, and in world languages and cultures – those things that make us culturally literate.

And it means expanding opportunities for personalized learning experiences in our high schools to include honors and advanced placement classes, technology-based blended learning courses, college coursework, training and credentialing programs, and other rigorous

instructional opportunities that ensure multiple pathways to graduation.

Even more importantly, graduation cannot be our students' terminal degree. Instead, a CMSD diploma must ensure readiness for and access to apprenticeships, trade schools and technical colleges, associate degree programs, and four-year colleges and universities. And we must focus on these investments in every academic neighborhood, so that children going to East Technical High School have the same opportunities for success, as do the children that go to John Hay.

Issue 107 ensures our ability to make the key investments needed to even the playing field for our kids.

Issue 107 ensures our ability to attract and retain a new corps of excellent teachers and leaders and to reward our employees for their valuable skills and outstanding performance. Twenty-five percent of CMSD's teachers and professional staff could retire today – right now, on September 27, 2012 – and not come to work tomorrow. And, with Ohio's recent pension reform, we can be certain that they will, very soon.

So, if we can anticipate a significant change in workforce on the very near horizon, it is critical that we actively recruit the very best educators to teach our students and lead our schools. And it's not as simple as posting a job application and hoping the best and brightest find Cleveland. When I was a principal in a wealthy, high-performing suburban district in Columbus, I had to hire a social studies teacher. I had 1,000 applicants for that one job. And when I was interviewing candidates, applicant after applicant told me why he or she was the "very best" candidate and why he or she "deserved to work" for that high performing school. At the same time, Columbus City Schools, just 27 miles down the road, was

seeking social studies teachers for their job openings and was calling my school district to find out if we had any candidates they might consider. Columbus did not have 1,000 applicants waiting for their jobs.

The fact is, we cannot afford to hire teachers and leaders into the Cleveland Metropolitan School District who only deign to work here because they didn't get the job for which they feel they are worthy. Our kids deserve better. Instead, we must actively go out and find the great teachers and principals out there that don't just tolerate our community—ones who love our city, love our kids, and are driven to improve the quality of education in our schools. They do exist, and it's our responsibility to find them and bring them to Cleveland.

And once they are here, we have to pay them for their talents and skills. This means structuring our compensation system so that it recognizes great teachers that accept responsibility for improving our lowest performing schools. It means adjusting our salaries to attract bilingual principals. It means recognizing and rewarding teachers who earn specialized training credentials, like Montessori certification or attracting professionals into our most difficult to staff positions. It also means rewarding our very best performers, those who consistently earn top ratings on their evaluations and whose students make substantial growth in their learning.

Issue 107 allows us to make those investments!

Issue 107 allows us to update our learning materials and to take advantage of 21st century technologies. Consider the power of simply moving from books to Nooks. We are using tablets at two CMSD schools already, and they are game-changing devices. For these

students, every one of their textbooks is on the 10.2-ounce Nook. In these schools, students are able to underline or highlight in their textbooks and to write notes in the margins of the pages to help anchor their learning.

For these students, their textbook connects directly to the *Declaration of Independence*, to the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and to millions of other primary source documents. On the Nook, students can watch mathematics lectures as their homework, and then work on the practice problems as their class work, with their teacher available to help them – a concept we call “the flipped classroom.” The Nook is only one example of the smart technologies that can revolutionize the classroom experience, and at a dramatic cost savings over time.

Issue 107 allows us to make these investments.

Issue 107 enables continued improvements in discipline and safety. The reality is, in the last three years the number of “serious safety incidents” in our schools has declined 36%. Suspensions are down 15%. Expulsions are down 42%. Attendance is up 1.5%. And both K-8 and high school students rate their schools’ climates and the levels of support they receive as “significantly improved.”

But we are an urban district and we know there is more work to be done. This means deepening our investments in social and emotional learning practices that help students develop such skills as self-regulation, care and concern for others, developing positive relationships and making responsible decisions. This means supporting anti-bullying efforts, like our recent District-wide anti-bullying summit, and investing in conflict mediation so that students can effectively address the challenges they encounter.

It also means ensuring that our school cultures both challenge and support students and families. It means re-engaging families, including assisting parents in selecting the school that best meets the needs of their children, developing meaningful opportunities for families to actively participate in the education of their children, and ensuring families have multiple ways to conveniently connect with their teacher and school, through such things as parent portals and online grade books.

Issue 107 also ensures opportunities to invest in mentorships, internships, apprenticeships, dual credit opportunities, stackable certificate programs and other real world experiences that connect what students are learning in the classroom to the outside world.

There are many of us that believe we have to “get back to the basics – reading, writing, and arithmetic.” Certainly, students must learn strong literacy and numeracy skills to be successful. But in today’s world, that is simply not enough. Let me give you an example:

I brought my student intern’s 10th grade chemistry assignment to one of my senior leadership team meetings last year, and I asked my team to do the assignment. When no one began working, I asked how many of the senior team had taken chemistry in high school. All of the hands went up. I then asked how many had a bachelor’s degree and again, all raised their hands. Next, I quizzed the team as to how many held a master’s degree. We’re educators, so as you can imagine, most hands went up again. I stopped there, worried about asking who in the room had a doctorate and couldn’t complete a simple 10th grade chemistry problem!

Next, I pulled up a website called wolframalpha.com. If you haven't heard of it, ask your children or your grandchildren. They have. I asked my team to pick a problem from the page, and we plugged the equation $(CF_2CF_2)_n = C_{2n}F_{4n}$ into wolframalpha.com. The computer solved the problem immediately, along with telling us that we were balancing an equation which bonds one atom of carbon to two atoms of fluoride, that the chemical name of the equation we were balancing was polytetrafluoroethylene, and that this particular chemical composition is commonly known as Teflon.

So if all of this information is available, literally at my students' fingertips, the real question is – do our students know what to do with that information? That's why mentorships, internships, apprenticeships, and other real world experiences are so critically important, and why they are a key investment of this levy.

Issue 107 also allows us to lengthen the school day for students who need it most. I mentioned earlier the agrarian calendar we currently use, so that all of our students can be free in the summer to help bring in the harvest. The fact is, we can attribute as much as half of the learning gap between my students and their suburban peers to a learning loss that occurs over 12 summer vacations during their educational career.

We also know that the learning gap begins to be measurable at about the beginning of the fourth week of summer. And, ironically, we know that most families would like to send their children back to school after the third week of summer break! So if we know all of these facts, why wouldn't we switch to a school calendar in which students go to school for 10 weeks, and then take a 3-week fall break, return for a second 10-week quarter before taking a 3-week winter break, attend a third 10-week quarter before taking a 3-week spring break, and then

attend a fourth 10-week quarter before taking a 3-week summer break? Using this schedule, students get four more weeks of learning over the course of the school year, and we effectively eliminate summer learning loss!

Just imagine how much more convenient it would be for families whose work schedules don't end just because the school year does! I can certainly partner with recreation centers, community centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other community agencies to create 3-week camps for kids throughout the year!

Issue 107 makes this new school calendar possible.

Issue 107 lets us invest in high quality charter schools by setting aside 1 mill of revenue for those schools that are willing to be publicly transparent and accountable for their results. I know that, in Ohio, the words "charter schools" are often polarizing, but it's time we stop debating about who owns children – district schools or charter schools – and instead, start debating about whether those children are getting a quality education or not. And if they are, it's our responsibility to support those schools that are getting demonstrated results, so that they can sustain their momentum over time.

Finally, Issue 107 simply lets us restore key programs like art, music, physical education, and library/media access, to restore the length of our student day, and restore acceptable class sizes that we know have been important for even the incremental gains we've achieved over the last several years.

Most importantly, Issue 107 buys accountability.

For the first time in Cleveland history, with a 4-year levy, voters are completely in control. Either we transform Cleveland's schools, as promised, or we lose taxpayer support. It's as simple as that!

As Mayor Jackson says, “it’s time to call the roll.”

Everyone in Cleveland has to answer, either “Yes” or “No.” Either we are willing to invest in our kids and in our city’s future, or we are not. And I’m confident that, beginning October 2, and ending November 6, we will again lead the nation’s reform efforts when we invest in *The Right Plan, Right Now*, Issue 107, in support of Cleveland’s schools!

If we ever needed a reminder of why The Cleveland Plan and this Operating Levy are so important, we got that reminder yesterday when the Ohio Department of Education released preliminary data that indicates CMSD will likely earn the rating of *Academic Emergency* on the 2011-2012 state report card. I won’t lie. I was devastated by this news.

The reality is, despite all of our efforts, CMSD’s student achievement remains low and flat, and we failed to meet the state’s value-added goal for the second year in a row. But I have to tell you, that even if the data had shown we had improved to *Continuous Improvement*, instead of falling back to *Academic Emergency*, I wouldn’t have been able to stand here and tell you that all is well. The truth is, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District does serve many students very well! Our graduation rate increased another 3.8% this year, and more kids are going to more colleges and universities than ever before. But, it’s simply not enough.

Which brings us to the third and final part of our transformation strategy, execution. That’s right, not *implementation*, but *execution*. It’s “do or die” time for CMSD and for Cleveland!

Transformation is not just about changing the law or passing a levy that requires a coalition. The transformation of urban schools in America is a city-wide problem that requires a city-wide solution. If we truly expect schools

that send students to Harvard on a Gates Millennium Scholarship, like David Boone at MC²STEM High School, it’s going to take far more than asking a few people to drive to Columbus to lobby lawmakers.

And if we truly want schools with 98.6 percent graduation rates, like John Hay’s Science and Medicine and Early College High Schools, it’s going to require more than a one-time commitment at the ballot box.

For if we truly want schools where students use the entire community as their learning space, where mastery of rigorous content is the constant and the time it takes to learn it is the variable, where teachers and leaders have the autonomies to nimbly adjust their programming in order to meet their students’ needs, and where the best and brightest are supported and rewarded for their quality work, it’s going to take a persistent commitment from all of us – actually, from even *more* of us – to execute the *Plan for Transforming Cleveland’s Schools* for which we fought so hard.

I started my remarks today where I concluded last year:

“The state of our schools in the days to come depends on the investment each and every one of us is willing to make now.”

Thank you for the investment you made this year. I am counting on your continued investment in the year ahead.

More importantly, the 40,871 students of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District are counting on it.

Thank you.

