

STATE OF THE SCHOOLS ADDRESS

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
September 14, 2016



Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me at my sixth State of the Schools address.

A full house in this ballroom today is a visual reminder to me and my colleagues of the importance each of you place on education as a vital factor in the renaissance we are witnessing in Cleveland.

I'd like to offer a special thank you to Dan Moulthrop and The City Club staff for hosting the event again this year.

Thank you also to the sponsors who made it possible for The City Club to host the event in the brand-new Hilton Ballroom, so more of my fellow educators, our student scholars, and their families and caregivers, could be with us today.

Please join me in thanking each of these sponsors and supporters.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I also want to take a moment to thank several people in attendance today.

First, Mayor Frank G. Jackson for his continued strong leadership of our city's education plan, Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools. Thank you, not only for your work as our city's distinguished Mayor, but also for your leadership as Chair of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance and your unwavering devotion to the mission and goals of *The Cleveland Plan*.

Thank you to the Cleveland Board of Education, including the members present here today. Strong Board leadership has played a vital role on our Cleveland Plan journey over the past four years. Please stand and be recognized:

Board Chair Denise Link, and board members Anne Bingham, Willetta Milam, Robert Heard, Justin Monday and Lisa Thomas.

Thank you for the role you play in the success of our schools and in the rising achievement of the students we serve.

To the Chiefs and Senior Leadership of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, I am so proud to work with such an incredibly talented team of committed leaders and so grateful for all you do.

And while most of our CMSD Educators are at work in their schools, classrooms, offices, and other work areas today, I am pleased to see a number of them here. Would all of the CMSD Educators in attendance please stand? Thank you for the many roles you play in our students' success every day.

I am always grateful to see so many of our partners at this annual event—the men and women who 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 our growing charter school colleagues in the Cleveland Education Compact and the Cleveland Teachers Union. These and countless other friends and supporters play a pivotal role in the state of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District today.

Above all, we owe our gratitude to the people of Cleveland for their continued faith in CMSD, for their game-changing support of Issue 107 and Issue 4, that together did more than any of us could do alone to revitalize our schools, our city and our region.

So, let's talk about *The Cleveland Plan*!

Over the past four years, a lot has been written about The Plan—so much, in fact, that I am often surprised when a colleague sends me a clipping I didn't even know had been written about *The Cleveland Plan*. Here's one of my favorite finds this year—an interesting critique of The Plan.

It begins by stating:

“Even more generally and conspicuously than before, the “Cleveland plan”... as it has come to be known throughout the country, has... attracted public attention. The problem of securing a business-like administration of the business affairs and of keeping the teaching force professionally healthful and strong is a difficult one... Cleveland was the first city in the country to take decisive action in securing a plan of organization which would meet these difficulties.”

When citizens across Cleveland pulled together to draft *The Cleveland Plan* five years ago, we were in academic emergency, on the verge of financial bankruptcy and had lost the public's trust.

The Cleveland Plan provided a means to secure legislation that could modernize work rules,

incentivize charter school relationships and completely reinvent a school system governed by laws and workplace rules designed for another era.

When *The Cleveland Plan* legislation was proposed, Ohio law, union contracts and bureaucratic traditions thwarted every attempt to make changes in staffing, budget allocations, school schedules, calendars and virtually any other reforms designed to improve student achievement.

The Cleveland Plan was driven by knowledge of what was already beginning to work in our highest performing schools. Investments made between 2006 and 2011 in new and innovative school models enabled us to see the kind of results that were possible in Cleveland with the right tools in place.

We learned how much more we could do as a school system when we stopped competing with charter schools and, instead, partnered with the best of them. Through memorandums of understanding with our teachers union, we created new work rules in Cleveland and saw improved results in our own schools as well.

We were motivated by the gains we were seeing in some schools and determined to expand what was working to all of our schools across the city.

This collective mission required the support of Ohio's governor, and the bipartisan support of the Ohio House of Representatives and Ohio Senate, who saw value in our vision and passed House Bill 525—the legislation that put Cleveland in a position to not only reform, but transform its school system. CMSD, for the first time, had the legal authority and the responsibility to reinvent public education in Cleveland.

We also had the responsibility to convince voters that their support of a 15-mill tax levy for four years would enable us to prove that *The Cleveland Plan* was much more than the reform plans of the past; that indeed, *The Cleveland Plan* was the “Right Plan, Right Now.”

Skeptics understandably asked, “Why should we believe this plan is any different than the reform plans of the past?”

It was a fair question. The citizens of Cleveland had seen almost as many reform plans as they had seen superintendents and CEOs over the years.

In fact, CMSD had 14 superintendents or CEOs in the past 35 years. Why should a weary Cleveland public believe that this CEO and this reform plan would be any different?

I gave three reasons when we went to voters in 2012, and those reasons are the same today.

First, we had the benefit of knowing so much more about what was working in school reform than our predecessors did in prior years. Having the opportunity to study cities and school systems that were making real progress gave us firsthand knowledge of who was getting early results and what reforms were failing to move achievement.

Second, legislation passed in Columbus provided us with new work rules and new flexibilities that none of my predecessors had at their disposal.

Third, with the passage of Issue 107, we would also have the resources necessary to invest in our reform plan, something again that many of my predecessors did not have.

What made *The Cleveland Plan* so different was that with these three elements in place, CMSD was positioned for the first time to not just improve existing practices but to remove barriers to improvement strategies that we knew worked but previously could not implement.

As the writer noted:

“The problem of securing a business-like administration of the business affairs and of keeping the teaching force professionally healthful and strong is a difficult one...”

Through careful research of what works in urban school reform, bold legislative action and the will of its people in the voting booth, Cleveland truly was the “first city in the country to take decisive action in securing a plan of organization which could actually take on these difficulties.”

The writer continues:

“And while this plan has not accomplished all that can be desired, it has worked so successfully that there is no thought in any responsible quarter of abandoning it, or of relinquishing any of its essential features.”

It is true that *The Cleveland Plan* has not yet accomplished all that can be desired. We have not yet met our goal of tripling the number of students enrolled in high-performing District and charter schools. And we have not yet met our goal of eliminating failing schools in our city.

But *The Cleveland Plan*, at its core, was designed to move student achievement. Over the last four years, while still far to go, student achievement is moving in Cleveland. CMSD students are increasingly ready to compete with students across the state and nation, as we steadily move the system that serves them in the right direction.

Since implementing *The Cleveland Plan*, our community has expanded access to high-quality preschool education for four-year-olds in our city by more than 1200 seats. Data from PRE4CLE, a public-private partnership created by *The Cleveland Plan*, shows that 80% of the students accessing these high-quality preschool classes are arriving kindergarten-ready when they come to school the following fall, compared to only 50% for those who don't have access to a high-quality preschool.

And, according to a report released by Case Western Reserve University last fall, we know that kids who have attended CMSD preschools are 29% more likely to pass Ohio's third-grade reading assessment than those who have not. With recently announced commitments from Cuyahoga County, and matching gifts from local business leaders, I am excited to report that we will be able to continue our rapid expansion of this most important Cleveland Plan commitment.

As Cleveland's children grow, we have mounting evidence that CMSD is increasingly able to ensure these young students are able to read proficiently by third grade, as measured by Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee.

In fact, in both of the last two years since Ohio implemented the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, CMSD has improved third-grade reading scores from approximately 31% of students reading at a third-grade reading level in the fall to more than 85% of CMSD's third grade students reading at grade level by the end of the year. We saw these gains despite the fact that the state's passing score has increased each year, and even as the state implemented more rigorous reading tests each year as well.

Even though evolving state tests in the last three years have made it difficult to measure progress in the middle grades, CMSD was identified as one of only three large urban districts in the nation to show improvement in all four subjects of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as "NAEP"—the Nation's Report Card.

While other urban districts were losing ground on this measure of progress for 4th and 8th grade reading and 4th and 8th grade math, CMSD saw gains.

Even while Ohio and other states saw decreases in their NAEP scores, and as the United States as a whole saw declines in these scores, CMSD saw some of the largest performance increases in the nation.

Now it's true that we have a long way to go, but these results are particularly important when you consider that, prior to *The Cleveland Plan*, CMSD's results had declined steadily over the prior two decades.

In our high schools we've seen the most visible evidence of progress yet. Our four-year graduation rate, just 52.2% when we began drafting *The Cleveland Plan*, has increased to a District record high of 66.1% this year and, when our report card is released tomorrow, we expect to see another District record high as well!

This 14% increase means that hundreds more students have graduated from CMSD in the last four years. And even as we are graduating more students, we're also seeing that these students are more ready for college and careers.

The Higher Education Compact reports that college remediation rates for CMSD students declined by 10% in the last year alone, and that passage rates for those students who do need remediation increased by 15%.

Both Tri-C and CSU report that college persistence rates, the rate at which first-year students return for a second year of college, increased dramatically for CMSD students.

First-year persistence rates are one of the best indicators of college completion available, so this is exceedingly good news for our city.

Others are noting our progress as well.

In the Cleveland Transformation Alliance's report just released, the Alliance cites the progress we have made on both measures of school performance and implementation of *The Cleveland Plan* as promising, with school performance data having trended mostly upward.

Additionally, the independent research group, Innovation Ohio, recently called *The Cleveland Plan* "an emerging path to improvement."

"Make no mistake," it says, "there has been progress. For the first time in decades, enrollment in CMSD has increased. Graduation rates have also increased, disciplinary actions have decreased and proficiency test scores have improved relative to other large urban school districts."

Both reports agree, and I do as well, that there is much more work to be done.

Innovation Ohio aptly points out that, "While *The Cleveland Plan* appears to have created some improved opportunities for students, the progress has been slow and non-uniform. Some schools have seen improvement. Others have seen slippage," it reads. "But all are cultivating new school cultures and environments that could take as much as a generation to result in the kinds of improvements everyone wants."

Similarly, The Transformation Alliance report points out that "improvement has been slow and incremental" with "many schools still struggling to meet ever-increasing state and national standards of quality."

And yet, despite their acknowledgment of the real challenges we face in Cleveland, both groups advocate for staying the course.

The Transformation Alliance report states, “*The Cleveland Plan*, supported by the 2012 levy approved by Cleveland voters, has provided a vision and resources for both CMSD and participating charter schools to begin the difficult, long-term work of reinventing our city’s public education system.” The Alliance continues with a call to all stakeholders to support and pass Issue 108, the District’s no-tax-increase levy renewal, so that we can sustain and accelerate our progress.

Innovation Ohio similarly acknowledges, “While there is still a long way to go, success is within reach.” In addition to calling upon voters to renew the levy in November, its report calls upon stakeholders to stay committed to *The Cleveland Plan* for good reason:

“One of the greatest failings of our country’s education reform efforts has been that no one ever stays with them for long. Something works for a couple of years, funding dries up and we move on to the next thing. There have been several different Cleveland Plans—all of which had some merit to them. Many of the changes will take years to see academic results. The community can’t give up too quickly,” the report reads.

“There are cultural changes happening at many schools. Some may adopt them quicker than others.” But fixating on test scores does an injustice to the truly transformational things that are happening in many different Cleveland buildings.

As those of you who know me personally might guess, I prefer to think of our progress to date in terms of how it affects the life of a child. Take a moment and think back to 2012.

For 16 years, from 1996 to 2012, the District and our city had failed to make an investment in its children. Sixteen years is more than the entire school-aged lifetime of a child, from kindergarten to graduation, and the results of that failed investment in Cleveland’s children were predictable.

Cleveland has now invested for four years—from 2012 to 2016—which is approximately one third of the school-aged life of a child. And as predicted, we have seen the initial results.

Imagine for a moment what we’ll see two-thirds of the way through that child’s school-aged journey in 2020, or at the conclusion of that journey in 2024.

On November 8th, just six weeks away, we will ask voters to renew their commitment to Cleveland’s children for another four years by passing Issue 108, our no-tax-increase renewal levy, enabling us to stay the course on *The Cleveland Plan* for four more years.

As the author of the critique concluded:

“While this plan has not accomplished all that can be desired, it has worked so successfully that there is no thought in any responsible quarter of abandoning it, or of relinquishing any of its essential features.”

The author ends by saying:

“It must be remembered, however, that there is no legal enactment and no plan of government that can be so wisely and skillfully devised as to lessen in the slightest degree the responsibilities of those who are charged with its execution. Indeed the greater concentration of authority and the more fixed and personal the responsibility which the present law clearly contemplates emphasize the necessity of more constant and earnest endeavor, of increased watchfulness and fidelity and of greater energy, zeal and honesty, if it is to be faithfully and intelligently administered.”

There is no law, no plan, no matter how skillfully devised, the writer says, that can lessen in the slightest degree the collective responsibility of those charged with its execution.

Prior to *The Cleveland Plan*, CMSD had evolved into a bureaucratic, standardized, tightly-controlled school system that, from its central office, managed everything in its schools, from staffing to scheduling, curriculum, operations and budgets.

The result? A system where no one, not a teacher, not a principal, not a central office administrator, not even the CEO, felt empowered to take the actions needed to improve outcomes for kids.

No one felt accountable for results in a system that didn't allow anyone to make decisions and be responsible for them.

Now, four years later, through a new evaluation and compensation system, we have taken a system with no accountability and held both the system and everyone in it accountable, much more accountable than any of us has seen in decades.

And the writer makes it clear—it is our collective responsibility that will, in the end, ensure our success.

Even as we have worked hard to build an increasing sense of hope and support in the broader Cleveland community, we have struggled to build that same sense of hope and optimism among the people most important to our success—our teachers and other educators that we rely on to execute our plan well every day. We will continue to work with all of our educators to more clearly define and assume our “collective responsibility” to ensure success of *The Cleveland Plan*.

In doing so, we must recognize and appreciate how difficult this much longer journey has been for the hard-working men and women of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District—educators who have endured and persevered through one reform plan after another, and from one superintendent to another superintendent or CEO over the life of their career. It's no wonder that a veteran CMSD teacher who has devoted a lifetime to Cleveland's children would feel beleaguered by yet another promise of change.

We must remember that the educational system our veteran colleagues entered two decades ago was a far different system, with fewer challenges and demands.

There were no state standards, let alone Common Core State Standards.

There were no state tests, let alone state tests that counted as part of a teacher's performance.

And there were no school report cards, let alone corrective action schools that aggressively addressed performance on those report cards.

Teaching is profoundly different than it was when these professionals entered the field early in their career. Some of this work is not what they signed on to do when they became a teacher. Imagine what it must be like to be in a profession that promised you great stability in exchange for relatively low wages and then suddenly created high levels of accountability in ways you could never have fathomed when you took the job. That's exactly what's happened in America's schools. And CMSD is at the front of that change!

And speaking of being at the front of that change, even though we saw the benefits of our early reform efforts, there are almost no fully-developed models for CMSD to look to when we need to confront the difficult challenges that come with implementing change across the District.

Therefore, when we find ourselves struggling with complex issues like differentiated compensation for teachers, or the appropriate use of student performance data in adult evaluations, we can't simply look to the other 611 Ohio school districts for ideas or guidance. As leaders in this work, there are almost no peers to turn to when we need to figure out solutions to our problems, or when we need to alter our course to improve on a new practice and make it better.

This fall, these tensions came to a head when we faced the very real possibility of a strike by our teachers union. Many people have asked me how things got so bad.

What happened, they asked, that could drive the parties so far apart? I believe at the heart of our struggles are these two core issues. The profession of teaching has changed so dramatically and our educators, our union's members, are feeling the real emotions that come with change—anger, anxiety, uncertainty, loss, fear.

And, even as they are feeling these very real emotions, we, the District and our union, are left alone to find solutions to these new ways of doing business.

And we did.

As many of you know, at literally the 21st hour, we came to an agreement that both parties believe is fair to our teachers and other educators, while protecting the essential elements of *The Cleveland Plan*.

In truth, no one else is doing the kinds of things we are doing in Cleveland, but we have continued to find solutions and move forward, even when it seemed there were no solutions to be found. In fact, Cleveland continues to lead the way.

It's not only our teachers who are being asked to change. CMSD's central office is no longer the top-down, bureaucratic operation it was. Instead, it is evolving into a network of service providers, positioning itself to support our schools and the educators that work in them.

And our principals, those we've put the most responsibility on and the most trust in, are among the most burdened with leading change. It's our principals who are expected to leverage the new autonomies provided by *The Cleveland Plan*, flexibilities in how they manage their staff, budgets and resources, while also leading the complex adaptive work of culture change.

Each of us who worked together to create and implement *The Cleveland Plan* that brought about these changes, shares responsibility to execute The Plan.

That means accepting shared ownership of The Plan's success, and continually working together to meet the challenges that naturally arise out of new ways of doing business.

It means having empathy for the hard-working educators who are implementing these critical changes every day.

Indeed, as the writer so aptly stated:

"Success of the 'Cleveland plan' requires a constant and earnest endeavor to succeed, increased watchfulness, fidelity to its mission and greater zeal and honesty among all of us if it is to be faithfully and intelligently administered."

So, who was the writer who so fittingly captured the essence of our Cleveland Plan work?

Who was it that so eloquently commended our progress, recognized our challenges and emphasized the importance of staying the course?

Well, it turns out the writer wasn't actually talking about us at all.

In fact, the piece I've been referencing did not appear in any article you've seen over the last four years.

This passage about the "Cleveland plan" was actually written by H.Q. Sargent, the School Director of the Cleveland Public Schools in 1895 when in his Annual Message, his own State of the Schools Address, he described the Cleveland community's efforts to improve their schools, an effort they called the "Cleveland plan."

So why did I use Director Sargent's critique of his "Cleveland plan" to tell our story today?

Cleveland has a long history of tackling our own challenges. In fact, Mr. Sargent was tackling similar challenges more than 100 years ago. As we enter our fifth year of implementation of our own Cleveland Plan, we can take some important lessons from the original:

- ◆ Take decisive action to create a plan that meets the difficulties you face
- ◆ Stay the course, even as you recognize its successes and failings
- ◆ Recognize that even the best plan is only as strong as its people whose energy, zeal and honesty must be nurtured and respected

It's hard not to wonder what people will say 100 years from now, when someone dusts off a copy of this State of the Schools Address, this "Annual Message," or more likely when they read a digital transcript of it.

What will they say about our efforts?

My hope is that they will be inspired by the vision and optimism of every one of us here today.

That they will see the people of Cleveland as visionaries who believed—with everything they had—in *The Cleveland Plan*.

It is my hope that future generations will be inspired by our success.

That they will be grateful to the people of Cleveland who put their hopes and dreams for their children's future in Cleveland's public schools.

But that will only happen if we stay the course!

Let's build on the progress we've made the last four years.

Let's accelerate our gains, celebrate our successes and keep working to meet our challenges.

Let's recommit ourselves today so that 100 years from now, when people read about the historic Cleveland Plan of 2012, they will know that real school reform comes from within.

Let's make history, Cleveland.

Let's make history again!

Thank you.

Eric S. Gordon
Chief Executive Officer

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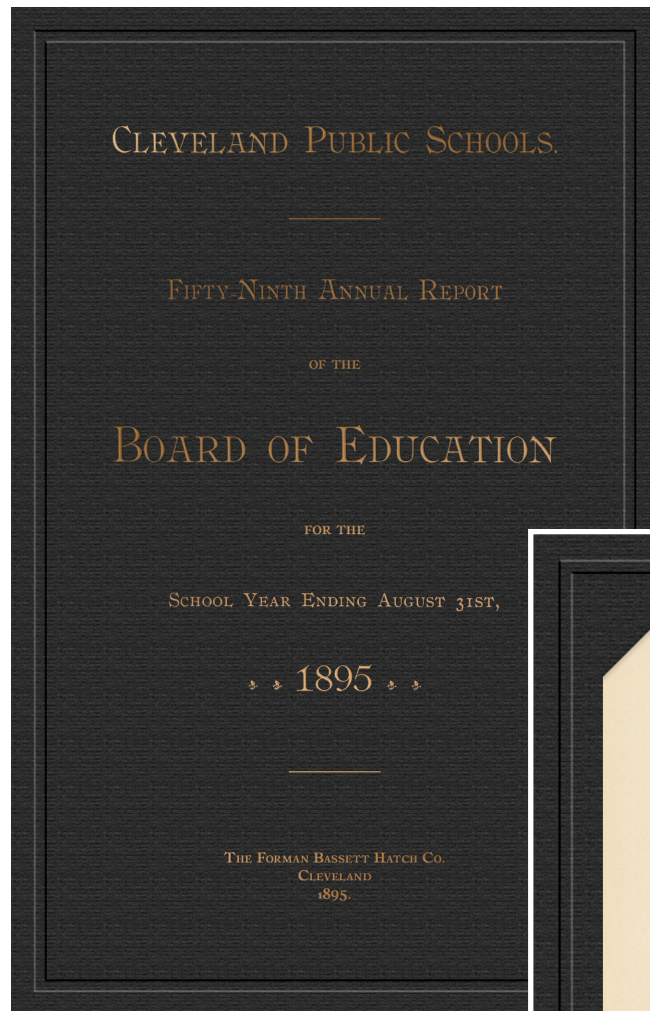
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Front Cover

This keepsake replica of the 1895 Annual Message was distributed to guests at the 2016 CMSD State of the Schools Address on September 14.

Copies are available upon request in the CMSD Communications office.

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