

# STATE of the SCHOOLS ADDRESS

Eric S. Gordon, CEO  
September 27, 2017



Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me at my seventh State of the Schools Address.

Each year since 2011, when I became CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the audience for this annual event has grown.

Your presence remains a testament to the high value that people, businesses and organizations across the city place on quality education as Cleveland's greatest hope for its children, for their future and for the future of our city and region.

I'm grateful to Dan Moulthrop and The City Club of Cleveland staff for their willingness to accommodate the growing number of people who mark their calendars for this important event, where it is my privilege to share the progress CMSD is making under *The Cleveland Plan*.

It is especially meaningful to do so in the presence of so many of the people who have dedicated their time, resources and efforts to making our progress possible.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to take a moment to recognize Mayor Frank G. Jackson. Mayor Jackson, more than anyone, deserves credit for breathing life into, and sustaining, the motivation behind *The Cleveland Plan*. Thank you, Mayor Jackson, for your distinguished work as our city's Mayor, and for your dedicated leadership as Chair of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance.

Heartfelt gratitude to the Cleveland Board of Education. Strong Board leadership continues to play a vital role in the progress we have seen over the past six years since launching *The Cleveland Plan*.

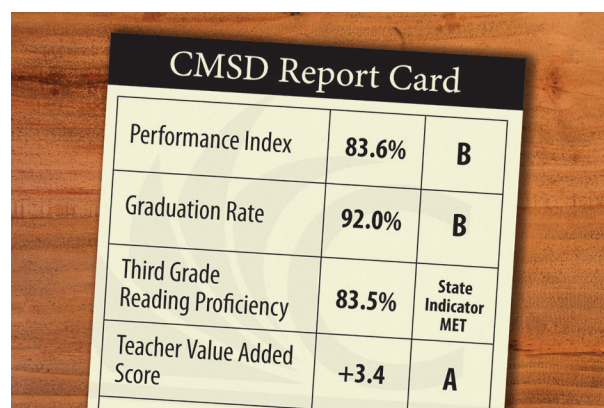


One of the hallmarks of this event is the attendance of so many of our educational partners—the extraordinary men and women who helped to shape and continue to support *The Cleveland Plan*, including the Greater Cleveland Partnership, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Breakthrough Schools, members of the Cleveland Education Compact, the Cleveland Teachers Union, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance, PRE4CLE and the Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland, to name just a few.

These citizens and countless other educators, friends and supporters in this room and across the city play a vital role in the state of Cleveland's public schools today.

And finally, and most importantly, I'd like to invite all of the student scholars in the audience here today to stand. It is for you, and all of your peers, that all of these people are gathered today!

So, let's talk about the state of our schools. A report published in May of 2015 compared our District's performance in 2013-14, after one full year of implementing *The Cleveland Plan*, to Ohio's other urban school districts. And while this particular report didn't assign a letter grade, here is how CMSD scored and what those scores would have equated to on the Ohio Report Card that year:



Performance Index	83.6%	B
Graduation Rate	92.0%	B
Third Grade Reading Proficiency	83.5%	State Indicator MET
Teacher Value Added Score	+3.4	A

This report was released by the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University and the Office of Evidence and Inquiry at Cuyahoga Community College. It was a pretty good report card for just one year of work on *The Cleveland Plan*—one that would make most people proud.

So, why is it that you don't recall seeing that report card?

The goal in researching our District was "to consider the unique demography of each school district as well as each districts' prior performance." Therefore, in calculating CMSD's academic progress, the study posed the question: "What if our kids didn't live in poverty?"

In its findings, the report legitimately recognized that:

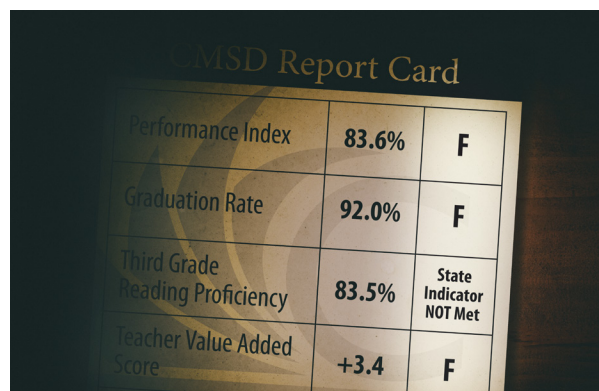
"Not all districts are the same. Comparing their performance without taking into account demography and prior performance is akin to comparing "apples and oranges."

The unique and reasoned approach researchers used was to put the Cleveland Metropolitan School District on an even playing field with other Ohio school districts.

Not surprisingly, CSU and Tri-C researchers found that, if put on an even playing field with our peers, CMSD teachers can teach just as well, and CMSD students can compete just as well as their peers.

In theory, that's great.

But in truth, CMSD's students are not on a level playing field with their peers in other Ohio school districts, including other urban districts, when the realities of poverty are factored in.



Performance Index	83.6%	F
Graduation Rate	92.0%	F
Third Grade Reading Proficiency	83.5%	State Indicator NOT Met
Teacher Value Added Score	+3.4	F

Everyone knows that CMSD is vastly different than our peers statewide. Our large and growing multiracial, multicultural demography is something I'm proud of, as we serve not only White, African-American and Hispanic kids and families, but also larger numbers of immigrant families who have come to Cleveland for opportunity or refuge—all of them with the same hope for a bright future for themselves and their children.

But our kids are different than their suburban and rural peers in another important way. And, unfortunately, it's a way we can't be proud of. Because, ladies and gentlemen, the brutal fact is that the large majority of CMSD's kids and families live in poverty, often generational poverty. In fact, the city of Cleveland actually has the second highest level of childhood poverty of any city in the nation, second only to Detroit, Michigan.

My guess is that everyone in this room would agree that poverty is neither good, nor fair, nor equitable. But it is a reality for the kids we serve.

So why am I telling you this? What am I saying?

Is it that poor kids can't learn as well as their middle and upper-income peers? We know that is simply not true. And there is ample evidence to prove they can.

A simple Internet search yields more than 31 million hits on "High Performing, High Poverty Schools" that defy the notion that poor kids can't learn or can't compete, including a local report titled "*Cleveland Schools That Are Making A Difference*," published by the Cleveland and George Gund Foundations in 2008.

That web search also includes a recently published CREDO report that features performance for some of the schools operated by our own charter partner, Breakthrough Schools.

In Ohio, you can find a series of articles collectively titled "Needles in a Haystack" featuring about 55 high-performing, high-poverty elementary and middle schools that, out of 816 K-8 schools reviewed,

were beating the odds, and another 50 high-poverty high schools which, out of 818 similar high schools, are breaking away from the pack.

In fact, CMSD had schools identified on both of those lists.

Nationally, school districts that serve the nation's poor each have their own pockets of success, like Alabama's "Torchbearers," 20 such schools out of the state's nearly 1,500 high-poverty schools or the 56 Louisiana schools that, out of over 1,400 high-poverty schools earned a High-Performing, High-Poverty Distinction Award.

It is clear from these "Islands of Excellence," as they are often called, that children in poverty can beat the odds. We see time and time again that poor kids can learn and can compete. So, if that's not my point, what is?

Let's look again at the 31 million, two hundred thousand hits found on the Internet for High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools. What's striking about this search isn't the 31 million hits, but that the hits actually represent comparatively few results. At a closer look, it turns out that the same few exemplars are simply repeated multiple times in multiple ways, showing where conditions have changed and children of poverty are beating the odds.

What's even more striking is that in all these stories about *Needles in a Haystack*, *Inside the Black Box*, *Torchbearers*, *Islands of Excellence* highlighting schools that are bucking the trend, you won't find one single hit in that same web search that shows an entire school district—not just a few schools in a community—but every school in the entire city with not just pockets of excellence, but high achievement in every high-poverty school.

So, while it's absolutely true that children who live in poverty can learn and can achieve just as well as their more advantaged peers, it turns out that it's also absolutely true that no district has done it completely—no district has yet figured a way to completely close the gap and ensure success for all of its children.

If it sounds like I'm excusing CMSD for the academic struggles our schools face, and simply blaming our performance on poverty, be absolutely assured I'm not!

What I am saying is that while our goal to ensure every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school is happening in some places, we have not addressed, with equal determination, the elephant in the room—the fact that no high-poverty school district in the nation has done it for everybody.

There's ample evidence that it *can* be done, as the Islands of Excellence in all those web hits show. And even as many cite evidence that raising achievement could be taken to scale “if all things were equal.” Yet, after decades of effort, we have yet to see a single school district or community find a way to actually do it. In some ways it has become the ultimate “no-win scenario.”

Fortunately, I don't believe in no-win scenarios!

So, today, I want to take on this paradox, and ask each and every one of you to consider how we in Cleveland can make all things equal for our kids and be the first to do it.

But how does one beat the no-win scenario?

One of my favorite examples of doing so comes from the classic 1982 movie, *Star Trek 2: The Wrath of Khan*. In the film, Captain Kirk tells the story of when he was in training and was presented with a scenario in which the ship and crew faced a no-win situation. Person after person had failed the test in the no-win scenario presented, explaining that every choice available would have led to the destruction of the starship and the death of its crew.

But Kirk, then a cadet himself, was the one and only cadet to beat the simulation. He did what everyone before him failed to do and successfully navigated the starship and its crew to safety.

How?

Let's watch. (see the one-minute video clip)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9dEI-Ru1CI>

So that's it. To beat the no-win scenario, you simply have to change the conditions.

So, if we know that students attending high-poverty schools can achieve at the same rates as their peers, but we also know that no system of high-poverty schools has yet figured out how to do this at scale, then the logical question becomes, how do we change the conditions?

*The Cleveland Plan* is a perfect example of what can happen when we change the conditions of a situation to improve our chances of winning.



Illustration courtesy of The George Gund Foundation.

With the vision and unwavering support of many people in this room, we did, against the odds, put new rules in place for CMSD and our charter partners—new rules and new state laws that we believed could improve our chances of winning and has.

Despite a report card grade that shows our kids are still lagging far behind their peers, every single year under *The Cleveland Plan* we have seen evidence that the changed conditions we are creating are taking effect.

Our graduation rate, a source of pride for us as a community, has again set a District record high at 71.9%, and has even exceeded the goal set by the Higher Education Compact of Cleveland in 2010.



Not only has our graduation rate increased by nearly 20% in the last six years, it is the fourth fastest improving out of Ohio's 608 school districts.

Today, CMSD has cut by more than half the gap between our graduation rate of 71.9% and the state average of 83.5%.

And, CMSD's five-year graduation rate now stands at 76.1%, the second fastest improving in Ohio!

On the State Performance Index, a measure of how our students performed on all state tests combined, CMSD improved to its best position in more than 10 years.

Although we earned an F on the report card, we missed a D by eight-tenths of a percent, and more importantly, CMSD showed the most growth of any urban school district in Ohio over the last six years.

In the last year specifically, CMSD's Performance Index grew 2 points more than our partnering charter schools showing that we are closing this performance gap as well.

This year we outperformed six other Ohio districts, including Dayton, East Cleveland, Warrensville Heights and Youngstown.

To be clear, I know that these districts are also struggling. I point them out not to suggest that we have achieved our goal, but to remind us that we are now beginning to surpass other Ohio districts and charter schools that previously outperformed us, and we must continue to do so and do so at a faster pace.

On Ohio's K-3 Literacy measure, a measure of how many students in kindergarten through third grade moved from off-track to on-track or proficient in reading, CMSD moved from an F to a C.

CMSD outperformed 88 other Ohio districts in K-3 Literacy, 88 districts including Akron, Avon, Canton, Columbus, Dayton, Elyria, Fostoria, Garfield Heights, Mansfield, Maple Heights, Painesville, Richmond Heights, Sheffield-Sheffield Lake, Stow-Munroe Falls, Toledo, Wooster and Zanesville, to name a few.

Does that mean our students read better than the students in Avon or Sheffield-Sheffield Lake? Not yet.

But what it does mean is that, when it comes to helping struggling readers grow and catch up, CMSD is closing the gap better and faster than all of these schools.

And, while we are seeing improvements citywide, the emerging Islands of Excellence are evidence that the changing conditions in our schools are working, too. Schools like East Technical High School, Max S. Hayes, New Tech East and Washington Park Environmental Studies have emerged as Cleveland's own Torchbearers, increasing their graduation rates by between 8.5 and 12.6% in the last year alone.

Clark PreK-8 School, Cleveland School of Architecture and Design, Glenville High School, New Tech East, Paul L. Dunbar and even our School of One for students who are most at risk, all earned Value-Added scores of A, meaning students in these schools far exceeded the learning growth expected in Ohio's schools!

Cleveland Early College High School, Euclid Park, John Marshall School of Information Technology, New Tech East and Paul L. Dunbar all jumped two or more letter grades on the same Value-Added growth measure in the last year as well!

And these 10 CMSD schools, Adlai E. Stevenson, Campus International, Douglas MacArthur Girls' Leadership Academy, Harvey Rice, Louis Agassiz, Louisa May Alcott, McKinley, O.H. Perry, Riverside and Warner Girls' Leadership Academy—our own Needles in the Haystack—showed enormous gains on K-3 Literacy last year, decreasing their off-track readers in grades K through 3 by 25% or more in a single year!

But transforming only *some* of Cleveland's high-poverty, low-performing schools into high-performing schools is not a win as long as other children of poverty continue to lose. It will never be a win as long as the conditions that perpetuate economic gaps, achievement gaps and opportunity gaps are not changed.

So today, I am asking, "What if?"

What if, instead of focusing on educating children who live in poverty, we choose instead to focus on educating them while simultaneously removing the *effects* of poverty—very literally, changing the conditions!

Fortunately, George Weiss, a man I've never met, also doesn't believe in the no-win scenario. He's the founder of an organization called *Say Yes to Education*, and his single bet is, and I quote:

"If an entire community came together to ensure that each of its children had the opportunity—and the support—to go to college, all, not just some, of the community's children would!"

It is George's view, and that of his colleagues, that decades have been spent in pursuit of quick, isolated fixes for high-poverty schools aimed at shattering predictable barriers to academic achievement for students in America's cities, but not one of them had pursued a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable communitywide solution.

So, George and his colleagues set out to change those conditions with the goal of winning the "no-win scenario."

So, what is *Say Yes to Education*? There is no better way to answer that than in the organizations' own words:

"*Say Yes to Education* is a nonprofit that revitalizes communities by helping them give every public high school graduate access to college or other postsecondary scholarships. *Say Yes* community partnerships also make available supports and services to develop the gifts and talents of each child."

"Using its scholarships as a catalyst, *Say Yes* partners with communities to create systems to ensure every child progresses on the pathway to postsecondary success."

"The *Say Yes* strategy unites city and county officials, the school district, teachers, unions, higher education, business, philanthropy and faith-based organizations—around outcome metrics that increase educational attainment and drive economic development."

*Say Yes* takes the long view, recognizing, for example, that for less than it costs to house a teenager in a juvenile detention center for two nights, we could instead give a student a full year of afterschool programming, and that by dramatically increasing the

college attainment levels of a city's children over time, we can cut in half the unemployment rate for that city. A win-win.

Sounds easy, right? Of course not, but here's the good news.

What *Say Yes* envisions, and is trying to nurture in a few American cities, is exactly what we in Cleveland do best! *Say Yes's* bet is that success will come by staying true to an improvement strategy over time. Cleveland has already demonstrated its belief that staying true to an improvement strategy will, in fact, get us results over time, and already has.

*Say Yes* recognizes the strength of communities like Cleveland where faith leaders, business leaders, political leaders, union leaders, parents and teachers do together what no one has been able to do alone.

*Say Yes* believes that it is our children and their education that will drive long-term economic health in our city. Cleveland has long understood that getting our schools right is, in the end, absolutely necessary for ensuring our city's prosperity.

With these common beliefs and missions, a small group of dedicated Cleveland leaders has been quietly pursuing over the last year our own *Path to Say Yes*. Not surprisingly, that visionary effort is being led by our city's greatest champion for education, Mayor Frank G. Jackson.



At Mayor Jackson's side in this effort is an equally strong champion, particularly for our earliest learners, County Executive Armond Budish. Consistently vital partners like The Cleveland Foundation, United Way of Greater Cleveland and College Now Greater Cleveland, have joined CMSD in pursuit of becoming a *Say Yes* chapter as well.

Similar to our *Cleveland Plan* effort, a notable list of people and organizations have coalesced around the *Say Yes* journey and are regularly monitoring and supporting our efforts to bring to Cleveland this comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable plan to our city. Our hope is to change conditions in Cleveland in ways that ensure postsecondary education is the norm, not the exception, for every child in our city.

Our hope is to bring to children and families who live in poverty all of the supports and resources available to them in a community that believes in its children and their potential.

To be clear, while I am very excited about what *Say Yes to Education* can do for CMSD, our focus over the next several years must also be on accelerating the gains we have seen each year, including this year, under *The Cleveland Plan*.

Under the right conditions, Cleveland can and must be the city that emerges in the Internet search not just as a place where some schools are high-poverty, high-achieving schools, but where all are high achieving. The good news is that we are small enough to actually beat the no-win scenario, and big enough to matter when we do!

We know the impact that a quality education system has on the revitalization and economic growth of a community. The hundreds of supporters in this room and education partners that stretch across the city and county attest to that fact.

But what Cleveland has done so well in the past, and what I have every faith will continue to do as we move forward, is that we have owned our problems. We have faced them and found solutions for them together.

As your new superintendent six years ago, one of the first events I was invited to attend was a screening of the movie *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary that in its 2010 release presented a dismal look at the state of American education. A New York charter school principal was the inspiration for the film's title when, during an interview with the producers, he said that as a poor child, he wept upon hearing there would be no Man of Steel to solve all the problems of his neighborhood and his school. Of course in Cleveland we know that Superman is a fictional hero since he was actually created right here in our very own metropolis!

So, shortly after, while educators nationwide debated the issues raised in the film, pointing fingers of blame at one another for those problems and waiting for Superman, the people of Cleveland banded together to solve our own problems.

If Cleveland was waiting for Superman, our kids, their families, our educators and constituents found their hero in a citywide coalition that was bound and determined to change our conditions rather than to blame others for them—and resolute in its decision not to rely on others to solve our problems for us.

It's true that our gains are not yet big enough and our growth is not yet fast enough, but we are clearly no longer a community whose schools are in crisis, whose district is on the verge of a state takeover, whose system is facing massive layoffs, program cuts and large, deep, annual budget cuts.

When our system faced the equivalent of death, the people of Cleveland changed the conditions and breathed life into a system that, because of that vision, is now making sure, steady progress!

The problems faced by Cleveland and other urban school districts are not new and are not likely to change unless we change the conditions that lead to them.

As we continue the work of *The Cleveland Plan*, there is an urgent need to deepen and accelerate what we've started.

But if we are really going to adequately and equitably prepare all of Cleveland's children for a global economy that is racing ahead of them, we must also change the conditions that continue to hold them back.

Six years ago, I asked each of you in this room to *Say Yes to The Cleveland Plan*. I asked you to help us change the conditions for CMSD, to envision a community where parents could truly choose the schools they wanted, where through changes in law, schools could have the flexibility to provide the best possible education for their students and families, and with the support of a new tax levy the District and our partnering charter schools would have the resources to support that education. Each and every day we can see evidence that the high-performing school district we envisioned six years ago is not only possible, but increasingly within our reach.

Today, I ask you to *Say Yes to The Cleveland Plan*. Cleveland can be the district that doesn't just settle for Needles in a Haystack, but instead achieves results we can see and celebrate for every child, in every school in our city.

Even as we celebrate the gains we are seeing in our own Islands of Excellence today, we must remain dedicated in pursuit of our collective goal to ensure every child has the opportunities and supports needed to graduate and access postsecondary college and career opportunities.

Cleveland is the city that has what it takes, even when faced with what appears to be the ultimate no-win scenario, to take the success we are seeing to scale.

We can do this.

The steady progress we are making, slowly but surely passing up other districts and charter schools in Northeast Ohio and across our state, shows we can.

We will do this.

Nowhere else in the state, and maybe the nation, has a community simply decided—quietly and without fanfare—to change the conditions of their school system so they could see better results.

So who's to say we won't change the conditions of our community, too?

We must do this.

There are many today that call education "the civil rights issue of our time." I've never really liked that. Not because I don't believe it, I absolutely do! In fact, it's been my life's work! I don't like it because, in my opinion, too many people have thrown that rhetoric around too loosely, almost like a cliché, without taking seriously what it means to absolutely mobilize and commit to a genuine civil rights movement.

But it has probably never been more important nor more urgent for us to truly treat education as the civil rights issue of our time, and to ensure that our children, especially minority children and children living in poverty in our cities, have universal access to a high-quality education.

Consider the policy changes in ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and the disproportionate impact of those changes on urban communities.

Consider efforts to change and roll back access to healthcare in general and Medicaid, a critical resource for our students and their families, in particular.

Consider changes in immigration policies that have already occurred, and those that have been proposed.

Consider the revocation of DACA and the kids it will immediately impact.

And, consider the open public attacks on racial and religious minorities, to name just a few.

Without committed educators positively impacting academic achievement in urban school districts across the nation, and without communities once and for all truly disrupting widespread generational poverty, the students whose futures are in our hands simply have no fair chance.



Six years ago, I came to you and asked you to *Say Yes* to *The Cleveland Plan*.

Today, I come to ask you to *Say Yes* again.

*Say Yes* when asked if Cleveland can be the first urban district to do what others say is impossible.

*Say Yes* to the hope, the dream and the goal of being a *Say Yes* city, where the success of every child—every single child—is the bottom line.

We can.

We will.

We must.

The children of Cleveland are depending on us.



We can. We will. We must.



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