STATE of the SCHOOLS ADDRESS

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CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining me for my eighth *State of the Schools Address.*

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to recognize a few people in attendance today.

Mayor Frank G. Jackson is serving a record fourth term as Mayor of the great city of Cleveland. Thank you, Mayor Jackson, for your vision and your continued strong leadership of *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools* and the reforms that I have had the privilege of implementing in Cleveland's public schools under your leadership.

The Plan itself would not have brought us to where we are today without the outstanding leadership and guidance of the Cleveland Board of Education.

Strong Board leadership is vital to the success of any school district, but our Board here in Cleveland is known and recognized nationally for its unparalleled service and dedication. Several Board members are here today. Please stand and be recognized, Board Chair Anne Bingham, Board Vice-Chair Robert Heard, and Board members Denise Link, Willetta Milam, Shaletha Mitchell and Dr. Lisa Thomas.

I am also privileged to share this moment each year with several members of my senior leadership team who are here today. I am proud to work with such an incredibly talented team of committed leaders. Thank you to each of you for all you do! And although most of our CMSD Educators are at work in their schools and other work areas today, I am pleased that a number of them were able to join us and to bring a number of our scholars with them.

Also with us today are key partners in education who consistently attend our *State of the Schools* event, including the men and women who helped to shape, and who continue to support, *The Cleveland Plan*. These partners include:

The Greater Cleveland Partnership, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, the Cleveland Teachers Union,

Breakthrough Charter Schools and our growing number of charter school colleagues in the Cleveland Education Compact and our Say Yes to Education partners. Thank you all for your devotion to the success of Cleveland's children.

Finally, I am most grateful to the people of Cleveland for their belief in public education and their support of Issue 107, Issue 4 and Issue 108 that in the last six years has done so much to revitalize our schools and restore hope for a bright future for the children of this city.

As you've probably noticed, Twitter has become *increasingly* popular for both personal and business use, and more recently in politics for a variety of uses (and resulting effects) by people in significant positions of leadership. In fact, some of them just can't resist the temptation to use 280 characters to make their opinions known –

All. Day. Long.

All. The. Time.

Tweets like this one:

Donald J. Trump
Despite the constant negative press covfefe @realDonaldTrump

It was the morning after his covfefe Tweet that President Trump found a Tweet storm waiting on his phone, with people all over the world, including an editor at Merriam-Webster, venturing one opinion after another for the definition of "covfefe."

There were insensitive responses, like this one.

Joel Kim Booster
The tweet is still up. So like, did he die while writing a Tweet or what? @ihatejoelkim

That invited defensive Tweets like this one:

Danielle Blake
Mock away, but I think you'll find #Covfefe is an example of someone who's done an amazing job and is being recognised more and more? @abradacabla

And the wise guys:

Robert Wheel
Oh, you like covfefe? Then name their last three albums @BobbyBigWheel

The philosophers weighed in:

Existential Comics
I know everyone is excited, but don't be taken in by opportunists. Covfefe isn't something you can buy, it is something you have to become. @existentialcoms

And, in the strange case of "covfefe," even the President himself continued to weigh in,

Donald J. Trump
Who can figure out the true meaning of "covfefe" ??? Enjoy! @realDonaldTrump

inviting even more:

D$
When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie that's covfefe @DaniellaLira_

Community leaders are finding increasing value in using Twitter as another means of keeping their constituencies updated, to tap into the thoughts and opinions of others, and yes, even to see what people are thinking about the information they share.

But there is a challenge and a responsibility that comes with trying to communicate complex messages, like "covfefe," in 280 characters. And, as we saw, once communicated, the responses are likely to be wide and varied.

As we prepared to open this school year, I received two Tweets on my own Twitter account, @EricGordon_CEO that really got me thinking about this phenomenon.

The first read:

> We often and rightfully talk about what is to repair/improve in #Cleveland – what we have as a known goodness is an amazing cadre of teachers, staff and @EricGordon_CEO who love our kids & teach them with every fiber of their best selves every day, this I know. Thank you

And, probably not to be unexpected, not long after, this Tweet came in response:

> I disagree with your judgment of Eric. Might be a nice person but he doesn't have a clue about his district. He is surrounded by wanna bes and people that give him misinformation to their betterment. I would love to have a sincere conversation with you about this.

Why would I share these Tweets with you? Especially the second one? To me, it is clear that, in some ways, both of these Twitter users are right. And neither of them is right.

We need people like the first Tweeter to celebrate and to champion the legitimately good work my fellow educators and I have accomplished and the progress we have made in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

So, in that way, the first Tweet is absolutely right. We do have an amazing cadre of teachers and staff who love our kids and teach them with every fiber of their best selves every day. And the amazing effort has led to real and meaningful improvements across our city.

But we also need to acknowledge the concerns of skeptics like the second Tweeter and the harsh realities we face every single day in this very difficult work.

While I don't agree that I'm clueless, or that I don't have a team that is trying hard every day to move the needle for the kids we serve, I do think we need to pay attention to the broader message: There is still a lot of hard work to be done, and we can't, and shouldn't, declare victory while ignoring the current reality.

So in both Tweets there is some truth. But with a 280-character limit, both Tweets are incomplete.

There is, of course, a lot more to be said when it comes to assessing the *State of our Schools*, both here today and day by day as members of the community have many chances to weigh in, 280 characters at a time, with their thoughts around our progress.

What achievements have we made that are worth recognizing?

What are the real challenges that we must still take on?

And how do you convey those answers in 280 characters?

Well, today I'm going to give it a try.

Last Thursday, the Ohio Department of Education released its annual report cards for Ohio's schools and districts.

This is the third year of the full implementation of Ohio's new report card and the bar for all of Ohio's schools has been set extremely high. So high, in fact, that many across the state are trying to get rid of the report card or, at least, lower the standards to make them easier to achieve.

But while some are trying to get rid of these new, high standards, CMSD is busy working to achieve these goals. And, to be clear, we have not yet done so. It's one of the harsh realities we must face.

On the Achievement measures itself, for example, CMSD scored an F again this year. That fact fits nicely on a Tweet; however, that's not the entire story.

What that F doesn't immediately show is that CMSD posted gains in proficiency on 19 of the 21 state tests measured, or that the District's average gain this year was 6.7%, far higher than the average gain of 1.2% statewide, and the 4% gain of other Ohio urban districts.

That F also hides the fact that on the state's Performance Index, a summary score of overall test performance, CMSD moved from an F to a D this year, posting the strongest gains on this measure of any Ohio urban district since its creation in 2016. Both *The Plain Dealer* and Cleveland.com also pointed out this accomplishment in examining this year's data.

In fact, CMSD's two-year 5.8 point gain on the Performance Index is actually more than double the state average of 2.6 points, and while CMSD increased 1.8 points this year alone, compared to a one-tenth of a point increase statewide, nearly half of Ohio's school districts actually did worse on the Performance Index this year than they did the year before.

So, in the case of achievement, it is true that we are going in the right direction, and doing so more quickly than most, but we also still have a long way to go.

The state's Gap Closing measure is a measure showing how well school districts are meeting performance expectations in English and math for our most vulnerable populations, as well as expectations for meeting Ohio's graduation requirements and for meeting English language acquisition for our English Language Learners.

Here, too, CMSD is showing progress. Up from an F grade last year, CMSD earned a D on the Gap Closing measure, closing gaps in English language arts in *every single subgroup* (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Economically Disadvantaged, English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities) – that's *every single subgroup* – by at least 10%.

CMSD also met the state's Gap Closing goals in mathematics for White, Hispanic, Multiracial, Asian and American Indian/Alaskan Native students, as well as for English Language Learners. And while we did not meet the goals for Black students, Students with Disabilities, or Economically Disadvantaged students, we did show significant progress for each of these student groups as well.

CMSD continues to close gaps in graduation rates for our students compared to their state peers in nearly every subgroup. With that data alone, CMSD would have actually earned a B on this state measure this year.

We struggled, however, in meeting growth targets for English language acquisition for our newcomer students, for whom English language and American culture are brand new, and that struggle brought our total score down to a D. Still, even with these real challenges still ahead of us, CMSD outperformed 61 other Ohio school districts on the Gap Closing measure this year!

Last year, I shared that CMSD had earned a C on Ohio's K-3 Literacy Indicator, surpassing 88 other school districts, including some surprising ones right here in Northeast Ohio.

This year, our performance remained essentially flat and dropped to a D on this indicator, based largely on the fact that Ohio is using a new grading scale this year. Still, when we compare our performance statewide, CMSD again made a huge jump forward, outperforming 113 other Ohio school districts this year! That's 20% of school districts with a score on this measure!

And, where last year only 79.6% of our third grade students met Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee expectations, this year 83.9% of third graders met this important threshold, meaning over 100 more students, and more than 2,200 students total, are now reading at a level sufficient to tackle fourth grade content and beyond!

On Ohio's Graduation Rate measure, while still rated as an F, we continue to show huge gains – improving our graduation rate another 2.5 percentage points to another record high of 74.6% this year.

That's a total increase of 22.4 percentage points since 2011, making us not only the fastest-improving urban school district, but the fourth-fastest-improving school district in the entire state!

The graduation rate for our Hispanic students, who once lagged 15.6 percentage points behind their Hispanic peers statewide, now stands at 74.3%. That's 0.7 of a percentage point higher than the state average for Hispanic students in Ohio. The graduation rate for our Black students, now at 75.2% is 6.8 percentage points higher than the state average for African-American students.

That's right, if you are a Black student in Cleveland, you are MORE LIKELY to graduate high school than are your African-American peers statewide. And that is absolutely something to celebrate!

CMSD's Five-Year Graduation Rate also continues to grow. Now at 79.6%, we missed a D grade on the Ohio report card by just 11 kids! We'll grab that grade improvement next year!

So, on many measures, it would be fair for our Twitter champion to celebrate the progress that the love, dedication and hard work of our educators has achieved for Cleveland's kids.

But while there are a number of really positive data points on this report card, there are some harsh realities, too. For example, CMSD's Progress score, commonly known as value-added, remains an F again this year, clearly showing the troubling impact of summer learning loss.

We know, for example, that CMSD students grow an average of 12 points each year on a common measure known as the MAP test, a test of English and mathematics. That is, they grow 12 points from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year.

But here's the reality when we look at what happened from the beginning of last year to the beginning of this year, taking summer break into account. That 12-point gain is nearly eliminated, with students starting only 1 point ahead of the prior year when they return from summer break.

So, while our achievement data shows gains on the overall test score Performance Index and significant gains in proficiency on state tests overall, we simultaneously see lots of those gains washed out over the summer, leaving our students only slightly ahead of where they started just the year before.

It's also true that while many more CMSD students are graduating high school than ever before, far too few are graduating fully ready for college or a high-skill, high-wage career. That's not to say that our students graduate with no readiness, but it does say that our students are not fully ready. This is clearly evident on Ohio's Ready for Success report card measure.

So all of that together leaves CMSD with an overall grade of F on the report card this year, along with only 13 other school districts in Ohio. We were close, to be sure, but even if we had earned the 0.061 additional points we needed to earn a D, would we really want to celebrate that?

Frankly, this is a club we simply can't afford to stay in and, as I said earlier, our Twitter critic would also be absolutely right to point out that not all is good and there is a lot more to do. That's precisely the reason that last year I introduced you to Say Yes to Education.

Say Yes to Education, a comprehensive support system for kids and their families, coupled with a last dollar scholarship that guarantees all CMSD graduates the opportunity for career and college training, is the absolutely right next step if we're really going to tackle summer learning loss and true college or career readiness post-high school.

I'm pleased to report that over the year since we were last together, committees of dozens of leaders from across Cleveland have continued the work of completing *Cleveland's Path to Say Yes* and we are making great progress.

This team of people have analyzed tons of data about our city, its schools and many of our community's other child and family services and supports. We have worked on memorandums of understanding that articulate how public government – our city, our county, our libraries and our schools – can work together in a more integrated way, even as our non-profit and philanthropic community have examined how to better align all of the children – serving assets of Cleveland around the common goal of ensuring career and college readiness for every CMSD student upon graduation.

And corporate, philanthropic and individual support is also under way to create a scholarship fund that will guarantee every CMSD graduate the opportunity to pursue his or her college and career goals!

However, we need to finish that journey this calendar year and begin implementing these critical wraparound supports, along with guaranteed last dollar scholarships this spring, if we are truly going to improve these additional, critical state indicators, and more importantly, if we are to meet the truly ambitious achievement goals of *The Cleveland Plan*!

I'm sure you've heard the expression:

"Rome wasn't built in a day."

James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits,* uses this famous phrase about the Roman Empire in his counseling of athletes, artists and entrepreneurs, helping them not to lose sight of their potential as they work hard to continuously change and improve.

To encourage them to keep the faith and stay the course, he reminds them:

Rome wasn't built in a day.

But they were laying bricks every hour.

The problem, he says, is that it can be really easy to overestimate the importance of building an empire and to underestimate the importance of simply laying another brick.

As we saw in the differing opinions of the authors of the two Tweets I shared earlier, it's easy to discount the work of reform – all the hard work that educators across the city have put into *The Cleveland Plan* over the last several years – by declaring that we haven't built the empire we promised.

But Rome wasn't built in a day.

Or a year.

Or even six years.

In truth, Rome was built hour by hour, day by day, year by year, by continuously laying bricks, one after another until, slowly but surely, an empire emerged.

But even that's not enough.

While it's true that Rome wasn't built in a day, and it's true that Rome was built brick by brick, hour by hour, why do we actually care about Rome?

I mean, there were many other cities being built, brick by brick, hour by hour.

Why has Rome arisen as the example?

Well, it's not just that they built it; it's *what* they built!

With those bricks they built the Pantheon, the Piazza Navona, the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps and the Vatican!

You see, they weren't just building for the day – they were building for the future! Similarly, under *The Cleveland Plan*, CMSD has been building for the future, too.

Unlike any school district in Ohio, our high school students can now choose from over 36 different school options, including three early college high schools, an International Baccalaureate high school, a high school for the performing arts and another

for digital arts; schools for architecture and design, engineering, aerospace and maritime studies, civic and business leadership, information technology, and global studies. Three different high school options for science, health, and medical careers, and several options for career-technical studies including construction, manufacturing, criminal justice, business and hospitality careers, environmental studies and more!

This year, CMSD launched three new learning models in 13 of our PreK-8 schools and is expanding our International Baccalaureate programming to the new William Rainey Harper School.

But we can do more.

That's why my team and I have embarked on an ambitious effort over the last year to define what great learning and teaching looks like, not just for now but for the future.

And in the coming year, we will be looking at how to take advantage of the most advanced learning technologies – blended learning, virtual reality and simulation technologies, for example – like those now being used by colleges, universities and even the best performing corporations themselves.

You see, we can't just strive to catch up to Ohio's standards. Instead, like the Romans did, even as they were laying each individual brick, we need to seek to define them for the future.

Since launching *The Cleveland Plan* in 2012, we've laid hundreds of bricks on our reform path. Each brick laid was borne out of the dreams and ideals of so many people in this room who not only envision a high-quality education system for every child in the city, but who backed that vision with a commitment to realize that dream and to provide the resources and supports needed to make it happen.

It's true. We're not done. We haven't arrived at our goal. And, yes, we still have a long way to go.

But like Rome, *The Cleveland Plan* is the result of a vision.

As with the Romans', the bricks we've laid, hour by hour, day by day, year by year are the system we are designing and putting in place to achieve our dream.

In using the same analogy, James Clear counsels his athletes that there is nothing impressive about laying one brick, and he cautions them not to see incremental progress as a grand feat of strength or stamina, but instead to see each gain as an integral part of the larger greatness they are striving to achieve. Conversely, he cautions them not to lose patience, recognizing that every solid layer builds strength to hold the next one.

Likening the process of change to the building of any grand structure, laying a brick every hour, building on layers of bricks, year after year, is precisely how a community of people builds an empire strong enough to endure for generations.

Generations of children.

Generations of Clevelanders.

Generations to come.

Today, I've shared our progress, our current realities, and our goals to tackle the challenges ahead of us. So, do we have progress worth celebrating this year?

Or are we just fooling ourselves?

Let me know what you think by Tweeting me @EricGordon_CEO, #CLEStateofSchools18. I look forward to reading your thoughts, 280 characters at a time.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for attending today and for supporting our 39,000 scholars, their parents and caregivers and our 7,500 educators Districtwide.

And thank you to each of you who, individually and collectively, have helped construct the vision for *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools*, brick by brick, hour by hour as we pursue our dream of building an educational empire for the children of Cleveland and for the future of this great city we love.

Thank you.

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