

State *of the* Schools 2021

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
September 22, 2021

Good afternoon,

As I began preparing for my 11th State of the Schools Address, I paused to consider the moment itself – the opportunity to stand before you today with more than a decade of service behind me as superintendent/CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Over the last decade, people have commented more than once about the enormity of my challenge at CMSD, in “turning around the ship” and steering it in a better direction.

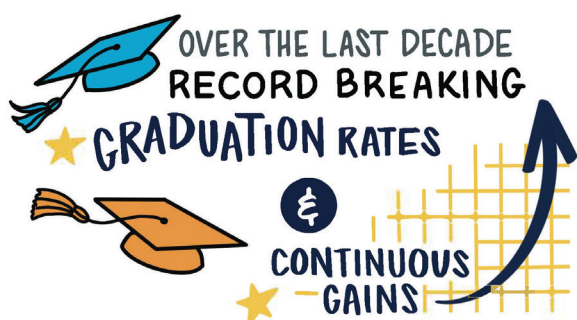
I feel privileged to be at the helm of this ship that, 11 years ago, had veered dangerously off course, and I am grateful to have worked for more than a decade with many of you to point this vast organizational vessel in a much better direction.

Over the last decade, we have celebrated continuous gains and record-breaking graduation rates each year under *The Cleveland Plan*, while mapping a clear course for closing and, in some cases, eliminating achievement gaps, and for demonstrating growth and improvement that far outpaces the rates of growth of most school districts in Ohio and across the nation.

In that time, CMSD earned the status of being ranked in the top 15% in Ohio for improvement in K-3 literacy, the top 4% in Ohio for improvement on state reading and math exams, and the top 1% in Ohio for improvement in graduation rates. In fact, our 80.1% graduation rate makes CMSD the fourth-fastest improving district in Ohio, our 80.9% graduation rate for African-American students and 82.6% graduation rate for Hispanic students means that our children of color graduate at rates nearly 6 percentage points higher than their peers statewide.



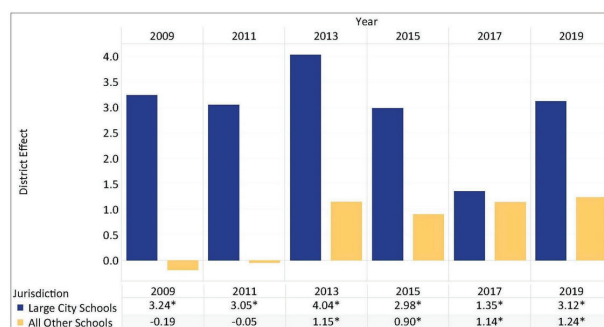
The Council of the Great City Schools, a national coalition of 76 urban school districts recently released a report looking to answer the question of how well large city public schools do at overcoming the effects of poverty and other barriers, using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP, also known as The Nation's Report Card.



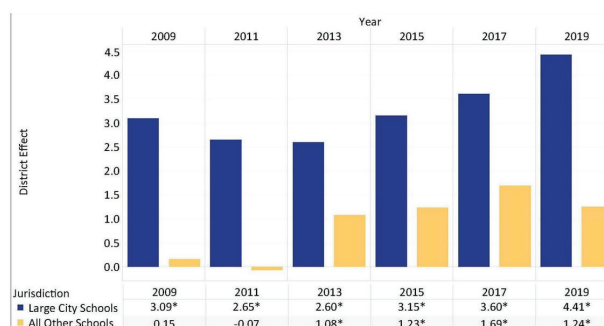
The report, entitled *Mirrors or Windows*, asked the tough question of whether urban school districts like Cleveland are “windows of opportunity to help overcome or mitigate poverty and other barriers” of success for their students, or whether they are simply “mirrors of society’s inequities.” The report found that Cleveland is one of just 12 cities identified as having beat the odds for our students on each administration of the NAEP over the last decade, and CMSD is one of only 6 school districts in the country that consistently improved our performance over that same 10-year period. In fact, this report found that if we were to control for poverty and other barriers such as language acquisition and learning disabilities, Cleveland would outperform state and national averages in 4th and 8th grade reading and in 4th grade math as well.

It’s clear, by all objective measurements, that we had indeed steered CMSD toward a much better path than where it was headed.

But that was then.



Trends in District Effects† on NAEP Fourth-grade Mathematics by School Type, 2009 to 2019.



Trends in District Effects† on NAEP Eighth-grade Mathematics by School Type, 2009 to 2019.

That was a voyage on which we were navigating rough but familiar waters in a pre-COVID world. Before the shutdown. Before the world stopped.

So, here we are, post-shutdown, in a world that is trying to start up again. Where do we venture now? What’s next for CMSD?

Today, in my 11th report on the state of our schools, I will address the impact of the global pandemic, and, more optimistically, detail the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity we have to not just overcome the effects of the shutdown, not just return to familiar waters, but to steer CMSD in an entirely new direction and chart a course unlike any other in the history of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Before I do so, I want to take a moment to recognize a number of people in this very distinguished audience of educators, families, partners, stakeholders and supporters of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

First, to Dan Moulthrop and his City Club staff, along with the City Club's partnership with ideastream public media, who together have made it possible to not only present to those in this room today, but also to broadcast this State of the Schools address to our entire community.

And we owe a debt of gratitude to the generous sponsors of this annual event for enabling us to share the progress and achievements of Cleveland's public schools with a much broader audience, including students, families and educators who are attending today at tables sponsored by our supporters.

Mayor Frank G. Jackson, in his fourth and final term as Mayor of Cleveland, will forever be remembered for his visionary leadership of *The Cleveland Plan* that propelled the District on a path of continuous improvement, gap-closing and record-breaking academic success.

Mayor Jackson, who, among his numerous achievements as Mayor, played a pivotal role in making Cleveland a Say Yes to Education city, ensuring for every child in Cleveland the opportunity to attain a post-secondary education, tuition-free, for the next 25 years. These accomplishments and many more will be a hallmark of his legacy as our Mayor. Thank you, Mayor.

Mayor Jackson and the City of Cleveland have been ably represented over the past fourteen years by the Mayor's Chief of Education, Dr. Monyka Price. Thank you, Monyka, for your many contributions over the years as well.

Also instrumental in the progress we have seen over the last decade has been the consistency and outstanding leadership of the Cleveland Board of Education. Our Board

is known, and has been recognized nationally, for its unparalleled service and dedication to Cleveland's public schools. With us today are Board Chair Anne Bingham, Vice Chair Robert Heard and Board Members Sara Elaquad, Denise Link, Dr. Nigamanth Sridhar and Dr. Lisa Thomas.

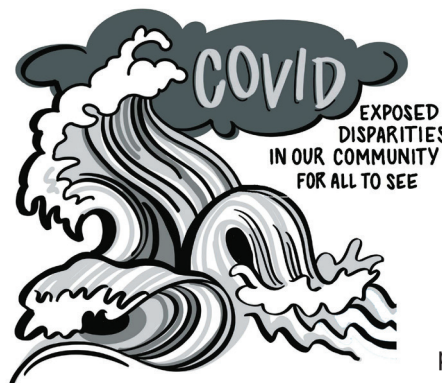
Also with us today are representatives of many of the community agencies that helped to shape, and who continue to support, CMSD. These include: The Greater Cleveland Partnership, The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, the Cleveland Council of Administrators and Supervisors, the Cleveland Teachers Union, Breakthrough Public Schools, the City of Cleveland, County Executive Armond Budish and Cuyahoga County, the United Way of Greater Cleveland, College Now Greater Cleveland, our partners at Pre4Cle, the Cleveland

Transformation Alliance, the Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland and so many more.

And I would be remiss if I didn't recognize our amazing CMSD students and parents

and our incredible CMSD educators of all roles, whose tireless dedication to our students and families have led to the successes of the last decade. Many of those students, families and educators are here today. Would you please stand and be recognized?

THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS
FOUND THAT **CMSD** IS ONE OF ONLY 6 SCHOOL DISTRICTS
IN THE U.S. THAT CONSISTENTLY IMPROVED
PERFORMANCE OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS



On March 13, 2020, CMSD, the city of Cleveland, the state of Ohio, the United States of America, in fact, the entire world faced a deadly storm of epic proportions. The original

forecast as it approached was that the storm would be fierce but brief, and if we moored down and waited it out, we could then proceed back on our course.

We now know that these early predictions and the hope that the storm would pass were wrong, and the storm that hit was more ferocious and devastating than anyone predicted, especially for those with no safe harbor.

As a nation, we are known for what historian Noam Chomsky called the privileged few and the desperate many. While the economic disparities of the “desperate many” were known long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global shutdown that directed everyone into digital lifeboats forced the privileged few to confront the stark realities of many poor Americans, including those living here in Cleveland.

In the city with the highest childhood poverty in the nation, those with privilege watched from home as CMSD and numerous other community organizations worked to feed children and adults alike who, when their jobs evaporated and schools closed, simultaneously lost access to school breakfast and lunch for their children and also the income



FED FAMILIES

- WHO LOST ACCESS TO SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS
- WHO LOST THE INCOME TO REPLACE THOSE MEALS

REACHED OUR STUDENTS

- PRINTED & MAILED ACADEMIC CONTENT
- LESSONS BROADCAST ON WUAB-CHANNEL 43
- DEPLOYED TECHNOLOGY
- PAID FOR & INSTALLED INTERNET ACCESS TO EVERY CMSD FAMILY

needed to replace those meals and pay for dinner, too.

In Cleveland – identified as the worst digitally-connected city in the count – those with access to the Internet worked from home and complied with orders to stay inside while accessing core services like medical care, legal supports, education and even unemployment benefits, through the worldwide web – a web, as it turns out, that isn't truly worldwide.

Again, CMSD and our many community partners became lifelines to our families. They worked tirelessly to reach those who not only were cut off from such supports, but who needed them more than anyone. We printed and mailed academic content to our students' homes, broadcasted lessons on WUAB-Channel 43, purchased and deployed iPads, Chromebooks and laptops, distributed hotspots to the homes of every CMSD family, and began the process of converting those hotspots to permanent high-speed Internet access as well.

The storm was fierce! But, as we now know, it was not brief. In fact, the storm is still raging today.

So, after anchoring down briefly, organizations like CMSD had little choice but to attempt to navigate our way to safer waters. The dilemma we faced was whether to push forward in the hopes of brighter skies on the horizon or to turn around and attempt to reach the calmer waters we enjoyed before the storm.



For me, the choice was clear.

As the leader of one of the most important institutions serving the people in the ninth most racially segregated city in America, I knew we needed to not only address the enormous impacts of the public health pandemic on the students we serve, but also the massive added threat of continued economic and social injustice that was playing out in disadvantaged urban communities across our country. I knew then, and affirm today, that we had a moral obligation not to retreat, but to venture forward.

WE HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO
CREATE SOMETHING
MORE FAIR, JUST & GOOD
 FOR EACH OF OUR LEARNERS

Audre Lorde, an American writer, feminist and human rights activist, once famously said,

“*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*”

Let’s face it, even in the best cases the school systems that so many are striving to return to in America were built for an agrarian society in an industrial age and not for a global society in the digital age. But now, with the vast disparities between the haves and the have-nots laid bare, it’s nearly impossible for the privileged few to ignore what is in plain sight.

And so I ask, why would we, as a society, work so hard to find ways to pick up the master’s tools when we know they are only sufficient for rebuilding the master’s house?

Why wouldn’t we, instead, create new tools to build a new house – one that is more fair, just and good?

I mentioned earlier that CMSD had proven over the past decade that we were able to sail a strong vessel through a number of storms, arriving at better destinations. But even those voyages were achieved using old tools on an old ship.

The question today is not if we can build and sail a strong ship, but what kind of ship we should build and where we should sail it. The question is how do we emerge from this pandemic and position the Cleveland Metropolitan School District for the future?

To answer these questions, the state of Cleveland’s public schools and our vision for the future of CMSD must be

about far more than simply correcting for the setbacks our kids experienced in the shutdown. And it must be about far more than simply getting kids back on track for where they would have been in the antiquated system that was dismantled by the pandemic.

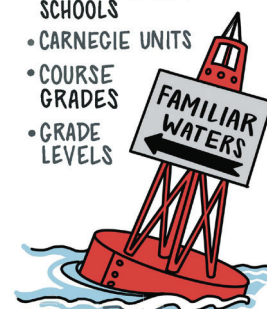
If we have learned anything from the past 18 months, I hope it is that the core infrastructure of our communities must be designed for the many, not for the few. And that, as examples, the people of the world’s most wealthy nation shouldn’t have to rely on their schools to meet their basic food needs, or that those same people should have access to affordable, high-speed Internet as a public utility, deemed every bit as essential as heat, electricity and water in a global society that requires connection through a digital world for people to function and thrive.

It’s ironic that a century ago, the Spanish flu epidemic of 1919 resulted in a previously unaffordable luxury – electricity – becoming a public utility available to all when that crisis ended. I watch and wonder whether local, state and federal leaders will once and for all eradicate this enormous yet easily fixable disparity even as we tackle more intractable disparities like food insecurity or the quality of the educational experiences the most disadvantaged people in our community’s experience.

For our part, the pandemic shutdown forced CMSD to set aside old tools like classroom seat time, learning in brick and mortar schools, conventional Carnegie Units, course grades and grade levels, and enabled us to create and begin to use new tools like competency-based learning, anytime/anywhere learning, learning that is more individualized and learning

OLD TOOLS

- CLASSROOM SEAT TIME
- BRICK & MORTAR SCHOOLS
- CARNEGIE UNITS
- COURSE GRADES
- GRADE LEVELS



that focuses on the whole child, including his or her social, emotional, cultural and physical wellness.

At CMSD, we are leveraging these new tools to position ourselves for the future. It is our vision in a post-pandemic world that in pursuit of a more fair, just and good system of education, each of our learners – both each of our scholars and each of their educators – will be individually and collectively engaged with intellectually complex tasks that are worthy of their productive struggle. And that these tasks allow our learners authentic opportunities to demonstrate their work and their learning of both academic content and transferable skills in a joyful and adventurous environment.

NEW TOOLS

- COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING
- ANYTIME-ANYWHERE LEARNING
- INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING
- FOCUS ON THE WHOLE CHILD
SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, CULTURAL & PHYSICAL

AMERICAN
RESCUE PLAN

Notice that I said a *more* fair, just and good system of education.

I fully understand that my educator colleagues and I alone cannot eliminate all of the injustices our community has and will continue to face. But that doesn't mean that we don't have an urgent responsibility to dramatically reduce those inequities!

Notice, also, that I said "each of our *learners*." This is not just our vision of a more fair, just and good system for students. It's what we expect for all in a curious organization of dedicated people who are always learning and improving together, whether you're a student or an adult.

In our vision I shared that our learners should be engaged in intellectually complex tasks. In education, we often call that "rigor," but there is actually an important difference. If you look up the definition of rigor you'll find it described as

Our Vision for Learning in a Post-Pandemic World

“In pursuit of a more fair, just and good system of education, CMSD wants each of its learners – both scholars and their educators – to be individually and collectively presented with academically and intellectually complex tasks that are worthy of their productive struggle, and that enable them to demonstrate their learning and their work in joyful and adventurous environments.”

"scrupulous accuracy or adherence." But how does one describe "scrupulous accuracy" or "adherence" in our everyday work?

An intellectually complex task can be described in plain words in which learners know exactly what they are expected to do. For example, 7th and 8th grade students who participated in our recent Summer Learning Experience were presented with this intellectually complex task:

"The city of Cleveland has had a declining population for many years. There has been a revitalization effort over the past few years to bring the city back. Your job is to evaluate this effort and report to the Departments of Economic Development and Community Development. After conducting observations in your neighborhood and comparing it to observations made by other students in different neighborhoods, your team will identify one revitalization effort to dig deeper into and evaluate. You will then make a recommendation on how to revitalize Cleveland."

You'll also notice that our vision doesn't say "real world." The real world is certainly important, but it's only a subset of where learning can occur. If Gene Roddenberry hadn't written about a far-away future where people flipped

open radio devices to talk to each other across the galaxy, where star ship captains touched glass screens to operate their computers and where people simply called out to their computers with questions – questions the computer answered back to them, you might not be tweeting messages about this speech to @ericgordon_ceo and @cityclubcleveland on those smartphones you're using today. Don't forget to use the hashtag #CelebrateCMSD!

The trick of these intellectually complex tasks is to go beyond the intangible definition of rigor while exploring the world not only as it is today but as we would hope it will be. But to do that these tasks have to be worthy of our productive struggle. We have to want to work together in our group to figure out the solution. We have to want to research and learn new academic content that helps us answer the question. We have to be willing to tinker, to try and fail and try again. The task has to be worth our time, our energy and our curiosity.

Part of the way we can make tasks worthy of our struggle is by providing authentic opportunities to demonstrate our learning, not just of the academic content – the English, math or chemistry, for example – but also of transferable skills like working on a team, learning how to present to an audience, learning research skills and more.

In the work environment, you often see these demonstrations of learning manifested as presentations of your team's ideas or prototyping a new idea in a medical lab or on a fabrication floor. In a restaurant, it's the taste, quality and presentation of the meal you've prepared for the customer. In the arts, it is juried competitions, performances, gallery exhibits and more.

Like these authentic demonstrations of learning happening in the world around schools, we must also present our

learners with opportunities to demonstrate their learning in authentic ways in their school as well. We did this over the summer by creating Demonstration of Learning Days where our students first got to invite their families and friends to see and hear about their learning, and then competed citywide in competition categories in the arts, STEM, humanities and in a category of projects, like those our 7th and 8th graders participated in, called "I Love the Land!"



Finally, all of this should take place in a joyful and adventurous environment. Learning should be fun!

And, if we achieve this vision – or rather, when we achieve it – our students will also do just fine on their standardized tests. In fact, I predict we will close gaps faster and better than we've ever done before.

Don't believe me? Just ask the over 8,400 students who participated in our Summer Learning Experience. Ask

their parents. Ask their teachers! The learning we saw in just four weeks on hundreds of projects just like the one I described to you earlier was astounding!



So how do we make this happen?

I mentioned earlier that we have proven our ability to sail this ship toward a brighter horizon. But to truly arrive at this beautiful new port, to position CMSD for this much brighter future, we have to retrofit our lake freighter into a state-of-the-art cruise liner.



We have to ensure that our learners – our students and their teachers – have experiences similar to

that of a luxury cruise: opportunities to walk the decks and stare into the stars and wonder; opportunities to go on excursions and try new things; opportunities to splash in the pool, go to the show, enjoy the all-inclusive dining; opportunities, in CMSD's case, to have a full school experience like those we prototyped this summer!

Fortunately, we have both the desire and the means to do so.

CMSD is using the resources provided from the American Rescue Plan to make the investments necessary to bring our vision to life. While school districts across the country are being warned not to use their one-time American Rescue Plan funds for long-term investments, CMSD is placing some big bets on our future. The American Rescue Plan, by Congress' design, is a three-year plan. And like Congress, we are thinking about our emergence as a stronger, healthier organization that is living our vision for a bright post-pandemic future over this and the next two years.

Using our Rescue Plan funds, we will complete the full conversion to a 1:1 technology District, ensuring every student and educator in CMSD has the appropriate modern iPad, Chromebook or laptop to meet their anytime/



anywhere learning needs. And, by replacing these devices every four years, CMSD seniors will now be able to keep their laptops after graduation.

Beginning this year, every CMSD campus will have a full-time health professional focusing on the whole child's learning needs.

Beginning this year, every traditional PreK-8 school in the city has added either a before-school, zero-period or after-school ninth period, enabling us to expand access to art, music and physical education in addition to the instruction students already receive in these areas during the typical school day.

Over this year and the next, CMSD will convert each of our library/media centers into modern community, college and career hubs; cyber cafes open to students before and after school and during their lunchtime, in addition to during the school day, ensuring access to a modern library/media collection while also providing a one-stop-shop for students to sign up for clubs and activities, access services and supports like their Say Yes Family Support Specialists, explore their career interests and aptitudes, get help with college applications, essays and scholarships, or just hang out together to work on those intellectually complex tasks.

It's important to note that these big bets in particular – full-time health professionals, expanded art, music and

physical education, and the expansion and conversion of our library/media programs – are only made possible because of the bold, new collective bargaining agreement ratified by the District and members of the Cleveland Teachers Union last spring.

There is often a question about the role teachers' unions do or do not play in educational innovation. While I can't speak for other cities, I can confidently share today that CTU, led by President Shari Obrenski, has not only embraced our vision for a brighter future, but has actively worked to bring this to life over the summer and into the current school year!

With the American Rescue Plan funding, we can, at a critical time for CMSD, bring these and other big bets to life over the next three years. Unlike many of my counterparts across the country, I'm able to make these bets because of the incredible support of this community.



By passing Issue 68 last November, Clevelanders have created a stable financial position that allows us to

make these investments and show our community what their schools could be, both in the next three short years and beyond. I urge Clevelanders to visit our schools and participate in the many authentic demonstrations of learning that our learners will be engaged in. Come to our concerts, visit our juried art exhibits, cheer our scholar-athletes to victory at their athletic competitions or serve as a judge for a school team's project. And look for us in the community, installing our works in libraries and community centers and activating our anytime/anywhere learning. You will see your tax dollars hard at work!

Our people have suffered throughout the pandemic. They deserve more than we've ever delivered to them, and CMSD is better positioned than we've ever been before, and than we may ever be again, to give them more.

If we've done nothing else in my last 10 years as your CEO, it is to prove what's possible if we envision the future and build it together.

Today, and in the days to come, I invite you to join us as we set sail on this brand new CMSD experience. An experience like none in the history of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and a life-changing one for our kids, our school community and our city.

Before I conclude, I'd like to thank Jo Byrne, our cruise ship director so to speak, who donated her time and her talent to create the amazing graphic recording that mapped out our journey today. And a special thanks to Benn Draher, CMSD's TV station manager, who served as first mate, graphically bringing our journey to life.

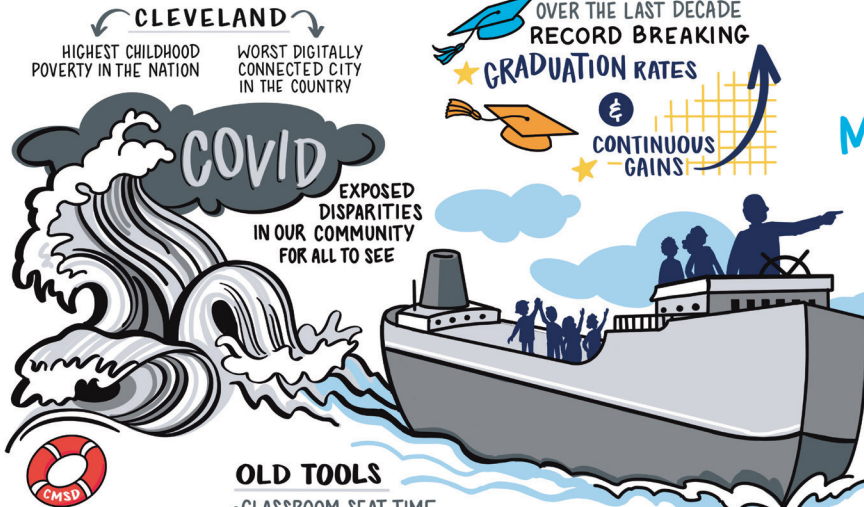
Thank you for joining me and allowing me to share the bright state of our Cleveland Public Schools. Thank you.





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OUR PEOPLE DESERVE MORE *and* CMSD IS POSITIONED TO DELIVER



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