

State *of the* Schools 2022

Eric S. Gordon, CEO
September 21, 2022



Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me, here in the Renaissance Ballroom in Cleveland and also on the live stream, for our annual State of the Schools Address.

Before I begin my remarks today, let's applaud the sponsors of this event who make it possible every year for us to share the progress and achievements of Cleveland's public schools with both a live and broadcast audience. These generous donors also enable students, families, and educators to attend at sponsored tables throughout the room.

It has been customary the last 12 years for me to take time before my formal remarks to recognize the educators, families, partners, stakeholders and supporters whose dedication to and support of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District play such a significant role in the state of our schools each year.

I've been privileged to work closely with a Board of Education that has distinguished itself locally and nationally for its dedicated, consistent leadership of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The devoted members of the Cleveland Board of Education have earned their reputation for delivering consistently strong, impactful leadership and support for 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. You deserve our gratitude, our respect and our applause.

At the head table are distinguished civic and community leaders and friends who make our daily work and this annual event possible, including Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb, Chief of Education Holly Trifiro, Chief of Youth and Family Services Sonya Pryor Jones, one of my most important mentors and the long-serving Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools Dr. Michael Casserly, and my wife of 28 years and best friend Dawn Gordon.

Throughout the room are many other vital community partners, who, as I speak today, will recognize the vision for Cleveland's schools that they helped inspire, their contributions toward taking action on that vision, and the progress we have made together this year and over the last decade, at one of the most pivotal times in CMSD history.

These dignified and dedicated representatives of community agencies across the city have helped to shape and continue to support our kids and families. They 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, United Way of Greater Cleveland, College Now Greater Cleveland, our partners at Pre4CLE, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance, the Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland, Say Yes Cleveland, the Greater Cleveland Career Consortium and so many more.

Our work and our strong partnerships, of course, center around the most important people in this room and those listening across the city--our CMSD student scholars, their parents and caregivers, and our incredible CMSD educators in every area of service to our school community.

In particular, it is the tireless devotion of our educators to our students and families that is central to the success we've seen over the last decade. And it is their presence at this annual event that warms my heart most--our CMSD students, families, and educators present today, including several of our student and parent ambassadors.

Finally, I want to thank the people who work collaboratively behind the scenes to bring this State of the Schools address to life. I'd like to acknowledge Dan Moulthrop and his staff from the City Club of Cleveland, who, in partnership with ideastream public media, make it possible for me to present and to live stream this State of the Schools Address.

I'd also like to acknowledge Dr. Roseann "Chic" Canfora, my colleague and State of the Schools co-author for the last 12 years, CMSD-TV station manager Benn Draher, graphic designer Brenda Haehn and other members of the CMSD Communications and Engagement teams.

Thank you all for sharing this moment, as I deliver my 12th, and final, State of the Schools Address as CEO of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

I know it was a surprise to many of you when I announced last week that this school year will be my final year as CEO. While the decision was not an easy one for me, it was an important decision, made at the right time and for the right reasons.

So today, I'll use my brief time with you to not only report on our progress and challenges over the last year at CMSD, but also to reflect on the last decade of work and progress that brought us to this important and pivotal moment for the District. It is that work, and the progress we have made together, that has positioned the district for the critical moment when we transition to new leadership next year—from one hand to another—to ensure our continued progress and success.

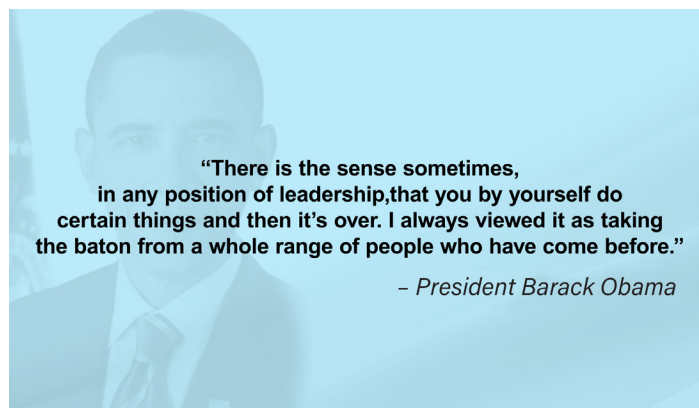
Good leadership is often characterized as either a marathon or a sprint. Some say the best leaders are those who are consistent for a continual period of time. Others say it's best to go "all out" in order to more quickly achieve their goals.

In my more than 11 years as CMSD's CEO, I have attempted to do both, leading with what I would describe as a persistent urgency, to quickly achieve significant goals, while simultaneously working to embed those wins into a culture that can nurture and sustain them over time.

But truly effective leadership is neither a sprint nor a marathon. Former U.S. President Barack Obama

supported this notion when at the end of his Presidency, he characterized effective leadership as similar to a relay race. Our noble work in public service, he said, is more like a team sport than an individual one.

As he left The White House at the end of his Presidency, President Obama said simply:



It's easy to see this moment in that light. At its simplest, a relay race is a team sport where individual runners each run a leg of the race before passing a baton to the next person to continue the competition.

Each of the runners must perform at their absolute maximum during their leg of the race. And in a relay, the race is won not by those individual runners, but by a combination of the runners who came before them and those who come after in the entire race.



But winning a relay race requires far more than simply running. It requires that the entire relay team see the finish line, and that each member is not only prepared for their run, but also for when and how the baton is passed.

In an actual relay race, runners prepare strategically and deliberately not just for the end goal, but also for something called the "exchange zone," the critical places in the race where the baton can successfully, and optimally, be passed.

Three factors are key to successfully passing the baton in the exchange zone.

They are: an intentional focus on looking ahead, not behind; the precise timing of the handoff; and the successful passing of the baton, at the peak speed of both runners.



I really want to stress that.

The handoff occurs when both runners—the one carrying the baton, and the one taking it – are running at their maximum speed. More important, if the runners aren't aligned for a successful handoff in the exchange zone, or if they drop the baton, the team can lose ground or even risk being disqualified.

So how does all of this apply to the state of our schools?

CMSD has reached our exchange zone.



The conditions of the District are such that, as we look intentionally ahead, it is clear that now is the precisely right time to carefully plan for a successful handoff to the next leader of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. It's time to pass the baton.

So what are those unique conditions that have presented themselves in this rare, short window of time?

To answer that, let's consider another factor that is key to success in a relay race: the Split.

While a relay race is a team sport, the contributions of each individual runner also matter greatly. When the baton is officially passed, the measurement of an individual runner's time is referred to as the "split"; a calculation that essentially involves splitting each individual runner's time out of the total time of the race. To better understand the state of our schools, we need to measure the Split for my leg of the race.

When I was passed the baton in July 2011, CMSD was the lowest-performing district in Ohio. We were facing financial bankruptcy and had lost all public trust. Like the runners before me, I had to hit the ground

running at optimal speed. And with only a one-year contract as CEO, I did not have a second to lose.

When the baton was passed in 2011, many doubted what, if anything, might be attainable for Cleveland's public schools. But by 2012, we had secured bipartisan support for *The Cleveland Plan* to improve the academic performance of our schools. We passed the first school levy in 16 years, placing the district back on strong financial footing, and over the course of 10 years, we have continuously strengthened the public's trust in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Sooner than many thought, we were changing public perception of CMSD from one lagging behind to one that was not only finding its stride, but racing forward. None of that would have been possible without the extraordinary commitment of the partners, funders, and school and community leaders that brought *The Cleveland Plan* to its finish line, and scouts took note.

The National Review called *The Cleveland Plan* "an impressive, encouraging break from a long trend of 'conflict and stalemate.'" *The Wall Street Journal* called our transformation plan a "rare example of collaboration" and a "departure from the bitter animosity over school funding and treatment of teachers that has divided many U.S. cities."

The *Washington Post*, hailed our Mayor, Board and District leaders for not being afraid of "clashing over what's best for children," and for being an "exception to the rule" in

American schools that have too long failed our nation's children.

Here at home, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* Editorial Board said that, "with so much at stake," *The Cleveland Plan* was "a plan worth fighting for."

PUBLIC TRUST	
ISSUE 107	57%
ISSUE 4	63%
ISSUE 108	68%
ISSUE 68	61%
Strong and growing public trust	

And they were right.

Under that plan, and over the course of my work as CEO in the decade that followed, the Cleveland Board of Education held me and my team accountable for three critical goals: first, to increase the academic performance of the district and its schools; next, to ensure that CMSD was in strong organizational and financial health; and finally, to restore public trust in our schools.

I, and we, have spent the last eleven years solidifying the District's academic mission, raising academic performance, improving the health of the organization, ensuring its financial strength, building a strong infrastructure, modernizing facilities, transportation, and technology, and hiring the best and most qualified people. And with all of that in place, improving the public's trust in the District and in our expanding portfolio of schools.

When I stepped into the role of CEO in 2011, survey data showed the public had lost faith in CMSD. We hadn't passed a tax issue in over 16 years, and public polling at the time showed there was little voter support for Cleveland's public schools. In fact, in March 2012, during the first year of my tenure, only 20% of registered voters rated the quality of education as Good or Excellent while over 38% rated the quality as Poor.

Many in this room remember those years, as CMSD faced the looming risk of a state takeover of our schools by Academic Distress Commissions, similar to those assigned to Youngstown, Lorain, and East Cleveland. We, too, lagged far behind when compared with districts state-wide, but in Cleveland, we didn't give up and we refused to accept that fate.

Against the odds, CMSD averted a state takeover with the unparalleled support of a strong and committed coalition of Cleveland leaders, that are now more formally represented by the membership of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance.

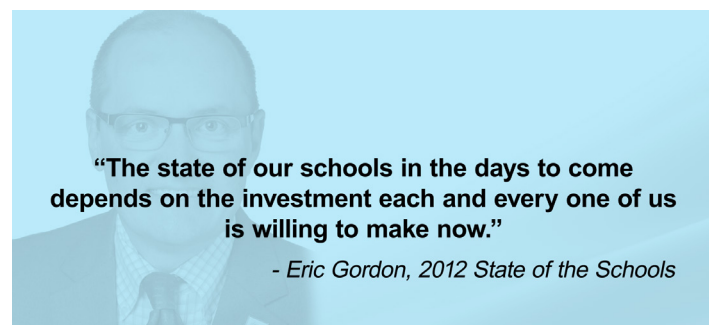
Working together, we moved forward with our own bold plan to improve education, and with the crafting and implementation of *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools*—or *The Cleveland Plan* – we made a promise to Ohio's elected officials and to the greater Cleveland community that we would hold ourselves accountable for academic improvement.

Over the past 11 years, CMSD's momentum was and continues today to be fueled by growing public trust, as evidenced by the passing of three school levies and a bond issue and by survey and focus group results showing a dramatic increase in public satisfaction with the direction CMSD is heading.

In my State of the Schools Address 10 years ago, I told the audience "The state of our schools in the days to come depends on the investment each and every one of us is willing to make now."

That investment, made with a promise of continued improvement before returning for renewed support, paid off. In November 2012, in support of the promise of *The Cleveland Plan*, voters passed Issue 107, a 15-mill tax increase, with 57% of the vote. That win was not so much because of public trust but more because of hope. *The Cleveland Plan* was a promise to the community that if given a chance, we would improve performance and earn their trust. The community simply gave us a chance to make good on that promise.

And, that, we did.



Two years later, with 63% of the vote, the people of Cleveland passed Issue 4, a \$200 million bond issue that allowed us to continue modernizing schools.

Two years after that, in 2016, voters passed Issue 108, renewing the 15-mill tax levy by a whopping 68% of the vote.

That momentum has continued to build.

Since then, the most significant, and most recent, demonstration of public trust was the passage of Issue 68, a 5-mill tax increase, passed by more than 61% of the vote, despite our need to seek support during the darkest part of the global pandemic shutdown and despite well-funded opposition by a small group of commercial property owners.

In looking forward to the exchange zone, strong public trust is critical for a successful leadership transition. It matters both to attract the best candidates and to ensure confidence in the selection of the new leader, and also to position that new leader to continue our momentum when they begin their leg of the race.

Those key indicators of strong public trust in measuring my split in the race are a few examples of why now is the right time to hand off the baton.

Let's look at another set of factors that are key to getting the timing right for our handoff; indicators of the organization's health.

In the spring of 2011, just before my appointment, the district had laid off hundreds of employees, cutting art, music, and physical education out of the K-8 curriculum, and shortening the K-8 student day just to survive financially.

The district was quickly running out of money to continue our building modernization program, we had a severely-aging fleet of busses and other vehicles, and we had an aging technology infrastructure as well.

With the momentum we were gaining with increased public trust, voters passed Issue 4 in 2014, making it possible for us to complete the construction or renovation of 20 school facilities, including state-of-the-art facilities like the Cleveland School of the Arts, the new Max Hayes Career Technical High School, the new Garrett Morgan Campus and the new John F. Kennedy Campus to name just a few. Renovations of Joseph Gallagher PreK-8 School have begun, preparations for a new Clark and a new Marion Seltzer School are also well underway and a new Lincoln-West High School is scheduled to follow these latest new buildings as well. At the same time, we continued our careful work in right-sizing our school footprint, while maintaining Cleveland's value of smaller neighborhood-based schools.

FINANCIAL, OPERATIONAL, PERSONNEL HEALTH

20 new school facilities

Modernized bus and vehicle fleet

Upgraded technology infrastructure, student devices, and internet connectivity

Improvements in school safety and security

Strong labor-management relationships

Strong financial health

High quality workforce

CMSD has also modernized our bus fleet, including the Board's most recent purchase of 110 additional new busses, safety, and trades vehicles. And starting this year, those school busses are now Wi-Fi-enabled so that our students can be connected to the internet as they ride to and from their schools.

And speaking of Wi-Fi, CMSD transitioned over the last few years to a full one-to-one technology solution. Today, every student at every grade level has their own age-appropriate iPad, tablet, Chromebook, or laptop, and we are installing Clevertouch interactive touch screens in every classroom in the District, as we upgrade the district's entire internet infrastructure.

Of vital importance—we put an end to the years when our students could only access the Internet at school. CMSD has actively assisted nearly 6,000 Cleveland families in getting permanently connected to the Internet through our partnerships with Charter Spectrum and Digital C.

And starting last school year, through a partnership with PCs for People, every CMSD graduate now receives a laptop at graduation to take with them to college or into the world of work.

At the same time, we've made significant improvements in our school safety infrastructure, including upgrades, repairs, and improvements of security cameras in our schools. Additionally, after securing a \$1.6 million grant, we are improving and enhancing our public address systems, door locks, and other school safety features district-wide.

Another sign of organizational health is the increasingly strong labor relationships CMSD has built with its bargaining members. While many districts muddle through arduous labor-management tensions, as seen recently in districts across the state, I am proud to report that CMSD has successfully bargained three-year contracts through June 2024 with all eight of our labor unions.

With the days of looming financial bankruptcy far behind us, the best sign of CMSD's vastly-improved organizational health is our five-year financial forecast. Last passed by the Board of Education in May 2022, the current forecast shows that CMSD is forecasted to be financially healthy through at least 2026, if not longer.

What does that mean?

It means the district won't need to consider a new levy for at least four more years. While this is possible, in part, due to significant federal investments in pandemic relief, it is also due to successful advocacy at the state-level for

a more fair school funding formula and our own prudent financial management.

That same sound financial management has also positioned the district for a potential "no new tax" bond issue or property maintenance levy at some point in the future to protect the community's significant investment in dozens of new buildings built or renovated over the last 25 years.

Each of these major strides add up. But how?

Today, instead of cutting art, music, and physical education, we are able through innovative contract language with the Cleveland Teachers Union to ensure that every PreK-8 school not only has a full-time art, music, and physical education teacher, but is able to expand the K-8 day to provide even more art, music, and physical education opportunities.

The same innovative contract language now ensures that every CMSD school houses a full-time health professional and a full-time community, college, and career coordinator to better support our students' wellness, interests, and needs.

While news reports everywhere warn of crippling teacher, bus driver and other employee shortages in districts across the nation, and as we are adding these much-needed, additional positions, I am proud to share that CMSD is currently staffed at 98.5 percent.

CMSD's strong financial, operational, and personnel health is vital for ensuring the district's continued progress through periods of transition as we enter the exchange zone this school year.

Finally, and most importantly, the district's clear and focused academic mission is stronger than ever. Over the course of the last several years, CMSD has tracked continuous progress on kindergarten readiness, K-3

reading improvement, improvement on reading and math scores, and record increases in graduation rates, while decreasing the need for remediation when our kids enter college. With the addition of Say Yes scholarships in 2019, our college-going rates began increasing as well.

Like districts across the country, the pandemic severely impacted all of those measures, but what the pandemic didn't do was dismantle the infrastructure we've built that enabled those gains.

Pre4CLE, our community's public-private compact, now ensures that all 3- and 4-year-olds have access to high quality pre-school education. That vital initiative—a game-changing head start for our kids – is stronger than ever. Pre4CLE has never once lost its stride and is today remarkably well-prepared to rebound from the impacts of the pandemic.

The district has in place a bold vision for learning, and more importantly a carefully-constructed strategic plan to both recover from the pandemic and to deepen learning and teaching in core academic content. Moreover, the plan includes a focus on the transferable skills students need to succeed beyond high school, especially in today's high-skilled labor economy.

Surely one of the milestone achievements that has contributed to building CMSD's ever-increasing momentum, is our city-wide effort to bring Say Yes to Education to Cleveland.

Say Yes now guarantees a full tuition scholarship to every CMSD student who lives in the district and attends a CMSD high school for a full four years. That includes any public

college or university in Ohio, including Pell-eligible trade schools, and includes tuition scholarships to over 100 private universities across the country.

What's more, due to the generous support of the administration of Cuyahoga County and the support of Cuyahoga County Council, Say Yes has now completed its four-year rollout of Family Support Specialists to provide student and family supports in every school in the district.

With last year's soft launch of PACE, the district's planning and career exploration curriculum, our newest public-private partnership with the Greater Cleveland Career Consortium has enabled a far more tightly coordinated

effort to ensure that every CMSD graduate is prepared to enter the high-skilled workforce and able to secure employment with family-sustaining wages and benefits.

And with the release of Ohio's new report cards we

now have data affirming the remarkable progress we've made in recovering from the pandemic, and a baseline for measuring continued progress in the years ahead.

While CMSD's new state report card shows that Cleveland and other districts struggled significantly during the pandemic, I am pleased to report that the data also shows our scores are improving.

In fact, in a number of areas on this year's report card, CMSD has already returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Among the most encouraging news is that, for the first time, CMSD is the highest rated urban school district in Ohio.

ACADEMICS

Pre4CLE

Post-pandemic Vision and Strategic Plan

Say Yes to Education

PACE Planning and Career Exploration

4 stars on Progress measure

4 stars on Ohio's Gap Closing measure

Ohio's top-rated urban school district

So, what does the report card tell us?

First, it tells us what we already knew. That the pandemic hit us hard.

Our community surveys show clearly that our community expected this. But the polls also show our families remained confident that CMSD can get our kids and district back on an upward trend.

And we have.

Outpacing many districts, CMSD earned a 4-star rating for closing achievement gaps and another 4-star rating for value-added, meaning we exceeded the state's expectations both for student growth and for closing learning gaps. In fact, CMSD was the only large urban school district to earn four stars for closing the gap between our minority students and their white peers across the state.

And while we are still recovering from the effects of the pandemic, CMSD's performance index, a measure of test scores, has already returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The new state report card, along with the upcoming release of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance's report on the performance of *The Cleveland Plan* over the past decade, and the recently published Education Forward report will, together, establish a new, post-pandemic baseline for current and future performance.

Moreover, our recently refreshed Cleveland Plan outlines a clear roadmap for the next leg of the relay, and will provide a blueprint for further success, as a new CEO comes aboard.

So you see, in several important measures of our academic mission, our organizational health, and our improved and sustained public trust, CMSD is healthy, strong and

strategically well-positioned in a way we haven't been for decades. Moreover, the District is uniquely prepared to accelerate the momentum we have built together, and to face new challenges in the short few years ahead. CMSD has entered the exchange zone.

I know that I could have stayed on longer with CMSD. And I'm confident that in doing so, I would have continued to garner the strong support I enjoy today from so many of you in this room and tuning in across the city.

But this is not a sprint. It's not a marathon. It is indeed a relay race.

One of the most difficult, but important moves a leader makes is to know when to hand off the baton, and to do so in a way that best ensures the organization's future success. Often leaders are tempted to let up only when they are tired and almost finished. But to do it well, the one passing the baton must be able to keep running full steam until the baton is passed.

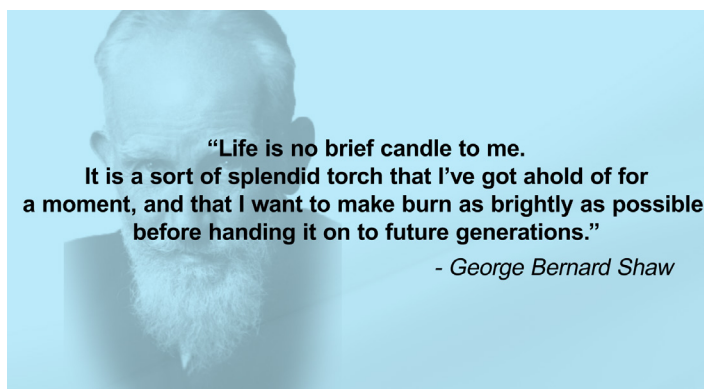
And it's also important to note that my decision to hand off the baton is part of a larger leadership exchange happening across Cleveland.

In addition to the City's transition to Mayor Bibb and his leadership team at City Hall, Cleveland has seen new leadership at the helm of the Greater Cleveland



Partnership, The George Gund Foundation, Breakthrough Public Schools, the United Way of Greater Cleveland, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland State University, Cuyahoga Community College and, not long ago, even in the leadership of the Cleveland Teachers Union. And there will surely be more leadership successions to come as our city hands off our part of the run to others, waiting to take the baton.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch that I've got ahold of for a moment, and that I want to make burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."



I wasn't the first superintendent/CEO of Cleveland's Public Schools and I was never going to be the last. CMSD's full race is not yet run. But as I've measured the split, and as I've looked carefully forward, the conditions are precisely right to hand off the baton, and to ensure the next CEO takes forward the progress and momentum we have made and built together.

Regardless of what you do or where you sit in this room, the work we have done together is legacy work, particularly as it sets up the district for future progress and supports the ability to impact future generations of Cleveland's children. Our greatest achievements in life, then, are not in what we leave behind, but in what we send forward.

To everyone who shared this journey with me over the last 11 years, thank you for the part you played in the foundation we have laid for the future. I'm confident that our legacy will be protected because we, as a community are intentionally looking ahead and are doing so strategically, during this pivotal moment in time.

I am also resolute in my pledge that, together, we will continue to run at our fastest pace this school year, while the Board of Education and Mayor Bibb take the time they need to identify the next runner, ready to build up speed and to be well-positioned to take the baton in June.

I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to serve as CMSD's 36th superintendent/CEO, and to be one of the longest-serving superintendents in our District's rich history.

My job, and my privilege now, is to continue leading the district in this, my final year as CEO, and to do so at the same pace and with the same determination to succeed that you've come to expect of me.

And, when we reach the moment of exchange this spring, I will, with more gratitude than I can express here, be fully prepared to pass the baton, and to leave a new pair of running shoes, fully laced up for the next CEO.

Thank you for joining me this afternoon for my twelfth and final State of the Schools Address.

Thank you for your faith in me and for your unwavering belief in our kids.

Thank you, most of all, for more than 11 remarkable years.

Thank you.

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