



Written Remarks for the Committee on Education and Labor

June 15, 2020

Eric S. Gordon, Chief Executive Officer

Good afternoon Chairman Scott and members of the Education & Labor committee. My name is Eric Gordon and I am proud to serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District in Cleveland, Ohio, where I have served for the past 13 years, including nine as the district's superintendent of schools. I am also proud to represent the Ohio Urban 8 Coalition, a coalition of superintendents and union presidents from Ohio's 8 large urban school districts, for whom I serve as co-chair, and to represent the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the 76 largest urban education districts in our country, for whom I am serving as the 2019-20 chair of the Board of Directors.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) is the second largest school district in Ohio with an enrollment of nearly 38,000 students. With over 42% of Cleveland's children living below the poverty line, U.S. census data indicates that Cleveland holds the distinction of having the highest child poverty rate of any major city in the country. With a median household income of just \$26,179, Cleveland residents often lack basic necessities considered essential in today's America. Our school community is 86% children of color (64% African-American, 16% Hispanic, 4% of other races). Over 17% of our students are English Language Learners (including those who have exited the formal status of Limited English Proficient) Due in part to a long-standing lead paint crisis in Cleveland's housing stock and limited service for students with disabilities in charter and voucher schools, nearly a quarter of our students are identified for special education services. Nearly 5% of our students are identified as homeless on any given day. That's over 1,900 students while hundreds more live in doubled-up housing not even knowing that it is considered homelessness.

Despite these and other inequities, CMSD has gone from being the worst performing school district in Ohio to becoming one of Ohio's fastest-improving districts. We have deeply invested in early education, increasing the number of children accessing high-quality preschool in our community by 71.6% in just six years. Our gains on Ohio's K-3 Literacy Improvement measure over the past five years place us among the top 15% of school districts in growth on this measure. On Ohio's Performance Index, Ohio's measure of reading and math, CMSD is among the top 4% of school districts in growth since Ohio's new state tests were introduced in 2016. And our on-time graduation rates have risen from just 52.2% for the class of 2011 to 80.1% for the class of 2019. That 27.9 percentage point gain makes CMSD the 4th fastest improving district in Ohio. More importantly, graduation rates for our district's African-American and Hispanic students exceed their respective state peer groups.

On March 13, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine ordered the necessary closing of Ohio's schools due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. This sudden and immediate closure had significant and immediate impacts on students across Ohio. But for my students and families in Cleveland, the impacts were devastating.

While my peers in more affluent districts in Ohio focused on switching from classroom to remote instruction, our focus in Cleveland and in other high poverty districts moved instead to how first to ensure meal sites were set up and transportation was provided for children whose families rely on their public schools for two meals a day. While we, too, scrambled to post information and learning opportunities online, and while we worked immediately to transition our staff and students to remote learning, we were forced to confront the reality that more than 40% of our families had no reliable access to high-speed internet in their homes.



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As communities across Northeast Ohio launched one-to-one technology initiatives, COVID-19 laid bare the inequities that high poverty districts like Cleveland face and the challenges that befall students and families in high poverty districts like ours, where 68% of our families have no device other than a smart phone to access the Internet.

Responding to these deep inequities, CMSD operated 22 grab-and-go meal sites where, at our peak, we provided up to 10,000 meals per day (a sack lunch and a sack breakfast to take home), along with prepared instructional materials, free paperback books, and basic health and hygiene items. We also turned our attention to supporting our school and teacher teams to develop school-based plans that met students and families where they were. This included establishing homework hotlines, remote student, teacher, parent learning conferences, delivery of content that could be accessed by cell phone (e.g., lessons posted on Instagram) and other lower-tech solutions. Simultaneously, we created weekly grade-level learning packages, along with supplemental packages to support students with disabilities and English language learners and to support social emotional health. Because so many of our families had no way to access these materials from our website, we also mailed them to each child's home. These learning opportunities were further supplemented with classroom lessons that we created and broadcast on local TV stations and linked to our website. We also established social-emotional health hotlines for those who were experiencing high stress, feelings of isolation, or signs of neglect.

Over the shutdown period, we froze spending across the district to direct all available funds toward the distribution of over 9,000 hotspots with a one-year subscription to the Internet and over 16,000 devices. Many of the devices and nearly all of the hotspots were unplanned but necessary expenses for our district. Those devices and hotspots, which are now in place and will remain distributed throughout the summer, have temporarily closed the gap for many of my families and, because of this temporary solution, my families are now able, many of them for the first time, to connect to the many learning and enrichment resources on our internet site, as well as to the many of the tools that our students had already been using in school.

The vital connectivity we rushed to establish for our students not only made it possible for our students to access online learning like their more affluent peers, but also made it possible for our families to apply for unemployment, something that for a number of weeks Ohioans could only complete online. This distribution of devices and hotspots to the households of our students also enabled families to apply for jobs, to access medical care through telehealth, and to access other essential supports afforded to most Americans. Ohio's Stay At Home Order not only cut children and families off from their schools and workplaces, but illuminated the reality that the poorest segments of our communities lacked access to reliable high speed internet and therefore to the resources that are supposed to be available to support them. I point this out to say that the internet connectivity problem facing our urban and rural communities is critical not only for school but for so many other services that families rely on.

A number of people have said to me over the past several weeks how sorry they are to see the inequities, like food insecurity, lack of access to the internet, housing insecurity, job insecurity, and more, that were caused by COVID-19. I want to make it absolutely clear that these inequities were not caused by the coronavirus. Those inequities have existed in my community and in communities across the country for decades. All COVID-19 did was to starkly expose them for all to see. And the evidence is clear that these inequities are most acute in communities of color.



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If we have learned anything in Cleveland, it is that from crisis comes opportunity. I believe COVID-19 presents an opportunity for all of us to finally address long standing inequities and, in my community, I am working aggressively to do so.

Even before COVID-19, my community introduced a program called Say Yes to Education that provides a family support specialist in every school to ensure that my students have their basic needs (food, hygiene, health and mental health services, legal services, supports for housing stability, etc.) with the intent of removing the barriers that poverty creates, so that my children can thrive in school against the odds. We had already implemented these services in 16 schools last fall and, even in the midst of the current public health emergency, my community will be implementing services in 26 more schools this coming year with all of our schools having these essential services in place by 2023.

Together with a number of community partners, my community is working to treat Internet access as a public utility, as essential for basic living as electricity, heat and water. Our goal is to move our families (and all Cleveland families) off of temporary hot spot internet access to low-cost reliable high-speed Internet. We've done this by creating a not-for-profit internet provider called Digital C that, with our school district as their largest customer, now has the resources they need to expand their footprint across Cleveland, making access to the internet available for \$16.00 per month.

We must be just as impatient to reject the status quo in education. Under the currently-proposed public health guidance for schools in Ohio and in most states, we will not return to "normal" when we open schools in the fall. And why would we want to? This crisis has created an opportunity to create a much more personalized system of learning that takes advantage of both remote and in-school learning to provide a more customized learning experience for our students. While we are still developing this plan for fall, we expect that we will likely operate three to five scenarios, some simultaneously, that support the varying needs of learners in multiple different ways. These include:

- a much more robust home school and online learning environment for students and families (as well as staff members) who, because of coronavirus, cannot or will not return to school or work
- a more flexible independent learning model for students who can accomplish a great deal of learning on their own (e.g., middle and high school students, gifted students, etc.) using resources like Kahn Academy, online coursework, etc. but who will need some limited level of support (perhaps once a week) from teachers in schools
- a blended model for students who need increased level of direct support (e.g. younger students, students with disabilities, English learners, foster and homeless youth, etc.) who can benefit from more time with teachers (perhaps two to three days a week) in smaller, more individualized group settings
- full, daily in school learning for some students with higher needs who need daily in person instruction
- a fully reopened but redesigned system that leverages all of the above personalization and flexibilities when schools can resume.

Some may question whether such radical changes in the way schools operate can actually be done. I'm not questioning it, because I know it can. My district has been developing and implementing these models for over a decade. These include individualized student learning experiences through online classes and



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through the use of individualized learning tools like Kahn Academy, mastery-based learning experiences in which students conduct research using web-based tools, research databases, and in libraries, place-based learning in museums, art galleries, music venues, science centers, hospitals, and fortune 500 companies, workplace learning opportunities including internships, apprenticeships, and learn & earn opportunities, and exhibitions of learning including presentations to authentic audiences, juried exhibits, production of authentic work products, and awarding of credentials. All of these mastery-oriented learning opportunities already exist in some form in schools across our country.

The challenge now is not simply to show that learning models focused on personalized, mastery of rigorous content are effective, or that strategies in which learning is the constant and time is a variable can be done. We know they are effective and can be done, for all children as our primary learning strategy. These are, in fact the models often used in some of the most elite private schools. Our challenge in America's public schools is to take advantage of the opportunity that COVID-19 created to bring the type of high-quality learning options usually reserved for children of the most privileged among us to all students in my district and to students across the country. Only when we reject failed systems where time is the constant rather than the variable—only when we retire archaic strategies like agrarian calendars, rigid school hours, days and months designed for a different era, and only when we replace failed systems with ones that focus on strategies proven to close the achievement gaps between black and brown students and their white peers, can we truly say America's education system provides equal opportunity for every child to succeed.

We know it can be done. We just have to have the will to do.

And, the reality is, this moral imperative must be met within the context of the looming budget crisis brought on by the economic recession. In my district, we are facing the very real threat of losing up to \$127 million in state and local revenue in the year ahead. This includes: the potential of a \$23 million reduction in K-12 aid in the coming year; the elimination of \$12 million in state-provided student wellness funds that were originally designed to provide necessary wrap-around services for school-aged children; the potential loss of a \$67 million local tax renewal, slated for vote in November; and, the potential reduction of local tax collections of \$25 million if we return to recession era collection rates. That's nearly 25% of my district's net operating budget. And that's on top of the nearly \$23 million I had already cut from my budget prior to the COVID-19 shutdown. If this worst case scenario were to occur, I will have no choice but to make deep, devastating cuts to my district this coming winter and to implement those cuts for the second semester. Those cuts, including school building closures, reductions of force at all levels of the organization, elimination of student transportation, and all extra-curricular activities, elimination of art, music, physical education, and other classes from K-8 schools and of electives from high schools, would essentially wipe out the 10 years of growth my team and I have generated in Cleveland.

Do I think this worst case scenario will absolutely hit my district? I don't believe it has to. But I have already received a \$5.6 million budget cut from my educational state aid this year, so it's certainly quite possible that more budget cuts and revenue losses are to come. That's why your support with the HEROES Act and in future stimulus packages is going to be critical to K-12 education, as well as other public agencies.



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Recessions often hit the private economy quickly and deeply before hitting the public sector economy shortly thereafter and for longer periods of time. I'm not an economist, but it seems to me, based upon my experience in the 2008-2010 recession, that focusing the CARES Act on getting the private economy restarted seems to have been a wise first step. Cleveland will receive between \$24 and \$26 million from the CARES Act. And I am grateful to Congress for these funds. Since COVID-19 struck, we have spent in excess of \$15 million in unplanned expenses and, together with the cut in state aid of \$5.6 million that I've already received, these dollars have made us whole for the last school year with about \$4-6 million remaining to tackle the looming needs of the coming year.

I want to speak specifically to the \$2 million delta in our CARES Act funding. This discrepancy is dependent on Ohio making a decision as to whether our state will follow the non-regulatory guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education which defies Congress and pushes these precious resources into the hands of schools who are serving more wealthy students and families. While I want to be careful not to presume that I know the Secretary's intent, the notion that my poor minority children will receive \$2 million less in Federal aid while simultaneously more wealthy largely white students will get more is simply appalling to me and I will continue to advocate that Ohio and all of the country ignore this non-regulatory guidance and follow the letter of the law.

Further, the \$58 million in K-12 educational aid in the HEROES act is a significant, measured next step to head off immediate budget shortfalls that school districts are facing in the coming year. My experience from 2008-2010 tells me that more will be needed as the public sector recovers from this recession over time. In fact, the Council of the Great City Schools estimates that this recession will likely require \$200 billion in aid for K-12 education nationwide when it is all said and done.

There are many today that have called education "the civil rights issue of our time." I've never really liked that phrase, not because I don't believe it. Education has been my life's work *because* I believe that. I have never liked that phrase because for too long, people have used it too loosely, like a cliché, without taking seriously what it means to go beyond changing things for a moment, rather than mobilizing and creating change as part of a movement.

However, given the current climate in America today, it has probably never been more timely, more important, nor more urgent than now for us to truly address education as one of the many institutions in our country that must be systemically redesigned to address long standing inequities that are directly tied to race and class. COVID-19 has obliterated the existing education system as we know it. Next fall will not look like last fall. It couldn't, even if we wanted it to. However, that presents a great opportunity to systematically design educational systems that are more fair, just and good. Working together, we can ensure that our children, especially minority children and children of poverty, are not continually impacted by the inequities that deny them their right to a quality education and a safe and prosperous life.



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Congress can help, and already has. First, I urge Congress to provide the necessary resources to keep our nation's school districts intact during the economic crisis that arose from this public health emergency. While this includes resources contemplated in the HEROES Act and future stimulus and stabilization acts, it must also include additional resources in the years ahead to ensure adequate funding for America's most vulnerable children, including Title I-A for disadvantaged and at-risk youth, Title I-D for children who have been the victims of neglect, Title III for immigrant children, IDEA-B for students with learning disabilities, and the McKinney-Vento Act for homeless and foster youth, as school district's like mine work to recover the learning time that was lost for the most fragile among our youth.

Doing this will allow systems like mine to reinvent ourselves in ways that will free us from rules established in the 1700s that were never thoroughly and thoughtfully redesigned to meet the needs of a modern America and its widely diverse people. We have an extraordinary opportunity today to systemically redesign institutions that have too long perpetuated racial inequities, generated wide, long, and persistent opportunity and achievement gaps, and that have clearly failed to serve all children well. We can do better and Congress can use this public health emergency as a tool to create the environment for us to do so.

Chairman Scott and members of the Education & Labor committee, on behalf of the 38,000 students of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District who I have the privilege of serving, thank you for giving me the opportunity to give them a voice in Congress. Along with the 192,000 students of the Ohio Urban 8 Coalition and the 8.2 million students of the Council of the Great City Schools, I thank you for your time and more importantly for the positive actions I know you will take on behalf of America's children.