



CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Community Plan for School Transformation



Just a few years ago, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) was in crisis. Only 52 percent of its students graduated on time in 2010. From 2002 to 2013, the district had the lowest growth in Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) out of 21 participating districts. CMSD projected a \$65 million budget deficit for the 2012–13 school year and a \$105 million deficit the next year. Cleveland voters had not approved a new school levy (a significant source of funding for schools in Ohio) in well over a decade. As a result, hundreds of teachers were laid off in 2010, and 600 more teachers were let go in 2011.

Knowing that nothing short of an overhaul was needed, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson took action. In 2011, he convened a small coalition of Cleveland stakeholders, charging them to develop a plan that would dramatically transform Cleveland’s schools. The diverse group of leaders—which included CMSD’s new CEO Eric Gordon, the mayor’s office, local foundations, charter schools and the business community—shared the mayor’s sense of urgency. In February 2012, these leaders created what later became known as “the Cleveland Plan.”

“We needed significant change. The whole system was just broken—it wasn’t just a union or district issue.”

Helen Williams, Program Director for Education,
The Cleveland Foundation

The Cleveland Plan envisioned CMSD as a “portfolio district” that embraces school options, family choice and school autonomy. A portfolio district seeks to enroll all students in a high-quality school—regardless of whether that’s a district-operated school or a public charter school. Under the Cleveland Plan, schools would have the autonomy to increase the quality of their teaching workforce by basing staffing decisions on effectiveness and fit instead of seniority.

The plan also included new initiatives to improve learning throughout the district, such as extended learning time, technology-based instruction, and increasing rigor through a laser-like focus on college and career readiness for all students. To oversee its implementation, the plan established the Transformation Alliance. The Alliance monitors and communicates the success of all public schools in the city, including public charter schools.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District *Urban District* 2015–16



108 SCHOOLS

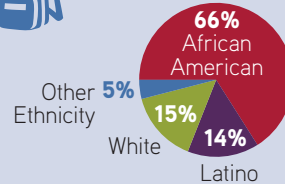
72 K–8 36 high



2,920 TEACHERS 108 PRINCIPALS



38,725 STUDENTS



23% special education

8% English language learners

100% free or reduced-price lunch

↑ CMSD is a “portfolio district;” public charter schools authorized by or partnered with the district receive a portion of the district’s levy dollars.

↑ District board has been appointed by mayor since 1998.

Source: Cleveland Metropolitan School District

DISTRICT PROFILE

The Cleveland Plan is CMSD’s transformation strategy—and it is working. In 2015, Cleveland was one of just six major districts nationwide that saw a significant increase in student performance on the NAEP/TUDA between 2013 and 2015. While student performance overall in this very poor, very challenged school system isn’t yet where it needs to be, Cleveland is a district on the rise.

Shifting from low expectations to rigor and readiness

The Cleveland Plan focuses, in part, on preparing students for success in college and the workforce. The plan starts with prekindergarten schooling and continues through high school with early exposure to universities and the workplace. Underpinning this effort is the district’s transition to college and career readiness standards. This was a priority of CMSD CEO Eric Gordon—formerly the district’s chief academic officer—and began even before the Cleveland Plan.

Ohio adopted its new academic standards, based on the Common Core State Standards, in 2010. Unlike many districts, CMSD embraced the standards immediately. “In Ohio, when the Common Core came out, the conversation was about how the standards were similar to existing standards,” Gordon observes. “We disagreed. We saw Common Core as an opportunity instead to increase the rigor of instruction across the board. That became our districtwide focus.”

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Eric Gordon, CEO, CMSD

The new standards were phased in by [grade level](#) over three years. With the help of some grant funding, CMSD began frequent, daylong trainings for teachers in 2010 focused on understanding the new standards. The next year, the district updated its curriculum to align with the standards and teachers learned how to adjust their lesson plans. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) awarded the Cleveland Teachers Union with a grant to develop [exemplar lessons](#) that focus on the key instructional shifts required by the new standards.

Phasing in new standards by grade level



Source: [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#)

The district also began adopting materials aligned to the standards. CMSD uses the framework created by the Council of the Great City Schools to identify materials for math and English language arts (ELA). The district aligned the curriculum in grades 6 through 12 to Advanced Placement (AP) courses using College Board’s Springboard program. Springboard is a comprehensive program of instructional materials and embedded assessments that build toward the rigor of AP courses.

Instructional coaches lead the implementation of new standards in each school. Coaches work in CMSD schools to support both new and veteran educators with the instructional shifts called for in the standards. Still, implementation takes time. Nearly half of the district’s teachers have been teaching for at least 15 years. “This level of rigor can be a hard paradigm shift that late in a career,” says Michelle Pierre-Farid, CMSD’s chief academic officer.

Building the Community’s Plan

The mayor’s coalition developed the Cleveland Plan in early 2012. Once developed, the coalition worked with the Cleveland Teachers Union to secure changes in state law that would be essential to the plan’s implementation. While the plan was originally criticized by the teachers union as an attack, months of conversations and some give and take earned the union’s support. The collaboration also [won praise](#) from Randi Weingarten, the president of the AFT.

By presenting a bold vision and a unified community, the coalition received bipartisan legislative support. In July 2012, Ohio’s governor signed a bill that enacted major provisions of the Cleveland Plan into state law. The bill made notable changes that enabled CMSD to use effectiveness as the primary factor in all talent decisions (rather than seniority), remove ineffective teachers regardless of seniority and share local levy funds with partnering, high-performing public charter schools.

The coalition next turned to the local school levy campaign. In November 2012, with widespread civic support, voters approved Cleveland’s first new school levy in 16 years. With more than \$60 million a year, it is the largest levy in the city’s history. By the 2013–14 school year, the district and union finalized a new contract. The contract built on the statutory changes to teacher effectiveness and compensation.

By summer 2013, the Cleveland Plan was in full effect. Engaging the district’s stakeholders early in the process set the stage for implementing the Cleveland Plan. “There is now a deep level of understanding of one another’s challenges and perspectives,” says Shana Marbury of the Greater Cleveland Partnership. “This is a community plan, not a district plan.”

The Cleveland Plan: Four interwoven strategies

Grow the number of high-performing district and charter schools in Cleveland and close and replace failing schools.

Focus CMSD’s central office on support and governance roles and transfer authority and resources to schools.

THE CLEVELAND PLAN

Invest and phase in high-leverage system reforms across all schools from preschool to college and career.

Create the Cleveland Transformation Alliance to ensure accountability for all public schools in the city.

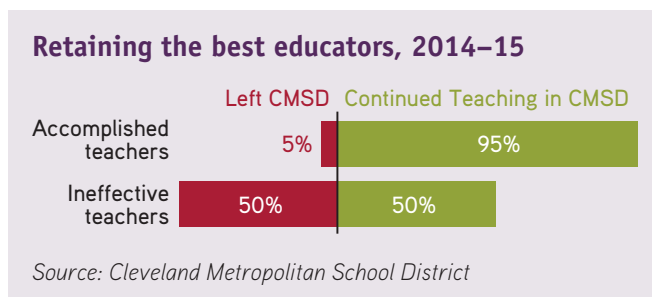
Source: [Transformation Alliance](#)

Noting the increase in math and ELA scores on the recent TUDA, Gordon credits the district’s early start on the standards and the focus on rigor of instruction. “Despite our hard work, we have a long way to go to get to college-ready, rigorous instruction in every classroom.”

Lifting Cleveland’s teachers

In addition to high academic standards, the Cleveland Plan is designed to increase the quality of teaching through better hiring and staffing policies, new educator evaluations, performance-based compensation, and recruiting the best talent to the district.

The Cleveland Plan legislation made it possible for the district to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom. Seniority is no longer the primary factor in talent decisions. Instead, the district can focus on a teacher’s effectiveness. Even tenured teachers can be removed from the classroom if they receive the lowest evaluation rating two years in a row. “Last year, 50 percent of ineffective teachers left the district,” notes Lora Cover, CMSD’s chief talent officer. “More importantly, 95 percent of our accomplished teachers were retained.”



CMSD piloted a new teacher evaluation system starting in 2011. Called the [Teacher Development and Evaluation System \(TDES\)](#), it was fully implemented during the 2013–14 school year. The system has two components that each count for 50 percent of the overall rating: teacher performance and student growth. To determine a teacher’s classroom performance, every teacher receives five observations. Three of the observations are walkthroughs. Two are formal observations, one announced and one unannounced. After each observation, teachers have an opportunity to receive feedback and pursue professional development.

District leaders are now working to improve professional development. “We’re now in our third year of the evaluation system,” Gordon notes. “Districtwide trends are emerging from the data that we can address.” For example, evaluation data revealed that teachers require more training on how to create effective, standards-aligned lesson plans. CMSD also is developing a career-pathway system for teachers—not only as an individual teacher advancement opportunity but also to create a cadre of teacher leaders who can help instruction in every school. “It’s a teacher-led growth strategy,” says Gordon.

And with the district’s new pay-for-performance compensation system, accomplished teachers get the recognition they deserve. The Cleveland Plan legislation required the district to create a system where pay is tied to effectiveness. “The district created a joint operating committee, with equal district and union representation, to think through what a system should look like,” Cover explains.

Accomplished teachers receive automatic salary increases, while ineffective teachers **do not earn credit** toward the next pay level. All teachers may still receive supplemental stipends by teaching in a hard-to-staff building, earning postsecondary credit or meeting building goals outlined in the school’s improvement plan.

CMSD is in a better position to add talent thanks to the funding raised by the 2012 levy. “We’re able to recruit teachers for the first time in years,” Cover reports. “We were able to start hiring about 300 teachers a year.” Helen Williams of the Cleveland Foundation, which helps CMSD create and staff innovative schools, observed the change from an outside perspective. “The district transitioned from a human resource approach focused on compliance and benefits to one driven by talent development and recruitment,” says Williams. “It’s had lots of new applications because of the excitement for the Cleveland Plan.”

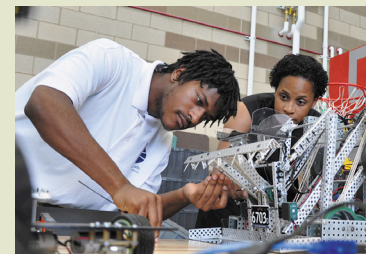
MC²STEM: Innovation Unleashed

In 2008, the [MC²STEM High School](#) opened as a partnership between the district and local science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)-focused organizations. Freshmen at MC²STEM attend classes at a science museum, move



to the campus of a Fortune 500 company for their sophomore year and then spend their final two years on a downtown college campus. With help from community partners, MC²STEM was able to attract scientists and engineers to become teachers in the school. MC²STEM quickly became one of the highest-performing schools in the district. Despite this, in 2010, the district’s annual fiscal deficits and the old contract’s “last in first out” policy decimated the school’s staff.

Feowyn MacKinnon started her first year as an English teacher at MC²STEM in 2009. However, she lost her job at the end of the school year, along with 92 percent of the teaching staff. The school fought to bring back its teachers, keeping them on as substitutes or even volunteers. The school managed to bring back most of its staff for the next school year. But in spring 2011, “we were all laid off again,” MacKinnon recalls. “We lost all our staff based on arbitrary rules.”



Thanks to the Cleveland Plan’s changes to seniority in 2012, MC²STEM found stability. No longer in limbo, teachers were able to thrive and grow. In 2015, MacKinnon became the principal of MC²STEM. “The rules for layoffs are no longer arbitrary,” MacKinnon explains. “I now have more freedom to make the decisions I need to make to run my school.”

Using its new mobile engineering facility—called the [Fab Lab](#)—the school is now working to inspire students throughout the district. A school that once embodied all of the troubles facing CMSD, MC²STEM now shows the possibilities that the future holds for CMSD students, teachers and schools.

Results

In 2013, Gordon reflected on Cleveland's overall low NAEP/TUDA scores. "We have an extraordinary opportunity between now and the next test in 2015 to alter a pattern of low and flat performance that has persisted in Cleveland over the last 10 years." Just **two years later**, Gordon reported that "the 2015 scores are the best indicator we have so far that our reforms are working."

The district is demonstrating success beyond NAEP/TUDA scores. From 2010 to 2014, the graduation rate in Cleveland **increased 13.4 percentage points**. In 2013, the state decided not to **take over** the district because of its academics, noting that the Cleveland Plan already laid the groundwork for improvement. The district's finances and enrollment have stabilized for the first time in over a decade. A **recent poll** shows that 72 percent of voters with school-age children believe the schools are moving in the right direction.

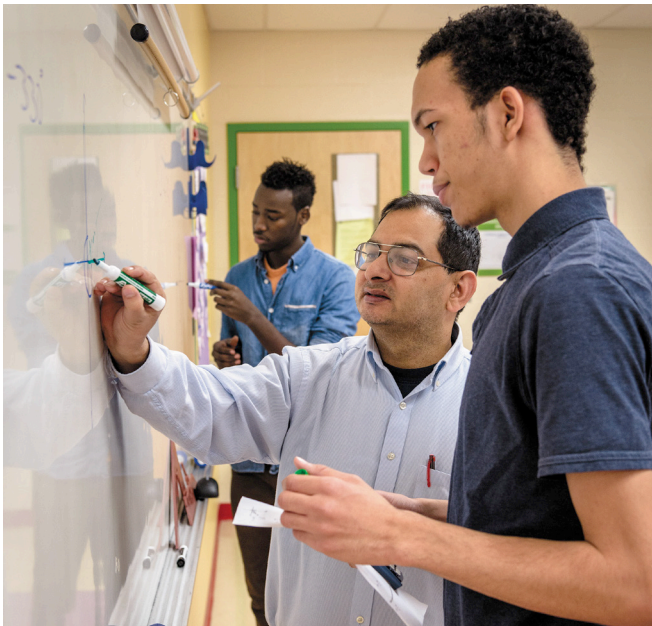
"The community should be encouraged and confident that more improvement is in store, as the school system is clearly on the right track."

Michael Casserly, Executive Director,
Council of the Great City Schools

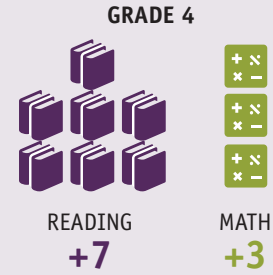
Conclusion

The Cleveland Plan was cemented in state legislation in 2012 and in the union contract in 2013. For CMSD, the 2013-14 school year was a year of "disruption and reinvention," and 2014-15 became the year of "clarity and transition."

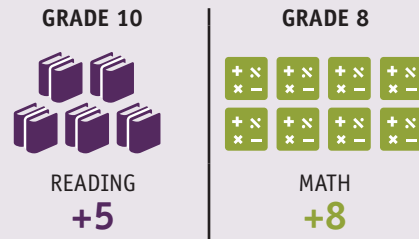
The 2015-16 school year will be the "year of impact," says Gordon. "People are settling into their new normal, learning their roles and accelerating improvement. The real results are yet to come."



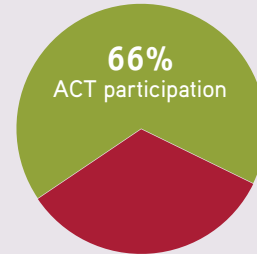
4th grade NAEP/TUDA scores increased from 2013 to 2015



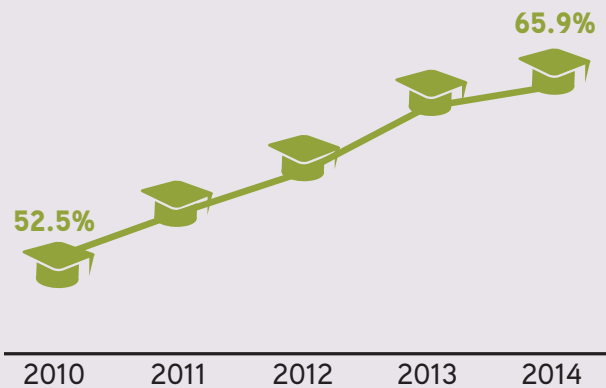
Student performance on state assessments rose from 2013 to 2014



Most 2014 graduates took the ACT



Graduation rates are climbing



Source: District data, NAEP



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Photos courtesy of
Cleveland Metropolitan School District