

Remarks on Cleveland Strategic Development Initiative
By
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Thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you. I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a national coalition of the country's largest urban public school systems.

I am pleased to support the new Strategic Development Initiative by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and applaud city and school system leaders for taking this bold step to improve the city's public schools.

The school system has made important strides over the last several years under the leadership of Mayor Jackson and CEO Sanders, one of the finest big city superintendents in the country. The district has—

- Committed to improvement goals for each school
- Created new pacing guides with the help of teachers and parents
- Stepped up professional development for building administrators and staff
- Emphasized STEM programming for city kids
- Enhanced community partnerships
- Strengthened safety and security measures, and
- Initiated a series of tough reviews and studies by external experts to help set the table for the reforms to come.

In his State of the Schools speech last February, the CEO asserted that the Cleveland school district would begin to focus on building a school system that would prepare the city's children for life and work in the 21st century.

It was a signal that a comprehensive revamping of the school district was necessary, and improved performance was imperative.

The components of that reform: accountability for results; parental choice; better instruction; more effective professional development; data-based decision-making; and tighter management and operations.

The initiative being released this evening makes good on that promise.

And it does so by building on solid data and a year's worth of study and debate.

Dr. Sanders will outline the components of the reforms in a minute, but like leaders of other big city school systems across the country he knows that urban public education is under enormous pressure to improve—maybe more pressure than any institution public or private in the nation.

We are being told to produce results or get out of the way. We are being told to improve or see the public go somewhere else. We are being told to be accountable for what we do or let someone else do it.

Some of the criticism is justified. Some of it is not. Either way, we are being challenged in the court of public opinion and by history to improve student achievement to levels that America or Cleveland has never asked of its schools.

Many groups might have folded under the pressure, giving up in the face of criticism and skepticism. But, the leaders of Cleveland's school district are doing what a lot of people weren't so sure was possible. They are rising to the occasion and putting a plan in place to revamp how the schools do business on behalf of your children.

And the plan and the sense of urgency behind it could not have come at a more critical moment.

The Cleveland public schools have not been doing the job that community leaders and school officials themselves know needs to be done.

Your graduation rate is too low. Your dropout rate is too high. There are too many elementary and secondary schools whose performance is below par. Many of your buildings are underutilized. And trend lines on national assessments are flat.

These flashing yellow lights are clear for everyone to see.

At the same time, more resources are being made available at the national level for the kinds of reforms proposed here. The quality of research on what works and doesn't work has never been better. And the number of people and organizations ready to roll up their sleeves and help you has never been greater.

The U.S. Department of Education and the Obama Administration are making new monies available through “Race to the Top” and School Improvement Grants that call for reforms that are entirely consistent with the new Strategic Development Initiative being unveiled tonight.

I also commit my organization—the Council of the Great City Schools—to working with the Cleveland schools on the details of their instructional plan with resources that we have available to us through the Gates Foundation.

And I invite and encourage the support, participation, and investment of the Cleveland community, teachers’ organization, the state, and others.

If we have learned anything in the reform of urban education across the country it is that having everybody’s shoulders to the same wheel gets better results than having everyone going in different directions.

The truth is that this effort is going to take the collaboration of everyone in the community. The school district, its staff and teachers will not be able to do this job all by themselves.

The public should know as well that what is being proposed here tonight is in harmony with the strategies of some of the fastest improving urban school systems across the country.

In fact, Cleveland would be on the leading edge of many of these reforms across the country if it stays true to this initiative.

Maybe the most important part of what school leaders are laying out tonight is a set of benchmarks on which to hold themselves accountable for the results they get. They are being specific in ways that invite your assessment of how much progress they are making.

In many ways, Cleveland—like other major urban school systems across the country—is being asked to overcome the many barriers we and our children face on a playing field that is distinctly uneven.

This playing field is defined around ideas about who is valuable in this society and who is not. Who we have high hopes for and for whom we have no hopes at all. Who we have high standards for and for whom we hold no great expectations.

But our job—your job—is not to reflect and perpetuate these inequities or to let them define us or hold us or our kids back. Our job is to overcome them.

Our mission is to rise to the audacity that President Obama has voiced, provide the hope that he has engendered, and teach all of our kids for a better future.

The great civil rights battles that were fought by the previous generation were not fought over access to mediocrity; they were fought over access to excellence.

Our job is to create it, and to make sure that education trumps poverty rather than letting poverty dampen education.

I hope that you see in this new plan for the Cleveland schools the same promise that I do, for the future can only be brighter for the children of this Great City if we pull together to make it real.

Other cities are pursuing bold reforms; Cleveland can too.

We applaud this new plan and the city's leadership for developing it. And we believe it warrants the community's enthusiastic support.

I could not be more optimistic about the future of your schools and your children.

Thank you.