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CLEVELAND TRANSFORMATION ALLIANCE

A report to the community on the
implementation and impact of *Cleveland's
Plan for Transforming Schools*

Executive Summary



Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools (the Cleveland Plan) is a comprehensive agenda for reinventing public education in Cleveland. It encompasses both Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) schools and charter schools located within CMSD boundaries. Implementation began during the 2012-13 school year, following passage of enabling state legislation and a school operating levy. The Cleveland Transformation Alliance (the Alliance) is the nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to supporting the implementation and success of the Cleveland Plan, and is the author of this report.

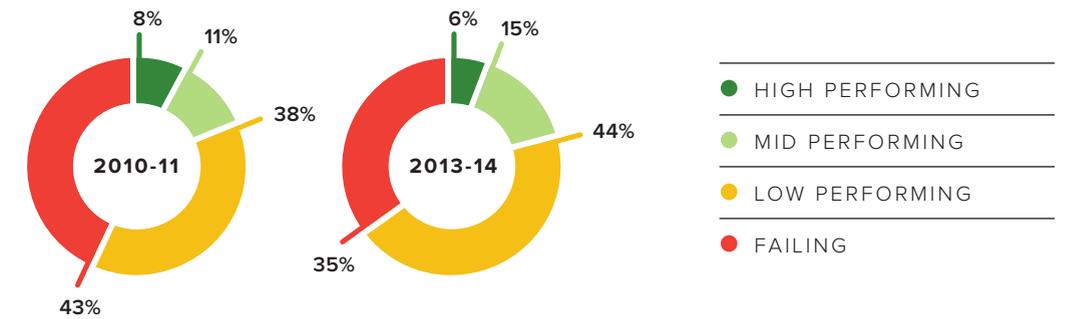
The Cleveland Plan sets two overarching goals: to triple the number of Cleveland students enrolled in high-performing district and charter schools, and to eliminate failing schools — both by the end of the 2018-19 school year. The Alliance considers as high-performing schools those that achieve a rating of A or B on two separate state indicators of quality.

In the first two years of implementation, important progress has been made toward developing the infrastructure and systems necessary to achieve the Cleveland Plan's goals. For example, CMSD is undergoing a comprehensive reorganization. Rather than being the top-down, single-source school district it once was, it is now focusing on providing a diverse portfolio of high-performing schools while giving school administrators and teachers new measures of autonomy. As of 2014-15, 48% of the district's operating budget was controlled at the school level, compared with 0.05% in 2011-12. Principals and teachers also have growing latitude to determine school hours, programs and curricula. CMSD has instituted improved systems for recruiting and retaining top teachers and principals while beginning to terminate those rated ineffective.

The picture for charter schools is also changing. In the past, charter schools opened with minimal oversight. More of the lowest-performing charter schools in Cleveland are being closed, and new schools tend to be run by charter operators with a proven track record. Today, the Alliance has legal authority intended to increase the accountability of charter school sponsors seeking to open a new school within CMSD boundaries. Partnerships between charter schools and CMSD have begun to strengthen. CMSD now sponsors eight high-performing charter schools and has partnership agreements with seven more. CMSD shares a portion of levy dollars with these schools.

The establishment of the Alliance is also a positive system development. The Alliance exists to assess and communicate school quality and to ensure the Cleveland Plan is implemented with fidelity. The organization provides a unique and effective forum for strengthening collaboration among community stakeholders working to improve Cleveland's public education system, including CMSD, the charter sector, the Cleveland Teachers Union, the mayor's office, businesses, foundations and families.

FIGURE 1, ALL SCHOOLS: Percentage of students enrolled in schools in different quality categories



Due in part to these system changes, there are some key indicators of progress. For example:

- The percentage of students in failing schools has declined to 35% in 2013-14 from 43% in 2010-11.
- Of the nine high-performing CMSD schools, six were fully enrolled at the start of 2014-15; both high-performing charter schools were fully enrolled.
- CMSD's high school graduation rate rose to 64% in 2012-13, an increase of eight percentage points since 2010-11 and its highest level in decades.
- Students in grades 4 through 8 are meeting state standards for keeping pace with their peers for the first time in nearly a decade.
- Many of the CMSD and partner charter schools that have opened over the past 10 years rate as high-performing.

While these developments are positive, the overall picture is not improving fast enough to meet the goals of the Cleveland Plan. In 2013-14, nearly eight in 10 public school students in Cleveland were in failing or low-performing schools, both district and charter. Since the inception of the Cleveland Plan, there has been a slight increase in the number of

students in high-performing high schools, but this has been offset by a larger decrease in the number of students in high-performing K-8 schools. And although the number of students in failing schools has fallen, the number of failing schools has risen.

Perhaps of greatest concern is the two percentage point decline in the number of students in high-performing schools. More encouragingly, the number of students in failing schools decreased eight percentage points.

These trends may be partly explained by the increasing rigor of state performance measures. They also come relatively early in the implementation process, at a time when structural changes may not have translated to outcomes for students. And because the total number of students in Cleveland schools is changing over time, some movement may be due to demographic changes. In order to meet the overarching goals of the Cleveland Plan, decisive action is called for in reevaluating some strategies.

This report therefore makes the following recommendations to educators and stakeholders involved in the Cleveland Plan's implementation.

1. CMSD and charter school operators and sponsors should develop differentiated school support and intervention strategies based on the current performance of their schools.

Strategies should focus on ensuring high-performing schools continue to perform at a high level, and on filling all available seats. Seat capacity should be added where possible. Mid-performing schools should be guided from “good to great” through increasing student engagement and motivation, differentiating instruction based on student needs and using time, talent and resources more creatively.

Among low-performing schools, those with the most potential for improvement in underserved neighborhoods should receive focused attention. In addressing failing schools, CMSD should adhere to its three-year timeline for assessing progress. Those not making significant gains should be closed and, when necessary, replaced. Charter school operators and sponsors should develop aggressive intervention plans for the failing charter schools under their jurisdiction. The Alliance should continue to support efforts at the state level to more quickly close failing charter schools.

New school development should continue to be a critical component of growing Cleveland’s portfolio of quality schools. CMSD and the charter sector should work together to strategically develop new schools to replace failing schools, especially in underserved neighborhoods. The Alliance should provide input into the development of new school models, including identifying high-performing schools from across the country for replication in Cleveland.

2. All stakeholders should intensify efforts to add capacity in the following areas that directly impact school quality.

Efforts should be made to expand relationships with proven sources of teacher talent to cultivate strong leaders for all schools. School autonomy should continue to be increased. The use of data and technology must be expanded on two fronts – in the classroom and at the systems level – and CMSD, the charter sector, and the Alliance must commit to developing a citywide enrollment system. The Alliance should develop family advocacy programs that empower parents to improve failing schools, and district-charter partnerships should continue to be strengthened.

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The Alliance recognizes ongoing efforts to ensure every child attends a high-performing school. However, the current pace of change is not fast enough. CMSD, the charter sector, and all community stakeholders must continue to push for accelerated progress to meet the Cleveland Plan’s goals by the end of the 2018-19 school year. Realizing these goals will require a difficult balance of urgency in implementation and measured patience around outcomes. All stakeholders of the Cleveland Plan share in the responsibility to ensure every child enrolled in public schools in Cleveland receives a high-quality education.

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