CLEVELAND TRANSFORMATION ALLIANCE

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

Key Impacts, Recommendations and Conclusion
KEY IMPACTS TO DATE

Although the Cleveland Plan was developed in early 2012, its implementation did not begin until after the signing of enabling legislation and passage of the operating levy later that year, and the approval of a new teacher contract in the spring of 2013. Beginning in the summer of 2013, much of the implementation effort has focused on transitioning CMSD from a traditional top-down, single-source school district to a portfolio district. In many ways, the work of this first stage of effort has centered on disrupting long-entrenched and outdated systems, so new ones can take their places.

THERE ARE POSITIVE SIGNS THAT A SIGNIFICANT TRANSITION IS TAKING PLACE WITHIN CMSD, INCLUDING:

Greater autonomy for district schools
CMSD has undertaken a massive institutional reorganization, including delegating many former responsibilities of the central office to individual schools and administrators. 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 enjoy greater latitude in determining school hours, programs and curricula. This embrace of autonomy for individual schools gives each individual school and administrator. 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 enjoy greater latitude in determining school hours, programs and curricula. This embrace of autonomy for individual schools gives each school greater freedom than ever before to meet the needs of its particular students.

An improved talent recruitment and development system
A new talent office was developed to hire and place effective teachers in schools before the start of the school year. The Teacher Development and Evaluation System gives CMSD a mechanism for developing talent and retaining top teachers while terminating those rated ineffective. The Aspiring Principals Program has resulted in the development and hiring of highly qualified new principals.

Enhanced school choice and enrollment process
Efforts are underway to create a streamlined enrollment process at CMSD, including investments in technology and staff. CMSD has created new print and online resources to provide families with information about school choices. The Alliance’s resources are distributed by an on-the-ground network of neighborhood “ambassadors.” In 2014-15, more than nine out of 10 entering CMSD ninth graders made active high school choices.

Student achievement
CMSD’s high school graduation rate has climbed eight percentage points since 2010-11 (see p. 45). The percentage of CMSD students meeting the college-ready benchmark ACT score of 21 increased to 14% in 2013-14 from 12% in 2011-12. And after nearly a decade of losing ground on value-added measures for students in grades 4 through 8, CMSD met progress indicators for the last two years.

Public support
Public regard for current reform strategies appears to be positive. In a 2015 poll of Cleveland voters with school-aged children, 72% agreed that the schools are moving in the right direction, 74% trust the district’s leaders to make decisions about the schools, and 91% said improving the schools is critical to making the city and its neighborhoods stronger.

IN ADDITION TO THE WORK TAKING PLACE WITHIN CMSD, THERE ARE OTHER POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS THAT ARE INTEGRAL TO THE CLEVELAND PLAN:

Creation of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance
The Alliance began operations in December 2012, providing a forum for strengthening collaboration among organizations working to improve Cleveland’s public education system. CMSD, charter school operators, the Cleveland Teachers Union, the mayor’s office, businesses and foundations now regularly communicate to work toward common education goals.

The Alliance has also developed print and online resources that report on school quality based on information provided by the state, schools and the community.

Improved relationships between CMSD and the charter sector
One key outcome of this collaborative spirit among Cleveland’s education stakeholders is CMSD’s sharing of levy funds with partner charter schools, an unprecedented demonstration of priority being placed on quality education over institutional boundaries. CMSD has also collaborated with charter school operators to open new schools.

Development of a citywide early education plan
PRE4CLE is a concerted effort to increase the number of high-quality preschool seats in Cleveland. Between March 2014 and April 2015, PRE4CLE created 750 new high-quality seats (see box, p. 39).

This first phase of implementation of the Cleveland Plan has been a remarkable and necessary period of restructuring, re-engineering and building new systems, organizations and partnerships. At the same time, some progress has been made on key impact measures:

Student achievement
Student achievement

Public support
Public support

Collaboration among organizations working to improve Cleveland’s public education system
Recommendations

While significant progress has been made in developing district and community infrastructure to support the portfolio strategy, and while the quality of Cleveland’s portfolio of schools is growing, the overall performance of public schools in the city is not improving fast enough. The Alliance calls for a more deliberate and strategic focus on meeting the overarching goals of the Cleveland Plan: to triple the number of students in high-performing schools and eliminate failing schools. In addition, the stakeholders must strive to ensure there are quality school options in all Cleveland neighborhoods, with a focus on the 11 underserved neighborhoods identified in the IFF report (see p. 32).

To date, progress toward meeting those goals has been incremental. While the number of students in failing schools has declined, the number of students in high-performing schools has also fallen. Meanwhile, the number of students in low-performing schools has increased.

The following recommendations are meant to provide a framework for achieving the Cleveland Plan’s goals. They are not intended to prescribe specific strategies and action steps; that is the purview of educators engaged in this work. Instead, they provide general direction based on the findings in this report, the original goals and approaches outlined in the Cleveland Plan, and relevant studies published during the past year.

CMSD FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES

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.

RECOMMENDATION 1

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

High-performing schools: (11 schools, 3,373 students) Strategies should focus on ensuring these schools continue to perform at a high level. CMSD and charter school operators should maintain current investment levels. They should work with the schools to make sure all seats are filled with Cleveland residents and should add seat capacity where possible, particularly in and near underserved neighborhoods.

Mid-performing schools: (25 schools, 7,353 students) Strategies should focus on helping these schools transition from “good to great.” Investment in these schools has the most potential for helping to triple the number of students in high-performing schools. Emphasis should be placed on increasing student engagement and motivation, differentiating instruction based on student needs and using time, talent and resources more creatively to improve results.

Low-performing schools: (69 schools, 22,382 students) This is the largest category of schools with the widest variance in performance. A “one-size-fits-all” approach will not work here. Based on performance data and trends, CMSD and charter school operators should classify these schools into three categories – high-potential, medium-potential and low-potential – and customize support and intervention plans for each level. Priority should be given to high and medium potential schools in underserved neighborhoods. In some cases, low potential schools should be treated as failing schools (see below).

Failing schools: (44 schools, 18,032 students) CMSD should adhere to its three-year timeline to assess the progress of its 23 Investment Schools. Those schools not making significant gains should be closed or replaced. CMSD should also develop aggressive but time-limited intervention plans addressing its current failing schools that are not Investment Schools, as well as some of its low-performing, low-potential schools. Charter operators and sponsors should develop aggressive intervention plans for the 10 failing charter schools under their jurisdiction. The Alliance should continue to support efforts at the state level to enact legislation that provides the state with the authority to more quickly close failing charter schools.

New school start-ups: The development of new district and charter schools over the past decade has contributed to improving the quality of Cleveland’s portfolio of schools. In 2013-14, seven of the 11 high-performing schools had been started within the previous 10 years, as had 11 of the 25 mid-performing schools. CMSD’s recent focus on phasing out two low-performing comprehensive high schools and replacing them with several new smaller schools is also promising. Creating new schools is critical to expanding Cleveland’s portfolio of quality schools. CMSD and the charter
sector should work together to strategically develop new schools to replace failing schools and to increase the number of high-quality options, particularly in high-need neighborhoods as identified in the 2014 IFF report (see p. 32). The Alliance should research and present promising school models to CMSD and charter operators.

Increasing the quality of Cleveland's school portfolio using this tiered approach will require CMSD and charter school operators to put in place deliberate and comprehensive planning processes. It will also require them to have the courage to continue to invest in what is working and pull back from what is not. This will result in the closure of some persistently failing schools.

The Alliance must continue to support affected families during periods of transition, helping them to select new schools for their children so that students’ education is not interrupted.

RECOMMENDATION 2

All stakeholders invested in the Cleveland Plan, including CMSD, the charter sector, Cleveland Teachers Union, the business and foundation communities, state policymakers, the Transformation Alliance, neighborhood-based organizations and higher education institutions should intensify efforts and build capacity in the following areas that directly impact school quality.

Strong leaders and teachers for all public schools: As already reported in this document, CMSD and the charter sector have begun several initiatives aimed at recruiting, hiring and developing quality teachers and principals.

Efforts should be made to expand relationships with proven sources of teacher talent and to work with local colleges of education to create exemplary urban teacher preparation programs. CMSD should deepen its implementation of the new Teacher Development and Evaluation System to develop its teacher talent, reward excellent teachers and dismiss poorly performing teachers. CMSD should also continue to grow its leadership pipeline by expanding the Aspiring Principals Program and recruiting experienced leaders from outside Cleveland. CMSD should assist principals in better understanding and using the new financial, operational and curricular autonomy they enjoy under the Cleveland Plan.

School autonomy should continue to be expanded by securing additional flexibilities through board policy and collective bargaining, particularly related to the hiring of non-teaching staff.

Use of data and technology: The use of data and technology must be expanded on two fronts – in the classroom and at the systems level. Both district and charter schools should explore additional opportunities for blended learning classroom models, combining computer-assisted instruction with classroom instruction. Used effectively, such models allow schools to provide a more individualized approach to education and offer strong preparation for a global economy that continues to emphasize and reward computer literacy. CMSD must continue to update its information technology systems to ensure improved communication and data sharing between systems, schools and the district office so schools can better use resources and make more timely decisions. Staff training should be a component of the overall technology plan.

Parent and community demand for quality schools: High-performing district and charter schools must be fully enrolled. Crucial to this is a citywide enrollment system, which will provide parents a “one-stop shop” for enrolling their children in any school they choose — charter or district. CMSD must prioritize the development and implementation of such a system, and must work closely with the charter sector in its planning and launch. The system should include access to information about school quality and directly link to the Alliance’s website to increase the likelihood that families will choose high-performing schools.

Families often choose failing or low-performing schools because those schools are the best or only choice in their neighborhood. As a result, the Alliance should develop family advocacy programs that empower parents to participate in or lead efforts to improve failing schools. These programs should help educate families on the metrics used to assess school performance, for example, and advise them on how to make their voices heard in advocating for change.

District-charter partnerships: While district-charter partnerships have improved, there are additional areas of collaboration that should be explored. Potential focus areas include talent recruitment; special education; professional development; addressing failing and low-performing schools; and sharing buildings. In addition, the Alliance, CMSD and its current charter partners should work to expand the number of charter schools that see themselves as partners in the work of the Cleveland Plan.
Conclusion

Important progress has been made toward achieving the goals of the Cleveland Plan even as significant challenges remain. While the number of students in failing schools has dropped, the number in high-performing schools has also fallen. The Alliance recognizes it must continue to push for accelerated progress.

A complicating factor for the coming year is the expected change to the state’s rating system (see p. 19). The Alliance must remain vigilant about any initial declines in school quality under this new system while taking the longer view that students, teachers and administrators may need time to adjust to new expectations.

Realizing the Cleveland Plan’s goals will require a balance of urgency and patience. All stakeholders share in the responsibility to ensure every child in Cleveland receives a high-quality education.