

**Testimony by Eric Gordon for “Raising the Bar: Exploring State and Local Efforts to Improve
Accountability”
Before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives
May 7, 2013**

Good Morning Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Committee. I am Eric Gordon, the Chief Executive Officer of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on accountability and school improvement initiatives in our nation’s public schools. I want also to recognize Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, known well in Cleveland for her advocacy of every child’s right to a quality education.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) is the second largest school district in Ohio, where more than 40,000 students and their families count on us to provide the best education possible for them. Our school system is particularly challenged by having a 47% Census poverty rate, the second highest among the nation’s Great City Schools, and a free and reduced price lunch rate of 100%.

Prior to my appointment as CEO, I served as Cleveland’s Chief Academic Officer and one of the main architects of a transformation plan to move Cleveland forward to become not only a premier school district in the United States, but also a district of premier schools. This aggressive plan to graduate our children ready for jobs and higher education at times has been mired in contractual and legal barriers to school reform-barriers that citizens and leaders across Cleveland and on both sides of the legislative aisle at the State Capital, have worked to overcome. *The Cleveland Plan* drew national attention in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the National Review as a model of collaboration that brought Democratic Mayor, Frank Jackson and Republican Governor, John Kasich together in a common mission to do what’s right for kids.

Moreover, some of the federal statutory and regulatory barriers to school reform also have been removed through the flexibility provided to Ohio under the U.S. Department of Education’s waiver initiative, allowing us to better target reform efforts on the schools in greatest need and more productive spending of federal Title I funds on effective school improvement measures. Otherwise, under the decade-old No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the 100% proficiency requirement for students in every subgroup for school year 2013-2014 would have overwhelmed the capacity of the district by requiring improvement plans, corrective action plans, or restructuring plans in nearly all of Cleveland’s schools, as well as directed expenditures to Supplemental Education services (SES) that have demonstrated minimal academic value since the 2002 enactment.

Notably, however, the critical requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) still remain in Cleveland and Ohio, and still warrant continued support. Accountability for the performance of disadvantaged groups of students (low-income, minority groups, English learners, and students with disabilities) is essential, as well as transparent reporting of assessment results in the aggregate and in the disaggregated form, remains appropriately the cornerstones of federal aid.

Even with some of the toughest challenges in the nation, Cleveland has embraced accountability, as demonstrated by volunteering for the local Trial Urban NAEP testing initiative with the high academic

standards set by the independent National Assessment Governing Board. It should not be surprising, therefore, that I support requiring Title I-funded schools to set academic performance targets to anchor and guide their school wide and targeted-assistance plans. And, while consensus on a precise trajectory for progress for each such school may not be attainable, continuing growth should be the pivotal element—particularly with so many students performing below proficiency and many of the low-achieving student groups also performing below the overall statewide average. Moreover, the National Assessment of Education Progress has demonstrated that far greater numbers of students are not proficient when tested against higher academic standards, similar to the Common Core standards now adopted by the vast majority of states.

Now with a shared commitment and some additional flexibility, our Cleveland schools can better model the most visionary and successful reform strategies in the country, and have replaced the “one size fits all” reform plans of the past with a portfolio school model that is producing dramatic results in cities throughout the nation. The portfolio model allows for—

- greater autonomy for our schools and increased accountability for producing the results our families expect and our children deserve;
- families to have school choices and access to high quality public and charter school options in every neighborhood which fosters public engagement;
- increased autonomy for schools to hire and place staff where they are needed most and to direct resources where they will make the most difference; and
- student-weighted funding formulas to determine school budgets with decisions based on individual student needs rather than enrollment numbers.

Reforms, school improvement strategies, and school intervention measures instituted in Cleveland include—

- focusing on the District’s Central Office on Key roles and transfer authority and resources to schools;
- growing the number of high performing district and charter schools in Cleveland;
- investing and phasing in high-leverage system reforms including high quality preschool education, year round-calendar, talent recruitment, and capacity building for staff;
- extensive community engagement; and
- performance-based accountability for educators and staff

Concurrently, Cleveland is aggressively implementing the Common Core standards adopted by the State of Ohio. I can’t overstate the challenge which these world-class academic standards present to our School Board, district administration, and every principal and teacher in Cleveland. And, we are probably more aggressive in approaching this increased academic rigor than most school districts. Although we still have more to do, Cleveland has taken the following steps thus far to improve our schools—

- Provided training for all staff that develops and prioritizes mastery of rigorous educational standards aligned to state standards
- Developed and monitored a guaranteed and viable Scope and Sequence for all subjects
- Carefully monitored student growth using a variety of measures throughout the school year
- Implemented research-based classroom instructional strategies
- Measured non-academic indicators of student achievement using conditions for learning surveys throughout the school year to yield better decision planning for staff
- Provided Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum for all students that promotes emotional and academic growth
- Increased our technology options for all students

Without federal support for disadvantaged students and accompanying accountability expectations in ESEA, districts like Cleveland would have truly been left behind. I would encourage an increased federal investment in ESEA to help underwrite the types of reforms that Cleveland has initiated and the movement toward world-class academics for all students. The traditional provisions of federal law that protect the integrity and impact of federal funding (i.e. maintenance of effort, supplement not supplant, etc.) continue to be important. Yet, there is still need for some additional flexibility to allow superintendents, like myself, to better tackle academic and capacity problems in our most difficult Title I schools that are constrained by rigid requirements and unnecessary paperwork. But, the presumption that delegating federal requirements to the States is the best answer to resolving the implementation problems of NCLB is rebutted by conflicting state requirements that I struggle with daily as superintendent, and documented state actions to avoid NCLB accountability through statistical manipulations, lowering state academic standards, lowering proficiency cut scores, or establishing a super-subgroup under waivers in order to avoid subgroup-by-subgroup accountability.

The economic downturn over the past few years has had a devastating impact on our city and state. And, the sequestration of important federal education aid for low-income, minority, English learners, and students with disabilities has had a further disruptive effect on educational services.

Nonetheless, I remain optimistic about the *Cleveland Plan*, and inspired by the citizens of our impoverished jurisdiction who passed a 15-mill levy to support the Plan and our commitment to providing a premier public education for all of our students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.