

An evaluation of

THE CLEVELAND PLAN FOR TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS

AN EMERGING PATH
TO IMPROVEMENT AND
THE CHALLENGES
THAT REMAIN



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The following report examines the progress that the Cleveland Municipal School District (CMSD) has made since the state legislature passed the so-called “Cleveland Plan” and voters approved a new levy in 2012.

Make no mistake, there has been progress. For the first time in decades, enrollment in CMSD has increased. Graduation rates have also increased, disciplinary actions have decreased, and proficiency test scores have improved relative to other large urban school districts.

However, many challenges still remain. The successes mentioned above are only relative to other challenged school districts. The district’s national fourth grade reading and math scores have improved since 2012, but remain mired in the bottom of districts nationally – as they have over the last decade.

This report also discusses the education supports created in *The Plan* such as efforts to expand early childhood education, the formation of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance to establish greater local control and a better informed community about its schools’ quality, and the implementation of wraparound services to create a broader support network for students and schools.

As we review this education reform effort, a pathway to success is clearly emerging. It will take time to get there, but three things need to happen before success can truly be realized:

A RENEW THE NOVEMBER LEVY

The Plan cannot succeed unless Cleveland residents renew the upcoming November levy.

B RESTORE FUNDING CUTS

The state legislature must restore a significant portion of the state funding that it has cut from CMSD over the last six years. When adjusting for inflation, CMSD has lost \$152 million in state funding in the most recent state budget compared with the state’s 2009 biennial budget, which was passed at the height of the Great Recession.

C REPAIR TEACHER RELATIONS

The strife among district administrators and teachers must end and a new, more positive relationship must begin. If the scope of *The Plan* continues to focus primarily on ways to reduce payroll and the employees’ voices in the workplace, the emerging successes of this plan will not materialize.

Utilizing a thorough review of data, as well as dozens of interviews with teachers, principals and administrators, Innovation Ohio has completed a comprehensive analysis of “The Cleveland Plan.” While there is still a long way to go, success is within reach.

THE CLEVELAND PLAN

AN EMERGING PATH TO IMPROVEMENT AND THE CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN

Once a month the Cleveland Transformation Alliance (Alliance) sends out a newsletter promoting successes within the Cleveland Municipal School District. It touts “The Power of *The Plan*” – a reference to legislative reform of the school district and a newly passed local levy.

Prior to 2012, there were no systematic attempts to promote the school district. No outreach. No Alliance. That’s because prior to 2012, *The Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools* didn’t exist. Shortly after *The Plan* was [introduced](#) in early 2012, Cleveland leaders moved legislation through the Ohio Statehouse to allow many of the provisions of *The Plan* to work. Most notably, the people of Cleveland passed a significant, 15-mill operating levy to pay for many of *The Plan*’s provisions, beginning that fall.

As the district seeks to renew the levy this November, this report will take a closer look at *The Plan* itself. However, defining exactly what *The Plan* is can be difficult. There are strong components within *The Plan* that are helping to improve the district’s educational performance, but among those working with it most closely, it has become primarily a human resources document – a way for district management to assert more authority over the district’s teachers and personnel. There remain legitimate questions about whether the positive things happening in the district happened because of *The Plan* or as a result of efforts that were put in place before *The Plan* was adopted.

In the meantime, the district and its teachers are embroiled in a contentious negotiation that has its roots in how *The Plan* was initially drafted – contention that has continued through its hotly disputed implementation. Setting aside this challenge for the moment, this report primarily will examine the progress that has been made, the challenges still remaining and will seek to better define *The Plan*. Finally, it will discuss how critical November’s levy will be for growing the successes that have been achieved thus far.

CLEVELAND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Since 2013, Cleveland CEO Eric Gordon has said that any [improvement](#) in Cleveland's performance should be measured using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) because the state testing regime is so volatile. Using those scores alone indicates that Cleveland's performance has steadied, after years of dropping. All of these scores should be understood within the context of Cleveland's extraordinary demographic challenges. Every student in Cleveland is considered to be economically disadvantaged by the Ohio Department of Education. Seeing as how there is a nearly perfect, linear relationship between income level and test [scores](#) (the poorer a student, the lower the score), seeing any improvement in these generally demographically driven assessments should be encouraging, even if the jump isn't as dramatic as one would traditionally want to see.

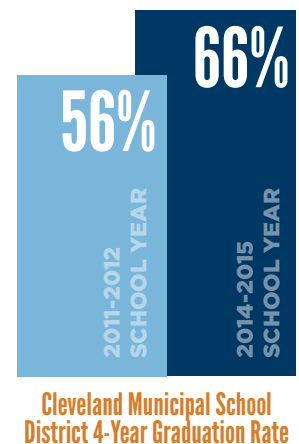
POSITIVE IMPROVEMENTS

Looking at state proficiency scores in relation to Cleveland's Big 8¹ brethren, Cleveland has improved its status overall. In the 2011-2012 school year – the final year before *The Plan* took effect – Cleveland typically ranked 7th out of 8 on its subject-matter proficiency test scores, and 8th on High School level proficiency scores. Today, Cleveland typically ranks 6th on both².

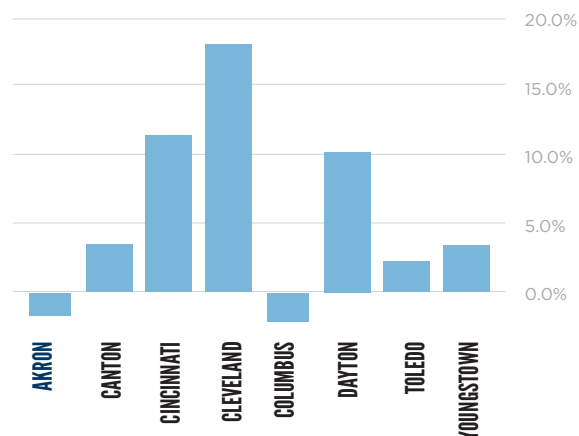
Four years ago, Cleveland ranked last in 8 of the 29 proficiency tests given that year. For the 2014-2015 school year, Cleveland ranked last only twice out of 22 tests. In addition, Cleveland ranked 6th or higher 6 times out of 29 tests four years ago. Last year, the district ranked 6th or higher more than three times as frequently – 14 times out of 22 tests.

So while the tests given both years were substantially different, in relation to other Ohio urban districts, Cleveland has shown improvement and better performance.

Cleveland has also shown significant improvement in its 4-year graduation rate, which jumped from 56% in 2011-2012 to 66% in the 2014-2015 school year. That represents the largest percentage jump (18%) of any Ohio urban district, and now ranks Cleveland 7th of the 8 – up one spot from four years ago.



PERCENT CHANGE IN 4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE 2011-12 TO 2014-15



¹ The Big 8 is short hand for Ohio's 8 major urban school districts: Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown.

² This is in comparable testing areas. Where grade levels and subjects have changed, IO did not do a comparison.

In addition, **Cleveland's overall rate of disciplinary actions being taken is the second lowest among the state's 8 major urban districts.** This is important because there is significant research suggesting that even a single disciplinary referral can make a student twice as likely to repeat a grade or [drop out](#). A West Virginia Department of Education study recently made these striking findings:

- “Students with one or more discipline referrals were 2.4 times more likely to score below proficiency in math than those with no discipline referrals; math proficiency among these students exhibited a 40 percentage point deficit (29.7% vs. 70.3%).”
- “As the number of discipline referrals increased so did the odds of poor academic performance.”
- “Low income students with a single discipline referral were 1.48 times more likely to score below proficiency than low income students with no referrals; those with 5 or more were 3.25 more likely.”



The fact that Cleveland reserves disciplinary actions to only the most serious cases places their students in a better position to succeed.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

In fourth grade reading and math, Cleveland's NAEP scores are significantly better than they were in 2013 and 2011, prior to *The Plan's* full implementation. The problem is that even those better scores are now merely as high as they were a dozen years ago. Meanwhile, other cities' scores have grown. NAEP is considered the gold standard of standardized tests because scores today can be compared with scores in previous years without the often year-to-year volatility of state testing regimes.

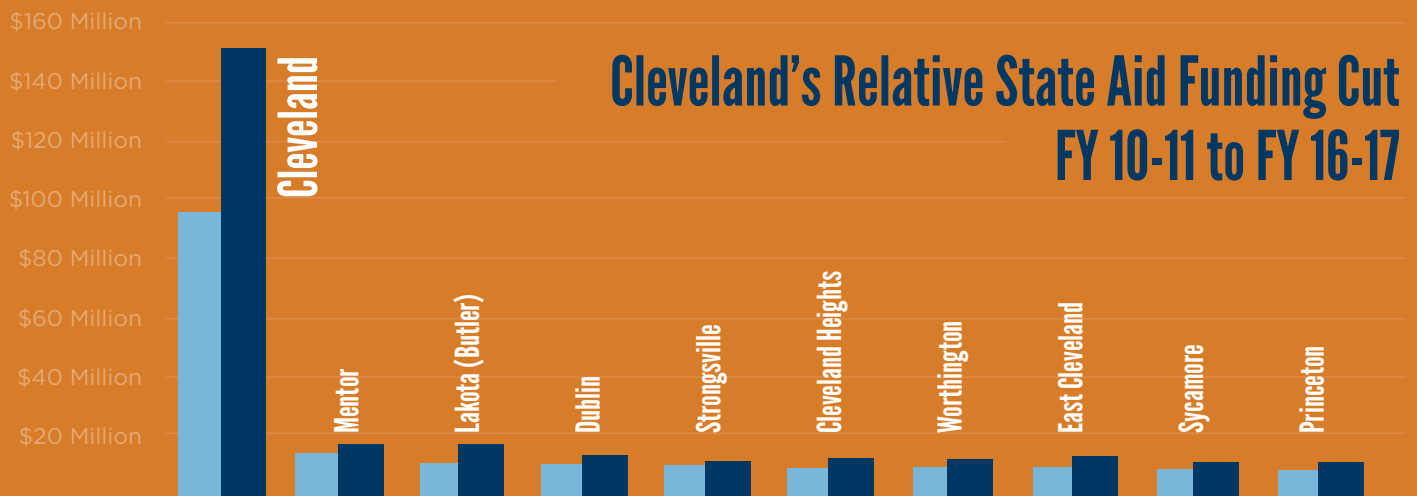
Generally, Cleveland's NAEP scores are flat from 2003. Only in a couple areas are they better than 2003, and that's an amount not considered by NAEP to be statistically significant.

However, when compared with large cities overall and Chicago in particular (Chicago scored about the same as Cleveland on NAEP scores 12 years ago), Cleveland NAEP scores remain below average. It is particularly troubling that while Chicago's scores have climbed in every category since 2003, Cleveland's has remained essentially flat. As Chicago has climbed out of the large city cellar, Cleveland remains mired there.

Only in fourth grade math has Cleveland improved its status among America's large cities. In all others, if it weren't for Detroit, Cleveland would be all alone at the bottom³.

Subject	2003 Rank	2015 Rank
Fourth Grade Reading	3rd Worst	2nd Worst
Fourth Grade Math	3rd Worst	5th Worst
Eighth Grade Reading	3rd Worst	2nd Worst
Eighth Grade Math	4th Worst	2nd Worst

³ See Appendix for trendlines in NAEP scores for Cleveland, Chicago and the big city average.



LOCAL TAXPAYERS FUNDING *THE PLAN*

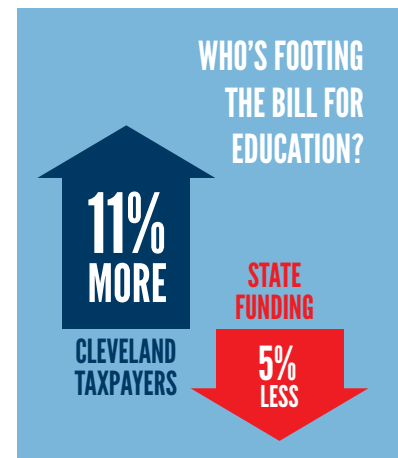
STATE AND LOCAL SCHOOL FUNDING IMBALANCE

Since 2011, no district has been as hard hit by state funding formula cuts as [Cleveland](#). In fact, when including the loss of Tangible Personal Property Tax payments, other changes to the state school funding formula, and an unwillingness to replace federal State Fiscal Stabilization Funding (as was the original intent of the program – to provide the difference between what states had been spending on fundamental programs like education and what they could spend at the height of the Great Recession), Cleveland has \$95 million less state money to spend in the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years than it did in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. That’s about as big a cut as the next 10 largest district cuts combined.

And when accounting for inflation, the number is even more staggering. In constant dollars, Cleveland has \$152 million fewer state dollars to spend between 2015 and 2017 than it did between 2009 and 2011. This inflation-adjusted loss is larger than the state’s next 12 largest district losses combined.

When The Cleveland Plan was signed into law on July 2, 2012, Governor John Kasich joked that success or failure of this plan now falls to local leaders: “‘It’s all on you now, Eric,’ (Kasich) said with a grin. ‘You screw up, we’re blaming you.’” While this may have been said in jest, there is a cruel reality that Cleveland is on its own financially to make this plan a success. State leaders may have passed the law, but they took away significant state funding that fundamentally limits Cleveland’s ability to make the law work.

The loss in state revenue meant that local taxpayers had to take on a larger share of the funding responsibility. Cleveland’s 15-mill levy, which raised \$85 million, just about made up for the biennial state funding loss. Since *The Plan* was announced, **Cleveland taxpayers have had to pay 11 percent more of the cost of education, while the state has reduced its funding share by 5 percent.** This change in the state and local [share](#) of education funding is the opposite result of what four Ohio Supreme Court rulings determined the state needed to do – *reduce* the reliance on local property taxes to pay for schools. In Cleveland, the state has forced the district to *increase* its reliance on local property taxpayers, which severely limits the district’s capacity to fully execute *The Plan* state lawmakers passed in 2012.



HOW IS THE MONEY INVESTED?

One of the hallmarks of *The Plan* was supposed to be a streamlining of the allegedly bloated Cleveland Central Office. As stated in a July 2015 [report](#) from the Alliance, “Cleveland’s new portfolio strategy requires central office to become a flatter, more nimble and more strategic professional organization.”

However, examining expenditure [data](#) from the Ohio Department of Education shows clearly that it is in the administrative, non-instructional functions that Cleveland has most heavily increased investment in people and resources.

Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, Cleveland increased the number of people working in administration by more than 25 percent and their pay by nearly 3 percent.

Administration is the only personnel category that saw both an increase in staff and salary. Administrative spending ballooned nearly 70 percent from \$52 million to \$88 million. The administrators that received the biggest salary boosts are principals, assistant principals, supervisors and managers, and education administrative specialists.

And in several support categories, it appears the district hired several more people, but is paying them far less, likely due to the United Way stepping up to help fund the positions. For example, there are nearly twice as many psychologists working at the district than four years ago, but they’re making about half of what they did four years ago. The same holds true for curriculum specialists and counselors.

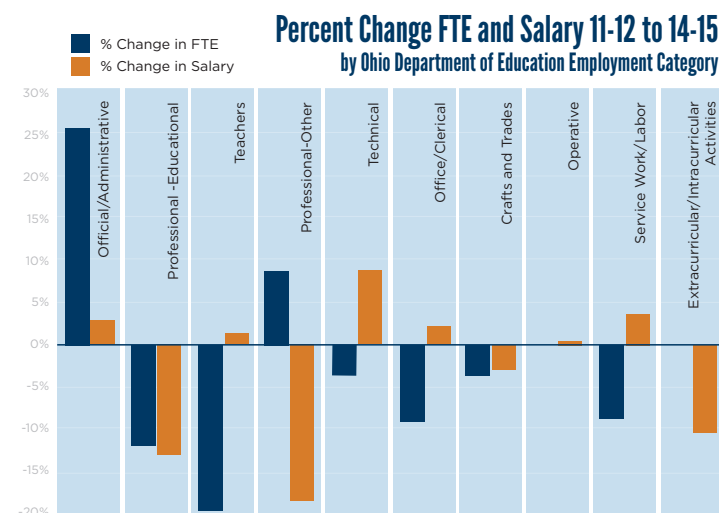
The district also hired more than 200 advisors, for about \$1,500 a year each, with more of that cost being picked up by the United Way and other outside funders.

Meanwhile, there are nearly 20 percent fewer teachers, though the average teacher makes a shade more than 1 percent more than what they did four years ago.

The trend is clear in overall expenditure data as well. In the 2011-2012 school year, Cleveland spent \$435 million on what the Ohio Department of Education considers to be classroom instructional categories (teaching, pupil and staff support). In the 2014-2015 school year, that number dropped to \$412 million.

The district acknowledged in interviews that they have had to hire more administrators to help building-level leaders deal with the newfound autonomy *The Plan* gives them. District officials said the plan is to eventually curtail the number of additional central office help staff as building-level administrators become more comfortable with their new, building-level staffing and budgeting authority.

But for the moment, more of *The Plan*’s investment has gone to administration than the classroom.



EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

Three of the areas Innovation Ohio (IO) felt had the most promise with *The Plan* in 2012 were 1) the proposed investments in early childhood education, 2) the Alliance, which had the potential to assert more local authority over Ohio's mostly poor-performing charter schools⁴ – 40 percent of which are in “urgent need of improvement”, according to national charter school [advocates](#), and 3) wraparound services. However, the district outsourced the early childhood element to a new start-up called Pre4CLE, the Alliance was substantially weakened by Ohio's traditionally poor-performing charter school sector, and the wraparound services are being largely funded by the United Way – a commendable community partnership, but a less stable funding stream than state formulaic funding.

PRE4CLE

The evidence is [clear](#) and has been for some [time](#): quality early childhood education can make a huge difference in children's lives. That's why when IO initially examined *The Plan* in 2012, its commitment to early childhood education was the aspect most effusively [praised](#).

“These ideas hold great promise for kids, especially the Early Childhood Academies. Few things in education research are better understood than this: the sooner and better we reach children, the easier and cheaper it is to overcome their obstacles. Pre-schools in every Cleveland neighborhood would give Cleveland a clear opportunity to turn around the district within a generation.”

However, Early Childhood Academies (thanks in no small measure to the lack of state funding support, as mentioned earlier) did not come to fruition.

Instead, the district and community created an organization called Pre4CLE, which is designed to coordinate and improve upon the district's preschool options through grants. They've been operating for one year, but officials there are excited about the opportunity to create transformational change.

“It's been a great first year,” said Pre4CLE's director, Katie Kelly. “We see ourselves as a catalyst to bring people together.”

Kelly said this spring that her group, which is a public-private partnership, has helped create 752 more high-quality preschool seats for Cleveland students, with a goal of reaching 2,000 soon.

Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have been heavily invested in preschool for 20 years. Kelly said Pre4CLE has been able to create a one-stop shop for families to find high-quality preschool options for their children.

There is a concern, however, that dependence on grants is less stable than being part of a state school funding formula, or similar, more stable funding structure.

“There's a commitment from the community to stick it out,” she said. “We will continue to advocate for sustainable revenue.”

⁴ IO initially was concerned that the Alliance would not be transparent enough, but that was remedied by the Plan developers after IO's 2012 report.

One additional source has been a \$1 million commitment from Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish from his countywide, \$10 million commitment to universal [preschool](#).

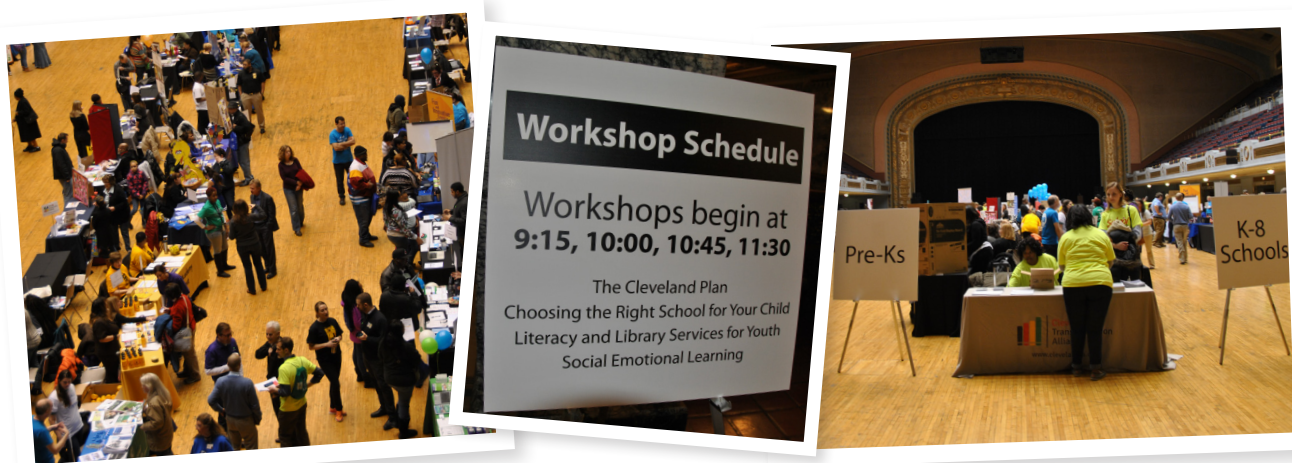
When asked what would happen to the program if the levy failed, Kelly didn't even want to consider that possibility – as if doing so would jinx the issue.

CLEVELAND TRANSFORMATION ALLIANCE – AN ELEMENT OF LOCAL CONTROL

The Alliance is a quasi-public organization made up of 30 community leaders whose goal is to ensure faithfulness to *The Plan* and, most publicly, educate the public about high-quality educational options for Cleveland parents. The Alliance has set up a website that shows how schools in various Cleveland neighborhoods perform. And while it's not nearly as thorough as KnowYourCharter.com, it is certainly more than what communities had available to parents prior to the Alliance's formation.

New Executive Director Piet Van Lier – who for many years was an Education Policy Analyst for Policy Matters Ohio – stressed to IO that the Alliance's main goal is to inform the community of quality school options so parents are empowered to have more control over their children's success.

One example was the district's first School Quality Fair, which took place March 5 at Cleveland's Public Hall. The fair had booths from several of the highest performing school buildings in Cleveland. However, the overwhelming portion (about 2 out of every 3) of the invited K-8 schools were charter [schools](#).



There are only 9 Cleveland school buildings that would be rated as high performing charter schools by the Ohio Department of Education's toughest definition. Four of those schools are district schools. Five are charters.

This over representation by charters at the School Quality Fair reinforces the concern of some that the Alliance primarily serves to promote school choice and charter schools, whose history in Ohio is largely marked by failure. However, it is important to note that Cleveland has a unique Ohio charter school experience – namely there is a substantial pocket of high-performing charters that enjoy much community support.

So what's happening in Cleveland is different from the rest of the state, where charters are not performing well and don't enjoy widespread community support. In Cleveland, leaders are trying to remove the antagonism between charters and the school district. Gordon has frequently stated he doesn't care what kind of school is succeeding or how it's classified. He just wants it to succeed. And even teachers unions have recognized the legitimacy of some Cleveland charters, as the Cleveland

Teachers Union successfully [unionized](#) the I Can charters in Cleveland – three of the city’s higher performing charters that receive local levy revenue. Those are the first charter schools in Ohio to be unionized after they were formed. The 40 or so [other](#) unionized charters were schools that districts turned into charters, and the union contracts were carried over to those schools.

It also appears the people of Cleveland are far more comfortable with charters than other Ohio communities. After all, Cleveland voters approved a significant portion of their levy to go to charter schools – a first for the state. A similar levy sharing proposal was voted down in Columbus.

The Alliance sees itself as promoting good schools for Cleveland parents and kids. They are far less concerned about the charter-district building divide. Though certainly Van Lier, who has been [critical](#) of charter schools in the past, acknowledges that overcoming the state’s charter school perception has been a challenge.

But while some may be concerned about the Alliance’s relationship with charters, it has also introduced to Ohio the potential for greater local authority over charter school expansion – one of the policy changes most detested by the state’s poor-performing charter school advocates.

For example, the Alliance has effectively kept out any schools sponsored by the St. Aloysius Orphanage – one of Ohio’s most notoriously poor, large-scale charter school sponsors (or authorizers). This will reduce the likelihood of more poor performing charters opening in Cleveland.

The Alliance was originally envisioned to actually exert much more local control over charter schools in Cleveland – essentially becoming the gatekeeper for any charter schools to open. However, the powerful, poor-performing charter school lobby got a last minute loophole inserted into the original Cleveland Plan legislation that essentially forced the Ohio Department of Education to approve any new charters for Cleveland without informing the Alliance.

After an uproar, the Alliance was able to restore some of its authority to review sponsors of charters and other charters, though the state kept a section of the loophole in law.

While the Alliance lost much of its initially prescribed oversight function due to pushback from Ohio’s powerful poor-performing charter school lobby, the Alliance’s successful claw back of some of [them](#) forced some of the city’s worst-performing charters to close, including the Virtual Schoolhouse this year.

So despite the poor-performing charter lobby’s best efforts, the Alliance has been more effective than expected at policing the previously un-policed charter school sector.



However, it should also be made clear that the charter school that receives the most money and students from Cleveland is the [notorious](#) Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, which receives about as much funding from Cleveland as the district’s two largest brick and mortar charters. There is nothing the Alliance can do about stopping the \$7 million flowing to a charter that graduates students at about a 60 percent lower rate than Cleveland.

For now.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

One of the most promising areas of academic improvement nationally has come from Integrated Student Services (ISS) – commonly called “wraparound services”. These services can be everything from offering psychological professionals to students to full-blown in-school health clinics. The idea behind wraparound services is they will help mitigate the barriers to learning that many students, especially those from impoverished communities like Cleveland, experience outside the classroom. Nationwide, evidence has demonstrated that ISS can have as much as a \$5 to \$15 return per \$1 invested. Cleveland has integrated more services in more buildings, but much of the cost has been borne by the [United Way](#). While IO commends the community partnership to bring more of these needed and evidence-based services to more Cleveland [children](#), if the economy turns again, it would put these services in jeopardy because the United Way’s bottom line would [suffer](#).

REALIZING THE RIGHT COMPENSATION PLAN

Prior to *The Plan*’s adoption, Cleveland’s frontline troops in its implementation – its teachers – had very little input. And while the teachers did eventually agree to forgo strict seniority as the primary means of pay increases (a very significant concession), the **new differentiated compensation system** is the key sticking point in the current contentious negotiations. According to the Cleveland Plain Dealer’s [assessment](#) of the current system’s implementation, “the district, at least for now, is only increasing salaries when teachers earn strong ratings on their annual evaluations.” The evaluations currently only include performance reviews by supervisors and student test scores and result in one-time increases in pay based on those evaluation outcomes.

There is ample evidence that merit pay does not produce better student [outcomes](#), and the idea that rewarding performance with more pay itself is questioned even by free market leaders. [The Harvard Business Review](#) has said since at least 1993 that “the failure of any given incentive program is due less to a glitch in that program than to the inadequacy of the psychological assumptions that ground all such plans” – namely that more money will be enough of a carrot to motivate better performance. There has also been added consternation over the current CMSD compensation system because of its close resemblance to the system proposed in 2011’s Senate Bill 5 – a bill the people of Ohio rejected that year by nearly 2-to-1.

In Cleveland, this merit pay system has been necessitated by the district and union’s inability to agree what constitutes performance and how to reward it. As anyone can attest who has had a teacher they love, only to discover it’s their best friend’s most despised teacher, objectively defining teacher performance is frustratingly difficult. Gordon has said, accurately, that it’s a failure of both sides for not coming to an agreement, which was called for in the 2012 legislation.

However, the greatest frustration may lie with *The Plan*’s unrealized potential. Once it is created (if it eventually happens), the agreement hashed out in the district’s memorandum of [understanding](#) could be **groundbreaking**, as it seeks to merge the idea of integrating student performance, peer review, student evaluations and traditional supervisor observations – all ideas espoused by many on all sides of the education policy spectrum – into a new compensation soup that, if implemented, could be a groundbreaking arrangement that leads to fairer, more equitable and relatively objective pay structures. While many complain about seniority-based systems, one thing those structures do provide is objective reasons for pay increases, though in some cases it may seem unfair, especially to younger teachers.

It is clear that Cleveland is far from achieving its noble goal of improving teacher compensation. As a *Plain Dealer* story put it: “Cleveland’s new compensation plan is still far from being a model for teacher pay that many hoped for.”

VISITING CLEVELAND'S SCHOOLS

INVESTMENT SCHOOLS

One of the keys to understanding *The Plan's* effectiveness is to see how buildings are operating under *The Plan*. IO visited several buildings for this report, including several of the district's lowest performing schools – Investment Schools, as *The Plan* calls them. And there is little question that interesting things are happening at these schools, though the performance data may not show it. In addition, as the strike and no confidence votes indicate, labor strife exists at all these buildings. However, IO chose to look at what was being done to change directions of the 23 Investment Schools. While many of the changes have rankled staff, as professionals, most have learned to work with the changes as best they can. It is clear that any success students have will be due in large part to the skill and effectiveness of the district's teachers. Though, again, given the strike and no confidence votes, it is important to recognize that these changes aren't happening seamlessly or with widespread enthusiasm.

IO visited Collinwood High School – a school at one time infamous for safety concerns and Robinson G. Jones – a K-8 school on Cleveland's west side named for Cleveland's first superintendent. Our takeaways from these visits will be discussed below. But the bottom line is these schools are trying new ways to operate and improve children's educational experiences. Whether these changes are working is a complicated question, and basing the answer simply on notoriously volatile test scores is a disservice to the schools' genuine attempts at improvement.

Collinwood

Seniors at Collinwood were especially thrilled with the changes in that school. They said that when they first arrived, they were literally afraid for their lives. Fights, violence, and fear dominated the day. But since the school adopted New Tech – a national [curriculum](#) that emphasizes project-based learning and professional collaboration between teachers – the students have noticed a radical change in the school's atmosphere.

"I love Collinwood," one student remarked. Several of the teachers at the school praised the new collaborative environment.



However, test scores alone don't do the school justice. The graduation rate has jumped by more than 25 percent from barely 50 percent the year before the reforms took hold to nearly 63 percent. In addition, while their letter grade for overall proficiency has stayed at an F, the score increased 6 percent, despite the much more difficult and involved PARCC assessments and tougher Common Core standards.

And while the school kept its F grade for meeting state standards, unlike the year prior to the reforms taking effect, Collinwood actually met one of the standards.

So once you look beyond the grades, it's apparent that test score improvement is happening. However, there is no current way to quantify the benefit of students no longer fearing violence in school. But suffice it to say that the current group of Collinwood students are, finally, concentrating on learning rather than surviving. And that's a great – and essential – first step.

Robinson G. Jones

Robinson G. Jones has taken a slightly different approach. They have turned to heavy parental involvement to change their school's culture. They hold frequent events for parents. Now they have about 475 involved parents for the school's 480 students.

"We can't keep them out," said Jones' principal Melissa Watts with a wry smile. There are teacher leaders and coaches at Jones that help improve the staff's development. The school has also adopted *The Leader In Me* program, complete with occasional, student produced road signs throughout the school for places like "Synergy Circle." The school also brings in authors to speak with students.

And while the building's leaders trumpet the cultural changes, test scores are not showing even the modest improvements at Collinwood overall. Instead of seeing proficiency improvements, Robinson G. Jones has shown drops in its test scores – commensurate with recent changes in test and content difficulty.

But whereas the year *The Plan* was introduced Jones received a B for student growth, the grade this last school year was an F. In addition, their overall proficiency scores dropped. And while in a few grades and subjects there were test score improvements, in 10 of 14 categories, students' proficiency rates plummeted – in some cases severely. For example, in the 2012-13 school year, 8th graders at Jones had a reading proficiency rate of 93.3. This last school year, that rate was 66.7 – a nearly 30 percent drop. However, on all the 5th grade tests, the school's proficiency scores increased since the 2012-13 school year.

But there is little question that the atmosphere at Jones has changed and students appear to be having different experiences, not unlike Collinwood. But will the test score issue derail these efforts before their student outcome impacts can be effectively measured?

"We have a powerhouse staff," Watts said. "We have the commitment of the teachers because they wanted to be here."

And that gets to one of the most contentious parts of *The Plan* for teachers – the greater authority it gives to local building administrators and away from teachers. So building leaders can pick and choose their staff much easier than they used to be able to do. But it does appear, given the strike and no confidence votes that there is a real question about whether that change has led to more resentment than opportunity.



PORTFOLIO SCHOOLS

Another group of schools *The Plan* has targeted are so-called Portfolio Schools. These are the high fliers that have waiting lists and top-end test scores. They are the incubators that the district wants to grow by several factors during *The Plan*'s lifetime.

IO visited two of them as well, Campus International –an International Baccalaureate powerhouse located near Cleveland State University that attracts a significant portion of students from the suburbs— and Max Hayes – a new, career-tech centered high school on the city's west side that has state-of-the art facilities.

Campus International

Campus International has always been one of the district's top-flight schools. Located in two buildings several block apart by the city's interbelt (though they are having a new building constructed to expand enrollment), the school is known for wildly creative teachers and exquisite educational opportunities that would make some wealthy suburban schools envious. For example, a group of Campus International teachers traveled to China to observe Shanghai and Beijing's top-notch schools.

Now, every student has Mandarin included as part of their learning.

They integrate learning among subjects and, most important of all, they implement the International Baccalaureate methodology to student learning – among the finest, most difficult to achieve and toughest curriculum options available.

The entire school looks like the best kindergarten building you can imagine. Every inch of every wall is covered with student art or maps or information about animals or history. It's as if Campus' leaders and teachers have decided that the greatest impediment to student learning is a blank wall.

And while the building has clearly been outgrown by Campus International, the staff has utilized every inch, turning wide hallways into libraries and cramped classroom space into vibrant learning environments.



Campus International

Max Hayes

Max Hayes is different. It's a new building, with the clean, antiseptic look of a not-quite-broken-in home. Like Campus International, it has a waiting list and high-performing students. Max Hayes specializes in career tech opportunities that lead to high-paying internships and post-graduate opportunities for their students.

And the facilities are truly cutting edge, complete with a top-end automotive paint shop and first-class machining facilities. This has given students the skills to work with even the most cutting edge technology, which gives them a leg up in the post-graduate world.

In particular, the school has partnered with Wire-net – a west side industrial placement firm – to ensure its students have as many post-graduate opportunities as possible. The partnership has meant that a few graduates work their senior year making as much as \$1,000 a week.



Max Hayes

“We’re the No. 1 selected high school,” said Max Hayes Principal Kelly Wittman, adding that the school’s aggressive marketing plan has helped make that so. “We had to think about how do we communicate our mission to families and the K-8 buildings.”

Wittman, who said she wanted to come to Cleveland because she believes so strongly in the school choice *The Plan* offers, is clearly a new-style building leader who easily negotiates the world of free-market reformers.

Here’s how Wittman put her school’s commitment to liberal arts, as well as hands-on learning: “Literacy and Numeracy requirements are higher for these jobs than they are for college freshmen. It’s a different world.”

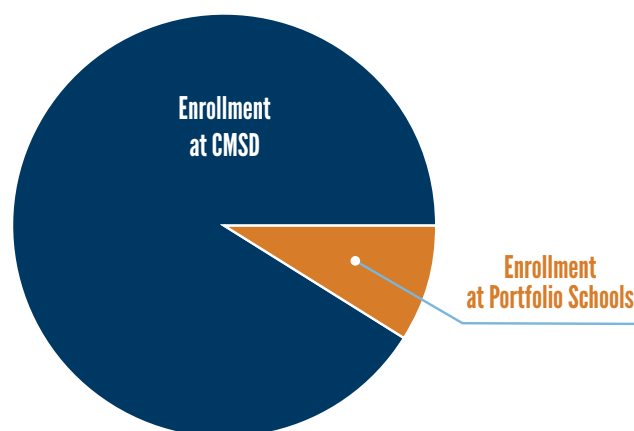
However, while both Campus International and Max Hayes have among the most exciting learning environments and curricula of any schools in the state, not every student can attend them. For example, Max Hayes can only take 200 students in each class. Last year, 562 applied. Same thing with Campus International. They had 100 spots for last year, with 150 students on their waiting list.

Both Wittman and Campus International Principal Julie Beers acknowledge that having too few spaces is a problem. Campus International is getting a new building that should help some. Wittman is looking to make school hours more flexible so more students can attend. She’d also like to see another Max Hayes style school built.

But the issue is this: the major problem with the Portfolio Schools isn’t a problem with the schools. It’s availability. There are more than 42,000 students enrolled in Cleveland school buildings, including district-sponsored charters⁵. **Less than 10 percent attend the Portfolio Schools.** So what happens to the thousands of Cleveland students who won’t be fortunate enough to attend these schools?

And while district leaders insist they are working to expand these high-quality options, the fact is most Cleveland students won’t be attending them. In addition, if these wait lists get too long, or the opportunities don’t grow fast enough, Cleveland could end up facing a lawsuit similar to the one recently filed in Massachusetts that demanded more high-performing charter schools open in Boston.

Percentage of CMSD students enrolled at Portfolio Schools
2015-2016



⁵ This is based on the enrollment of each Cleveland school building on the 2014-2015 Local Report Card located here: <http://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/Pages/Download-Data.aspx>

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

While the Cleveland Plan appears to have created some improved opportunities for students, the progress has been slow and non-uniform. Some schools have seen improvement. Others have seen slippage. But all are cultivating new school cultures and environments that could take as much as a generation to result in the kinds of improvements everyone wants. IO has several recommendations for the district and community to ensure *The Plan's* success.

- 1. Insist the state restore needed resources to fund its mandate.** The great flaw in *The Plan's* development was it never required the state to pay any additional money to ensure *The Plan's* fiscal stability. Instead, the state forced the district to pass an historically massive local levy to pay for the reforms while slashing the district's state funding. While the district has done an admirable job facing this challenge, it is an unnecessary hurdle for Cleveland to overcome. It is the state that bears the constitutional duty to educate Cleveland's (and all of Ohio's) kids. It is the state that should be paying a far larger portion of the reform bill than it currently is. For example, if the state would simply provide the same support to Cleveland that it did during the height of the Great Recession, the Early Childhood Academies could potentially be restored, or all of the district's lost teachers could be replaced. Again, the significance of state cuts to the overall success of *The Plan* cannot be overstated.
- 2. Integrate more of the wraparound and peripheral services under the district's banner.** Many of the wraparound services that have helped begin the district's turnaround have been implemented with generous funding from the United Way. However, that funding may not be sustainable, especially if another economic downturn hits. Wraparound services can take years to properly implement and succeed. It would be a shame if an economic downturn kept these key services from being a constant for Cleveland's students.
- 3. Heal the rift with the district's teachers.** From the beginning, *The Plan* was conceived and thrust upon teachers without their input. While Cleveland teachers ended up accepting many provisions that were more difficult for them, the district is now realizing that this tactic came with a price – an unhappy workforce that feels attacked and is threatening to strike. The rhetoric that has angered teachers for years has begun creeping into the vocabularies of building leaders at even the district's best schools. Campus International's Julie Beers told a story about how a couple teachers were complaining about some workplace issues and she said, "that sounds like an adult problem. Let's worry about the kids here." While that's a good soundbite, there is little question that if there is an adult issue at the workplace, it could seep into the classroom. Adult issues can become student issues too quickly because adults are, well, people. Teachers' concerns can't simply be dismissed as unimportant, or worse, a blockade to student learning. *The Plan's* success will not occur without a strong relationship between teachers and the administration. And while the current problems with the district's merit pay system are clear, *The Plan's* potential for developing a next generation compensation system is equally clear, though frustratingly far from reality.

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- 4. Restore some of the lost programming.** Early Childhood Academies were a great idea – emphasizing the need for a seamless pipeline between early childhood education and the district’s elementary schools is a key tool to turn the district around within a generation. However, the state funding cuts forced the district to abandon this idea, as well as others throughout *The Plan*. Drawing down more state funding should help restore some of the more ambitious and long-term goals *The Plan* offered.
 - 5. Stay committed.** One of the great failings of our country’s education reform efforts has been no one ever stays with them for long. Something works for a couple years, funding dries up and we move on to the next thing. Since the 1990s, there have been several different Cleveland Plans – all of which had some merit to them. Cleveland leaders and residents shouldn’t worry about academic achievement data changing quickly. Many of the changes will take years to see academic results. The community can’t give up too quickly. There are cultural changes happening at many schools. Some may adopt them quicker than others. But fixating on test scores does an injustice to the truly transformational things that are happening in many different Cleveland buildings.
 - 6. Follow the evidence.** The district shouldn’t chase unicorns. It should follow evidence-based change and practice. Just because a program worked somewhere else doesn’t mean it will work in Cleveland. Look to locally developed solutions. Those are the ones that tend to work best and have the longest staying power. Shoveling money over to firms or programs that are parachuting into Cleveland should be done sparingly and only with the greatest scrutiny. For example, the Breakthrough Schools – Ohio’s best performing group of charter schools – started as a local, Cleveland-based initiative by Cleveland entrepreneurs. While Breakthrough has certainly employed educational techniques that schools in other states have used, the schools’ willingness to adopt those models based on local need is what has, in many ways, led to the group’s success.
 - 7. Pass the levy.** The district has put a levy renewal on the ballot for November 8. It is imperative that the community re-up on the levy. If it doesn’t, then none of the stuff that’s working will continue to work and the opportunities for improvement won’t take place either. Passing the levy also gives the district and mayor the opportunity to go back to the state legislature and Governor and say, “Look, our community’s committed. How about the state?”

The Cleveland Plan has shown some promise, but without state support it’s also created some real challenges for the district, its teachers, and the community. A pathway to success had been established, but the local levy must be renewed and the state must step up to fund the remainder of this plan. At the moment, the only way to see even the limited success of *The Plan* continue is by the community stepping up to pass the levy. Without it, *The Plan* cannot work. With continued local support, and a re-established partnership with the state, there is hope that Cleveland can improve its education outcomes and establish sustained success for this generation of students and many more to come.



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