

Cleveland school district CEO Eric Gordon named "Urban Educator of the Year" by big-city schools group



Eric Gordon, CEO of Cleveland Schools, greets supporters as votes roll in for passage of the 2012 school tax increase that let the district start implementing its improvement plan to rebound from several years of enrollment losses and budget deficits. Gordon was named Urban Educator of the Year by the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's main association of big city school districts. *(Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer)*

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CLEVELAND, Ohio - Cleveland school district CEO Eric Gordon was named "Urban Educator of the Year" tonight by the nation's main association of big city school districts, the [Council of the Great City Schools](#).

Gordon received the award at the council's annual conference in Miami.

It comes three years after Cleveland school board chair [Denise Link also won the same award](#), which alternates each year between superintendents and school board members from 70 urban districts.

The council credits Gordon, who [took over as CEO in 2011](#), for making progress in a district hit hard by the recession.

"As the architect of 'The Plan for Transforming Cleveland's Schools,' the CEO has seen graduation rates increase, more and more families involved in their children's schools, and an upturn in student enrollment for the first time in decades," the Council said in its press release.

"Eric Gordon has made a profound difference in the lives of thousands of Cleveland's students, helped propel a once-struggling school system forward, and significantly contributed to the future of the Great City of Cleveland. Well done, Eric Gordon," said Michael Casserly, the council's executive director.

Gordon said he knew he was nominated, as he had been a few years ago, but expected someone else to win. He said that he respects the educators in the group so much that he could not think of a higher honor.

He also credited the entire community for rallying behind the schools.

"This is Cleveland's award," he said. "It's the Cleveland Plan. It's the entire community rallying around what's right for kids. This isn't Eric Gordon's award. This is Cleveland's award."

Gordon served as the district's chief academic officer from 2007 until he became CEO in 2011. Before coming to Cleveland, he taught math in New Orleans and was a high school principal and the head of academic programs for grades six through 12 in the Columbus suburb of Olentangy.

He took over the district as it was losing students by the thousands each year, had just closed several schools and was facing multi-million-dollar budget deficits that required layoffs and budget cuts each year.

In 2012, he and Mayor Frank Jackson convinced the state legislature and Gov. John Kasich to back the Cleveland Plan a year before the district would have faced state takeover for low performance. He and Jackson also convinced voters that year to pass the largest school tax increase in memory, a giant 15-mill hike that increased school property taxes by 50 percent.

[Enrollment losses have stopped](#) and the district has seen small increases, all while the district has financial stability it did not have before.

Though the [state just gave the district straight F grades](#) on state report cards last month, those come as the state increased expectations for all schools and grades fell across the state. A Plain Dealer comparison of every districts' scores to state averages over the last five years, however, shows [the district has improved test performance](#) even as it has failing grades.

Those grades and a continuing contract battle with the Cleveland Teachers Union, which [gave him a vote of "no-confidence"](#) this summer, are hurdles Gordon is working to overcome as the district seeks a renewal next month of that 2012 tax.

Casserly said he believes Gordon has shown gains, while also lining up staff in schools and the central office to produce bigger ones over time. He said the selection committee of previous winners knows that improvements in city schools can be slow, and was impressed with Gordon's work, even after some of the district's bad news this year.

"He knows what it takes to improve urban public education," Casserly said. "He has been in the process of getting that work done, slowly but surely, one brick at a time in a way that the improvements can be sustained."