



Address from Eric S. Gordon Chair of the Board Council of the Great City Schools

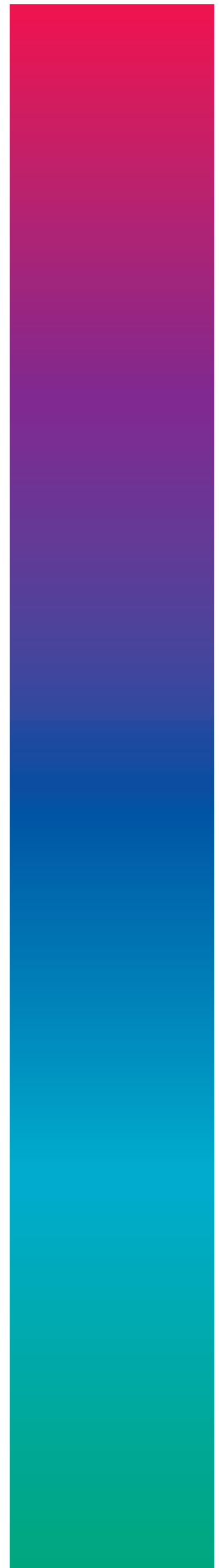
**Annual Fall Conference
October 24, 2019**

I am honored to speak to you this morning as Chair of the Council of the Great City Schools. I want to thank members of the Executive Committee and the Council's Board of Directors for selecting me for this important role, and for your continued support of the officers and incredible staff as we lead what I believe is one of the most important organizations in the field of education, the Council of the Great City Schools. Would you please join me in recognizing Dr. Mike Casserly and his amazing team?

Thank you to each of you for all you continue to do to support our districts across the country and continent.

I also want to take just a moment to thank our hosts from Jefferson County Public Schools here in beautiful Louisville, Kentucky. Please join me in thanking Superintendent Dr. Marty Pollio, the seven members of the Board of Education of the Jefferson County Public Schools and our Louisville host committee.

This morning, I want to introduce you to a part of Cleveland. Anyone who knows me will probably not be surprised by that. But the part I want to introduce you to today is not a part I'm proud of.



This is part of what is known as The Shaker Barricades – installed in 1976 by the wealthy suburban community of Shaker Heights, ostensibly as “traffic diverters” designed to prevent car accidents and traffic jams.

The Shaker Barricades created a 2-mile wall, effectively eliminating access to Shaker Heights for residents of what at the time were middle-class African-American communities surrounding it, including Cleveland’s Mt. Pleasant and Lee-Harvard neighborhoods and the suburban city of Warrensville Heights.

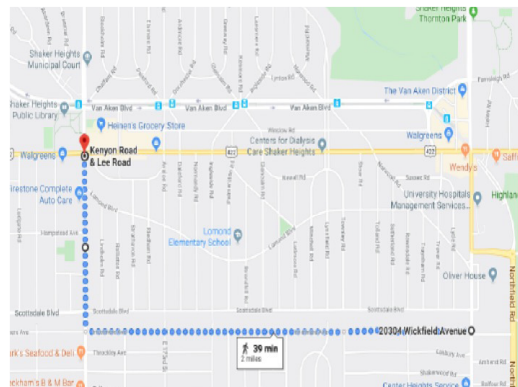
So why am I showing this to you? Unfortunately, they’re not unique to Cleveland. Barricades like these were installed in cities across our country, including in some of your very own communities.

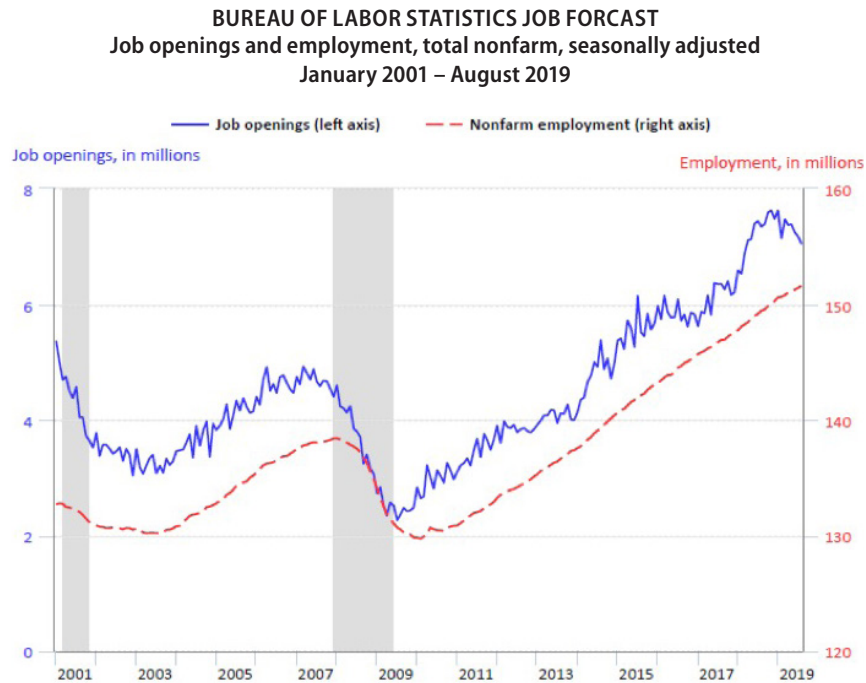
This is structural racism.

Right now, in Cleveland and I suspect in each of our communities, there is a lot of talk about race, racism and other forms of inequity. People are exploring implicit and explicit forms of bias and are having what we’ve begun to call “courageous conversations,” although frankly some of those conversations are a lot less courageous than they really need to be. I applaud those efforts, but courageous conversations that are not coupled with courageous actions are simply not enough. Instead, if we are going to make real, lasting change, we must also critically examine our current structures, policies and practices from the lens of structural racism and advocate for the changes needed to dismantle those systems



Liz Sisley, “Shaker Barricades.” Cleveland Historical, accessed October 21, 2019





that by their very design promote racial discrimination. We must also develop new policies, practices and procedures in ways that ensure racial equity as opposed to creating new forms of oppression.

In 2014, for example, Ohio's legislature approved new graduation criteria to be implemented for the graduating class of 2018. Ohio did so in the name of raising standards and with the stated goal of ensuring the high school diploma guaranteed that graduates were job and college ready.

These new graduation requirements were put in place at a time in which the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics was forecasting that there were over 5 million more jobs available than there were people to fill those jobs. Today, that number has grown to over 7 million unfilled jobs. When implemented, those new standards were forecasted to reduce the graduation rate for my district alone by over 20 percentage points.

I am a strong advocate of high standards. But, who are these high standards for and what are the implications from a race equity perspective? Ohio's new graduation rates did not change the standards or accountability of the adults controlling whether students met graduation rates – people like teachers, administrators, Superintendents, Board members – people like you and me. Instead, they held students accountable to this significantly higher bar. And the impact on my community alone, in



a district in which 84% of my kids are children of color, would have meant that hundreds of kids a year that were eligible for a diploma under the current standards would become ineligible under the new standards.

The high school diploma is an access document necessary to access nearly all of those unfilled jobs and to access the community colleges and technical schools that can further train our graduates to fill those jobs. Those new standards, had they been allowed to stand, would have resulted in new forms of structural racism in Ohio by eliminating the opportunity statewide for thousands of students, most of whom are Black or Hispanic, to access additional training and jobs that are more likely to result in family sustaining wages. This would have essentially guaranteed another generation of minority men and women would remain trapped in poverty, even while thousands of jobs would be unfilled across the state.

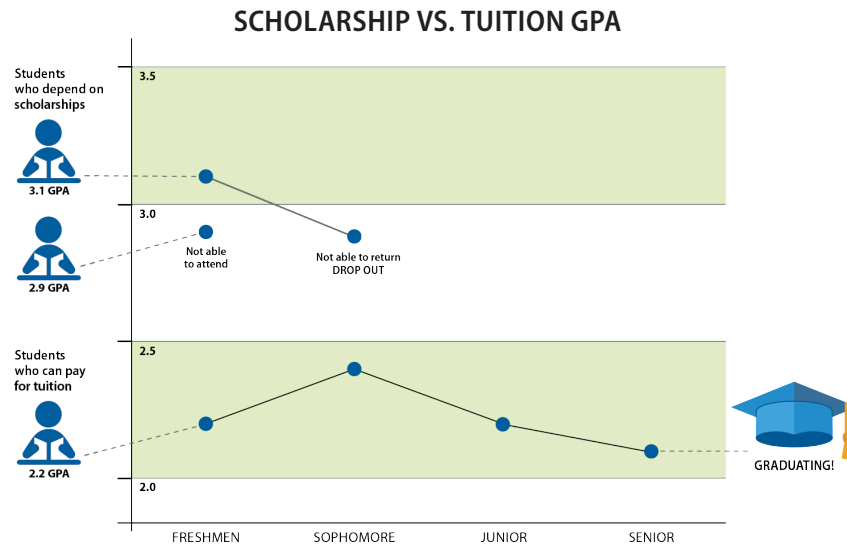
Fortunately, enough people across Ohio saw these graduation requirements as damaging. After six years of advocacy, they were first able to pass temporary relief from these requirements. Ultimately they were able to pass subsequent legislation that did meaningfully reform Ohio's graduation requirements without the dramatic inequitable impacts that were forecasted to occur.

Another example is related to college scholarships. Last year, our community announced that for the next 25 years every graduate of our district who completes their high school education with us would receive a last dollar tuition scholarship. Yes, we're very proud of that. When we made the announcement, we also made it clear that to be eligible a student needed only to graduate from high school, complete the FAFSA and be accepted into college. When our community asked about the GPA requirement, we informed them there wasn't one, only that the student be accepted into college. That upset a lot of people, including people in the Black and Hispanic community who perceived it as a message that we weren't holding our students to high standards.

We shouldn't be surprised that the community felt that way. After all, for years we've been programming the Black and Hispanic community and children in poverty with that exact message. But when you look at college admission from a structural point of view, there's a very different truth.

That truth is, if you are a family that can afford to pay tuition on your own, including through college loans, then you get to go to college simply by being admitted to the college and paying the bills. But if you cannot afford to pay on your own – a problem once again disparately greater for children of color – you can only go to college if you have a grade point average that is typically significantly higher than the college's actual admission criteria. And students who can afford





to pay tuition typically can remain in college with a much lower GPA than a student whose college GPA to maintain a scholarship is also typically significantly higher than the college’s retention criteria. The effect, then, is that a student who can pay his or her tuition can get into a college with his 2.1 GPA, for example, and maintain a 2.1 GPA all four years while a student who cannot afford to pay his or her own tuition cannot typically acquire the scholarships he or she needs unless he or she has a 3.0 GPA and then must also maintain a 3.0 GPA to keep those scholarships. That creates the difference between a student with a 2.1 GPA becoming a graduate and a student with a 2.9 GPA becoming a dropout. Fortunately, slowly but surely, we are getting those policies changed in Cleveland. Case Western Reserve University, for example, actually changed their university aid to match their admissions criteria, and I recently met with the Board at Cleveland State University where we began the same discussion.

I share both of these examples because both graduation requirements and college admission requirements are real structures in place in each of our communities, and the policies and practices for structures like these must be examined both from a perspective of high standards and also the perspective of structural racism. We must ask ourselves who are the high standards serving and who are they intended to serve. And then, when they are not serving Black, Hispanic and other minority children well, when they are not serving children in poverty well, we must change the standards.

I am a white man. As we all know that means I sit in a place of privilege that many of you in this room do not enjoy. However, by virtue of your role as an elected leader or senior executive of the largest K-12 education institution in your city or region, each of you also holds some amount of privilege and power. We must use what power we have, even though I know it is still differentiated by race, gender



and class, to tackle the systems that reinforce those differentials.

So as I close, I want to point out one last set of structures and policies that must be at the top of each of our agendas in the coming year – the U.S. Census. Like graduation requirement policies and college admission policies, we must tackle the Census from a perspective of race and class equity. We must ensure every child is counted and every person in our communities is counted. If not disrupted, the undercounting of not only our children but also the adults in our communities that occurs because of the structural racism that has governed the policies and practices of the Census will drive the underfunding of federal resources for our communities for the next 10 years. We must use our power to not only raise awareness, but to also ensure through structures, policies and practices that our children and families are counted. Our Town Hall this Friday will begin this conversation, and the Council is prepared to help lead this work with each of our member districts over the course of the coming year. Please join us on Friday to talk about this critical U.S. Census.

These are the Shaker Barricades. Two of them still stand today, leaving in place 1.4 miles of what was originally the two-mile wall that structurally segregated communities. We can join people around these trees and talk as neighbors and friends. We can picnic under these trees or play basketball in the street to build community since it's of no other use.

Ladies and gentleman, let's continue the difficult conversations about race and racism in our communities. And let's also tackle the structural racism at work in our districts. Let's cut down the trees. Let's eliminate our Shaker Barricades!



Liz Sisley, "Shaker Barricades."
Cleveland Historical, accessed
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