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Council of the Great City Schools

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FOR RELEASE
December 19, 2019

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Council Executive Director Michael Casserly to Step Aside

Longtime Leader Will Transition to an Advisory Role

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 – After more than 28 years as executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, Michael Casserly has announced that he will step aside at the end of December 2020. He will then assume the role of Strategic Advisor through 2024. Casserly has been with the Council for 43 years.

Called a ‘crusader’ for city schoolchildren by *USA TODAY*, Casserly took the reins of the Council in January 1992 after serving as the group’s director of legislation and research for 15 years. He is now believed to be the longest serving chief among the major national education membership organizations.

“This is the hardest decision I have ever made,” said Casserly in announcing the move. “It has been an honor to lead this organization over so many years. I am extremely proud of the work the Council has done over the decades and I would like to think that urban public education and the children we serve are better off for our efforts,” Casserly added.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District Superintendent Eric Gordon, who is the chair of the Council’s Board of Directors, praised Casserly for his leadership and 43 years of service. “On behalf of the Officers and the Board of Directors of the Council of the Great City Schools and our 76 member districts, it is difficult to find the words to appropriately acknowledge our incredible Executive Director, Michael Casserly. We have been blessed with his leadership, his vision, his drive, his work ethic, and most of all, his deep and abiding belief in the potential of all eight million youth we collectively serve in America’s largest cities.”

“Dr. Casserly has been both fearless and tireless for over four decades. Over this period, Casserly has earned a well-deserved national and international reputation as a thoughtful, committed, data-driven, and bipartisan leader. We will miss him in this role, but the Executive Committee and Board of Directors of the organization have planned for some time for this change. As such, we will be implementing our succession plan to select our next leader.”

Major Academic Accomplishments

Under Casserly's leadership, the Council has unified big-city school districts around a vision for improvement and reform that has helped produce significant academic gains for urban schoolchildren over the years.

In 2000, the Council initiated the federal Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), paving the way for the nation's largest urban school systems to directly track the progress of their students on the rigorous test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) against other cities, states, and the nation.

As of 2019, 27 large urban school districts volunteered to participate in TUDA, with results revealing that large city schools have substantially improved their reading and math performance over the years and have narrowed the achievement gap with the nation by half.

To augment these NAEP data, the Council developed the nation's only academic and operational performance management system that now allows urban school districts to track their progress on hundreds of key performance indicators in the areas of preschool participation, advanced placement rates, Algebra I completion, suspensions, graduation rates, grades, student transportation, food services, budgeting and finances, information technology, and human resources.

The Council also initiated and wrote ground-breaking studies on why some urban public-school systems improve faster than others in order to inform the improvement efforts of all urban schools. And it has produced important studies on African American males, Hispanic students, English-language learners, turnaround schools, principal supervisors, and student testing.

Its work on students of color led the Council to develop its Pledge for African American Males that was announced by President Obama and became part of the *My Brother's Keeper* initiative. The organization's research on over-testing led multiple states and local school systems to rethink their assessment practices.

To back up its academic priorities at the ground level, the Council has initiated and implemented more than 320 hard-hitting Strategic Support Team reviews of the organizational, academic, and operational practices in more than 65 major city school systems, developing detailed recommendations for improvement in each city.

Moreover, the Council played a major role in initiating what became known as the Common Core State Standards, and it was the first national membership group to endorse them. The group then developed scores of resources and professional development opportunities to help its members implement the higher academic standards.

Recently, to incent the nation's textbook publishers to design better instructional materials for English-language learners, the Council announced a ground-breaking, cross-state purchasing consortium.

Other Major Initiatives

Casserly also initiated a series of other efforts to not only bolster the Council's academic priorities but to improve other aspects of urban public education.

On the legislative front, the Council has led efforts over the years to target and protect federal resources under Title I, Title II, Title III, and Career and Technical Education for poor urban school systems. The organization led a broad bipartisan coalition to initiate the federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program, and it has voiced the concerns and needs of the nation's urban public schools in hundreds of federal legislative proposals. It also helped initiate the federal E-Rate program in partnership with the Federal Communications Commission and U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

The Council also filed major briefs before the U.S. Supreme Court in the areas of special education, school desegregation, the U.S. Census, LGBTQ student rights, and other cases.

In addition, the Council was one of the first groups that went into New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to assess damaged school buildings and conduct repairs to reopen schools. It sent teams into Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, provided crisis management experts and mental health counselors to New York City following the 9/11 attacks, and organized a nationwide clothing drive for the Houston schools following Hurricane Harvey.

This past summer, the Council offered a first-of-its kind professional development program for urban school superintendents and school board members at Harvard Business School in conjunction with the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the Harvard Graduate School of Education called the Accelerating Board Capacity Institute (ABC).

The Council remains the only national organization exclusively representing the needs of urban public schools. There were only 24 urban districts that formed the Council when Casserly joined the group in 1977, and since 1992, the Council has expanded its membership from 44 to 76 urban school districts, including Puerto Rico and Toronto, Canada.

"The Council's successes can be credited to its strong Board of Directors and its hardworking and talented staff whose expertise, commitment, and dedication to urban education is boundless," said Casserly. "I will do whatever I can to ensure a smooth transition, but I am confident in the future of the Council. This great organization will continue to do the important work of improving the nation's urban public schools on behalf of all its students."

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