



Outgoing Cleveland Schools CEO Reflects on Push to Remove Learning Barriers

Eric Gordon discusses charter schools, mastery and 12 years of rebuilding trust and hope in a district many viewed as a lost cause.

By Patrick O'Donnell

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In a world where big-district superintendents typically last just three to five years on the job, Cleveland school district CEO Eric Gordon has blown through that target since taking over in 2011, bringing stability to a high poverty district many viewed as a lost cause.

When Gordon started, Cleveland had the fourth-worst scores out of more than 600 districts in Ohio, had sometimes scored last, and was on the verge of takeover yet again by the state. But in 2012, he and former Mayor Frank Jackson negotiated with the state, charter schools and unions to create the Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools, a recovery plan that let the district aggressively use new teacher evaluations and made Cleveland the first in Ohio to share local tax dollars with charter schools in return for some safeguards on charter quality.

That allowed the district to pass a new tax, starting a rare period of financial stability. Gordon has since worked to create a portfolio style of district with magnet high schools and several others with specialized approaches. He helped create partnerships with charters, philanthropies, higher education and business aimed at improving preschool attendance and students preparing for careers.

And he helped make Cleveland the final city to join the Say Yes to Education program that provides social supports to students at school and offers free college tuition after graduation.

In 2016, he was named urban educator of the year by the Council of the Great City Schools. District test scores now rank 13th from the bottom — not outstanding, by any means, but ahead of other urban areas like Toledo and even with scores of Columbus, Ohio's largest district.

He steps down in July and into a new position at Cuyahoga County Community College as senior vice president of Student Development and Education Pipeline, where he will help students manage college and a transition to careers.

In an exit interview with The 74, Gordon reflected on his time as CEO, the importance of removing barriers of poverty and life that hurt kids' learning, how school choice is changing and how competency or mastery approaches should be the model for schools in the future.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The 74: So your time here as CEO has been notable for many reasons. What stands out as the thing that you're proudest of doing?

Eric Gordon: When I got the job, I gave myself three personal goals: show that we can improve the worst performing district, make it matter when we do — which means that you can go to college, you can go into a good career — and then work to remove the barriers that made it so hard in the first place. I feel like I can say that while there's still a lot of undone work, I've in some way managed to accomplish something on all of those goals.

I have demonstrated that we can improve the worst performing district. We've got a long way to go, but we've proven that we don't have to be dead last. Through Say Yes and through PACE (a career preparation partnership), I have proven that it can matter, that you can actually have access to high wage jobs, or you can go to college, and we can help you do that, and that it's affordable. And with the wraparound support, we can start removing the barriers that made it so hard in the first place. So I feel like I'm leaving having managed to accomplish something meaningful in all three of the goals I set 12 years ago.

Is there anything out there that you really wish you had been able to do that you haven't, that you most regret as you leave?

For all of the success that is visible and you can see, there is still a group of young people that we failed. And I say that personally as the CEO: The number of young people that didn't graduate high school or didn't graduate high school as ready as they ought to be.

But I also see it as a community issue that we have a whole bunch of Clevelanders that live in the visible economy that you and I and others enjoy. And then there are a group of Clevelanders, including kids, that live in a hidden economy, in a hidden world where they have figured out how to be successful, in spite of the fact that they don't have access and have not found a way to the paths that we consider successful.

And I worry greatly, that there are kids under my watch over the whole course of their lifetime, that I and we failed.

Is there something you think needs to change with the structure to reach those kids?

I think we need a larger youth and family agenda that really thinks about the students' role in the schools as kind of their job, but also what is their full youth experience and the family experience? How are we thinking about housing stability? How are we thinking about lead

poisoning? How are we thinking about poverty and all these other things that make it hard to be a kid. And if it's hard to be a kid, it's hard to be a kid that does well in school. How do we really disrupt the things that make it so hard to be a kid in the first place, so that the things that we're doing for kids in schools has a magnified impact?

So when we talk about Cleveland, Cleveland has giant child poverty problems. And so are you talking about that as a Cleveland problem? Are you talking about this as a national problem with Cleveland as a very, very intense example of it?

I think it's a national problem with us being an intense example of it. But part of why I've always loved Cleveland is that we are small enough to figure out how to do these things. And then we're big enough to matter when we do. So I hope that people have watched what we've managed to do so far, and think about how that can be done in their communities. And I hope this community continues to figure out how we fix these seemingly intractable problems, and make it a model for the country when we do.

If there's any one or two things that have happened here in Cleveland that you hope other communities would take lessons from, and emulate or adapt, what would you say to them?

I would say, the collective public private partnerships at all levels of the organization. I just can't tell you how many people around the country over all the years have said we could never do that in our community. And I think people have got to stop saying you can never do that, because that presumes that you're going to have to do it alone. And there's just way more opportunity to succeed when we're all doing it together. So I think that's a big lesson learned.

I think Say Yes has been the thing that matters most to me — that we have to find a way to provide social service interruptions for the poverty barriers that kids face. And then make sure that they have a path out of poverty through education, but one that is designed to keep them in their city, so that you disrupt poverty over time.

You have had a much more open viewpoint on charter schools and cooperation with them as partners in educating the city's kids than other cities in Ohio have had. How do you think that's gone?

If you look at the reforms in the (Ohio) charter school environment over time, and draw them back to where those reforms started, they started with the Cleveland Plan. And so from a policy influence — that we should have more rigorous accountability to have better opportunities for kids — I think we've got some real successes. None of us are serving every child as well as needed, but we are more competitive now that we actually have a choice point of view.

What I'm more concerned about is that as choice is becoming more prolific across the state and including the vouchers and parochial and private, that we're not taking a 'choice with accountability' point of view. I'm all for choice, but we should all be playing from the same scorecard and if you take the money, you should take the test. And I think that that's getting eroded in our state. And that that does worry me, even as someone who has always advocated that parents should be able to choose.

So that's not changing with charters. But that is the ongoing case with a lot of the private schools getting vouchers.

That's right. And in my read, the state politics has moved past charters and is all about vouchers. There's been a little bit of some form of accountability in this last budget, but it's the first I've ever seen a glimpse of it. I've had legislators say right to me that we don't need accountability, because people should be allowed to make bad choices, and they know a good school when they see it. And then when I say, 'Well, then why do we have accountability?' 'Well, somebody's got to hold you accountable.' So that is the circular logic, but I'm watching just a move away from the importance of accountability for knowing what schools are doing. And that alarms me.

So, talk to me a little bit about Say Yes? How much of a difference do you think they've made? And how much do you think that the social supports in place for Say Yes have helped the pandemic recovery?

I think Say Yes is having a really outsized impact that isn't always easy to see. I know so many situations where we have addressed food scarcity, medical needs, avoided foster situations, I mean just real and real time moments of supporting kids, and removing those barriers. And I wish the pandemic had not happened, because we're seeing Say Yes supporting the recovery from the pandemic, so we're not seeing kind of a through line as visibly. But I know it's making a difference in so many ways. And then, while we haven't had the college-going numbers we would have wanted because of the pandemic, the persistence numbers of those who are going are pretty remarkable.

I just went to my last graduations and watched half to three quarters of the class stand up with their Say Yes cohort because they are eligible and planning to go on to college. That's what it was for.

I think people have to remember, it was designed as a two generation strategy that if we got kids to and through colleges for two generations, and kept them in Cleveland, then they would become property owners and have family sustaining wages and benefits and not draw on the social service systems. And that's how you finally disrupt this suffocating blanket of poverty in this town.

The pandemic hit Cleveland and CMSD pretty hard. It seems to have affected you guys more than a lot of other cities, largely because of the really high poverty levels here and families living more on the edge. What's your take as to how much the pandemic has set back kids in Cleveland?

I appreciate the words of 'setback kids' in Cleveland, because you've heard me say over time, we didn't lose learning, we lost time. And our kids need more time to begin with, because they don't always get to come to kindergarten as ready as others. So we know that literacy has been hit hard. We know that graduation rates got hit hard because kids went to work, right? I mean, when you think about when we were all sitting home, who wasn't? It was my community. They were running the essential services. They were working at Amazon and getting us our packages delivered. They were cleaning.

The good news is we also know from last year's report card, and I'm optimistic you'll see it again, that our progress scores were among the highest and that our gap closing scores

were really strong, which is evidence that we can and will recover.

I think the thing we have to be careful for is we cannot just go back to assuming that young people who have had this incredible disruption are just going to somehow be right back on track, and us getting in a deficit model of 'They're broken if they don't.' We've got to meet them where they are and keep moving forward, and that means we're going to have to provide support for early learning, then as we go into fourth grade, fifth grade, you know, until they catch up. But we have to do it with an eye that they can, that it was a setback, that it was not somehow a break.

We had talked a bunch before about the mastery and competency models and how that applies to kids who may have fallen behind. How much do you think you've actually been able to use that? And do you think that's something that the city needs more of going forward?

I absolutely think it's something that the city needs more of going forward. We have continued to make progress on it. We now have district-wide demonstration days (in which students give presentations to show what they have learned in many areas, rather than testing by subject). We have 10 schools going into next school year that have written it into their achievement plan to make sure that all teachers are teaching some form of mastery content, and that all students get to experience two different kinds of demonstration days with their parents.

I actually think the reason we saw some of the great progress scores and gap closing scores is because of these more complex tasks that are more authentic, that kids are more engaged in.

Right now, the way we're expecting students to prove learning in school is completely disconnected from the way that we do living outside of school. So what would happen if we said to all of our students, take your state test, but you can have your phone? And when I asked kids they said, 'Well, that would be cheating'. And I said, 'Well, why would that be cheating?' 'Because you're not allowed to look stuff up when you're taking the test.' And I said, 'Okay, fair. As soon as you walk out of these doors and you find something you don't know, what are you going to do?' 'Well, we're gonna look it up on our phone.' So what if instead of testing whether kids can memorize things that we already know, they know how to look up, what if we started actually figuring out if they know what to do with the information once they found it? And I just think we've got to start making school model the world they live in, instead of making it this completely disconnected place. And I think that's why we're not seeing the attendance rebounds (post-pandemic). I think kids have figured out that school and the world are disconnected.

A lot of folks, you included, were talking about treating coming out of the pandemic as a way to reset everything. But a lot of the time, it was mostly about trying to keep your head above water as you're going forward. How much do you think things have actually been able to be reset in the best way?

I think locally, we have really made an effort to reset. We are now one-to-one technology. And we're committed to it. And we're making sure kids leave with devices post-graduation,

so that they stay digitally connected, because we do know that's how the world works now. We're moving in this mastery-based way that we just talked about. We're trying to think about that whole human experience. We're trying to make sure kids have agency, voice and choice, and indeed get more focused on who they think they are and what they want to be. But in the state, for sure, and then the nation actually snapped back to what was pre-pandemic as hard as it could. We have not re-examined whether Carnegie Units and seat time are the best ways to measure learning. We have not really examined the way we're assessing kids. You know, the federal government provided such incredible resources, but at the same time, didn't rethink at all how we're assessing learning. And I worry that the policy context did not take advantage of an opportunity to incentivize, at least, and change, at best, the way we think about schools in America.

So if I give you a magic wand, and you get to waive it and make a couple of changes in policy you think will reset things the way they should, what would you do?

I would much further incentivize real mastery of learning, and obliterate seat time, so that you could literally say to a kid, it's super easy that if you can show me you know how to do this, that you don't have to sit through this class. That would be a big place that I would really lean.

I'm really interested in how some of the AI technologies can be really helpful. We are using an AI high-dose tutoring system that I think is going to get some really exciting results. I think there's just real upside opportunities to the emerging technologies that schools are almost always the last ones to figure out how to embrace. Instead, our strategy is usually 'shut it off.' Again, 'keep the real world out of the school,' instead of figuring out how to leverage the real world in education.

You got a decent amount of federal money to help things coming out of the pandemic? How are you most happy with how that's been used? What challenges is that going to leave for the district?

Schools must spend their ARPA dollars by 2024, unlike city, county and state that have until 2026. I think that created some negative incentives if you've got a lot to spend and quickly. I'm excited that we tried to put ours towards creating a better student experience in so many ways — out of school time, expanding periods to add more art music and physical classes, the summer learning experience, our after school tutoring programming that our families can now access live teachers for tutoring, investments in our extracurricular program, investments in nurses and LPNs, so that we can provide a healthier experience, investments in PACE. But those ARPA dollars will be done at the end of 2024, and shortly thereafter the community is going to have to ask itself the question: Are we willing to pay to keep these things?

We're gonna have to ask ourselves: 'Of the things ARPA allowed us to do, what are the things that we want to keep? And how are we willing as a community to pay for them and keep them?'

The last thing is your new position. You're going to be taking on helping some of the same kids that you've been working with for the last 12 years? How do you think you're going to make a difference over at Cuyahoga Community College?

Well, honestly, if somebody had said, 'Write the job you want, and we'll give it to you', I would not have come up with this. What I'm really excited about is that (college President Michael) Baston has asked me to really understand, from the students perspective, what makes it easy or hard to get into the college, what makes it easy or hard to get through the college and what makes it easy or hard to get out successfully. That means I get to interrogate systems and figure out where it impedes and help clear those barriers. And it also means I get to continue to be an advocate for students. And I continue to learn from the people who know best, which are the students. So in some ways, it's a dream come true kind of job. If and when I do the job really well, you're gonna see far more students, whether they be right out of high school or returning adults, finding their way through and into a successful life post-college and I'm really looking forward to taking on the challenge.

What haven't I asked you about the things folks around the country should know about Cleveland?

I hear far too often the people who visit say we could never do this at home. And if that's the approach you're taking, then it's not worth the bother. Locally, I want people to know how grateful I am. Nobody gets to do this job for 12 years, and I've been here 16, when you consider my prior work (as chief academic officer). That's more than half of my career. And so I just want people in this community to know how grateful I am to have had the honor of being the CEO, literally 12 years to the day, on my last day.