Cleveland school board settles on some goals for next CEO as search process ramps up
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The next Cleveland Metropolitan School District CEO is going to have their work cut out for them.

The CMSD Board of Education had a lengthy discussion Saturday morning to review the state of the district’s trajectory over the last two decades and set goals for the next CEO. This comes as following the announcement earlier this year by CEO Eric Gordon that he was stepping down, with his tenure set to end at the end of the school year.

The top-line takeaways from the meeting were the board landing on some tentative student outcome goals for the next CEO to work toward:

- Pursuing more racially equitable outcomes for students by eliminating achievement differences between students of difference races (white versus Black versus Hispanic, for example).
- Improving academic achievement for third graders, with a big focus on literacy and reading.
- Improving quality of pre-kindergarten programming.
- Improving the quality of students who graduate from CMSD, as measured in part by fewer students needing remedial courses if they go on to post-secondary options like college.

The board was shepherded through the goal-setting process by Ray Hart, executive director of the national advocacy organization the Council of Great City Schools. CMSD is a member of that organization and Gordon was former chair of its Board of Directors.

Hart showed a series of graphs measuring the poverty level of the district’s students versus data on their academic performance. One graph he presented showed that CMSD had the second-highest percentage of households with incomes below about $25,000 of any district in the U.S., second only to U.S. territory Puerto Rico’s department of education.

And Hart said that means a greater number of students who are “at-risk,” identified as homeless, in foster care, with families who qualify for food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and/or are over-age for their grade level. Those students struggle the most with their academics.
“The challenge of educating students who are in poverty is the challenge that you’re asking your superintendent to take on,” he said.

The pandemic-related school closures also were a major setback in progress for CMSD, Hart said; he provided graphs showing fourth-grade math and reading scores that dipped significantly once the pandemic hit and schools across the country closed.

But even before the pandemic, the trend lines of test performance for those fourth graders did not show sustained, long-term improvement across three different CMSD CEOs’ tenure, from 2003 to 2022.

![Graph of CMSD students' performance on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests over the years.](image)

A graph of CMSD students' performance on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests over the years presented by the Council of the Great City Schools during a CMSD Board of Education meeting on Saturday, Nov. 5.

There were some positives, however. Hart said students’ scores are recovering after the pandemic-related school closures at a faster rate than the rest of Ohio on a number of metrics, mostly in grades 5 through 8, and in a few subjects in high school. But they are not recovering at a faster rate in the lower grades, especially in third and fourth grades, which was cause for concern among the board members. Hart said part of the reason for that is that it was hard for students to learn how to read, and learn other basics, through online classes.

“Everybody had to log on virtually, so who are these third graders and fourth graders? Where were they two years ago? Kindergarten, first grade, second grade,” Hart said.

Robert M. Heard Sr., vice chair of the board, said the board has been pleased with a lot of the progress the district has made under Gordon’s tenure. CMSD’s graduation rates have improved drastically from 64% to 80.1% between 2012-2013 and 2019-2020, along with the number of students enrolled in high-quality preschools, for example.

“We’re moving a lot of things in the right direction,” he said. “It has always been a conversation about how fast, and I think we all agree that, not fast enough.”
Board members, through further discussion, landed on the goals listed above, which resulted from distillation of priorities the board members shared. Other priorities board members mentioned included improving education outcomes for students with disabilities and English-language learners; increasing mental health supports for students; and reducing summer learning losses while expanding after-school and summertime learning opportunities. Hart asked the board to limit their main student achievement goals to a small number, between three and five, in order to ensure the next CEO’s full attention to improving each outcome.

Board members also discussed other issues facing the district as it looks to craft a better future for all Cleveland students. Leah D. Hudnall, the board member recently appointed by Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb, said she “struggles” with the idea of the lottery system for students to get into some of CMSD’s higher-performing schools like the John Hay School of Science and Medicine, considering CMSD is an open-enrollment district that any student can attend.

“If I have a child from Glenville who wants to be a ballerina, how do I make sure she’s actually in the (Cleveland) School of the Arts with the child that had 8 years worth of private training from Shaker that wants to train at School of Arts as well?” she said.

That issue – preserving quality school options for Cleveland-specific students – could become what Hart described as a “guardrail” set out for the next CEO, which Hart explained as an issue the board could identify for the CEO to be careful of or avoid. Determining those will be one of the next steps for the board, in addition to determining further priorities and “levers,” or specific theories and constituencies to rely on in attempting positive change.

The meeting comes as Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb revealed Thursday the results of a listening tour on education conducted earlier this year by the city, which suggested ways the city would like to work with CMSD and other partners to accomplish further improvement in education across the city.

The district issued a request for proposals (RFP) to find a search firm to provide candidates for the next CEO earlier this fall, and the deadline for firms to apply passed late last month. CMSD spokesperson Tom Ott said the board hopes to hire a firm by the end of November.