

The Cleveland public schools have a promising future: Michael Casserly

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Over the last two years, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District has implemented some of the most far-reaching reforms of any major city school system in the nation.

Since 2011 when Eric Gordon took the helm, the school district has reduced its expenses by \$104 million, cut the workforce by approximately 1,100 positions, drafted the far-reaching Cleveland Plan, fought for passage of the plan in the state legislature, secured a 15-mill levy, negotiated a groundbreaking new teacher contract, restored a full school day to the district's academic calendar and put into place a corrective action plan for its lowest-performing schools.

The impact of these steps over time will be that the city's schools will have greater financial resources to pursue improvements while operating more efficiently. These steps promise to change the culture of the school district to one that is more results-oriented and where accountability is the norm rather than the exception. They will create more choices for parents over the schools their children attend, and give schools more autonomy over staffing, budgets and time.

The school leadership initiatives will also expand access to preschool, drive more funds down to the school level, and make better use of instructional technology. And in addition to allowing for 40 more minutes of planning time each day and 100 minutes of additional instructional time each week, the new teacher contract will clarify student disciplinary procedures, refine procedures for the termination of ineffective teachers and provide for more rigorous evaluations of teachers.

These actions represent major steps forward for a school system that historically has had a difficult time building momentum behind its efforts.

Still, the district's recent results on the rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress prove that change requires not just an investment of resources and leadership, but of time. While student achievement on this rigorous assessment has held steady in the face of substantial budget cuts before the levy passed and the inclusion of more students in the assessment process, scores have not yet started to climb.

These initial results are not surprising. The district's reforms, to date, have been devoted to removing deep-rooted barriers to progress and putting organizational conditions into place that will not only allow the district to focus on instructional improvements, but also to accelerate and sustain those advances well into the future.

It is not unusual for major urban school systems to undertake an initial period of structural, organizational and legislative change before they are able to usher in the instructional improvements that are needed to boost student achievement. The public school systems in Boston and the District of Columbia are good examples.

Each school system went through early periods of upheaval in order to lay the foundations on which later gains could be built. As in Cleveland, these periods involved governing changes, legislative action and significant alterations in collective bargaining agreements.

And like Cleveland, student test scores did not instantly go up in either city. To produce such results, these districts followed up their early work with deliberate and focused attention to the quality of instruction in their classrooms. Both school systems have since made some of the largest gains in student scores on the national assessment that anyone has ever seen — something that Cleveland is poised to produce as well.

The steps that the Cleveland Metropolitan School District has taken so far are the right ones. The district — and community — have invested the resources necessary to build a strong foundation for the future. Now we need to invest the time it will take for the district to overhaul instruction throughout the city. Results may not come overnight, but the sense of urgency and forward-thinking of Cleveland's school leadership should produce considerable optimism on the part of parents and the community that their public schools will take center stage in the city's revitalization.

Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.