Cleveland Municipal School District

Background

The Cleveland Municipal School District is the largest school district in the state of Ohio with a current enrollment of approximately 65,000 students. Like many urban school districts across the nation, the Cleveland school system is struggling to increase student performance and accelerate the pace of learning. These efforts seek not only to raise standards and academic performance but to graduate students who will go on to higher education. By doing this, it is anticipated that the district will also regain community confidence in public education. The Cleveland school district’s response to these challenges have produced results during the past seven years, which is particularly noteworthy given the district’s history.

The Cleveland Municipal School district has had a troubled past, as evidenced by the rapid turnover in leadership. In the last 15 years, the district has had eight changes in leadership and in 1992, 1995 and 1998 the district had three leaders per year. The district was under a two decade federal desegregation order and released from the order as recent as in 1999. In 1995, the federal district court placed the leadership of the district under the state superintendent thereby removing the governance of the district from a locally elected school board. The federal court declared that under local control, the system had persistently failed to educate students as exemplified by low test performance, low graduation rates, poor financial management and operational procedures.

In 1998, with impetus and leadership of the then Mayor Michael R. White, the district came under a new governance structure through state legislation delineated in H.B.269. Governance for the school system became the responsibility of the Mayor who appoints the nine member school board. The state law further requires that both the presidents of Cleveland State University and Cuyahoga Community College serve as non-voting ex-officio members of the school board. From 1998-2000, the Mayor selects and appoints the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the school system. From 2000 forward, the board selects and appoints the CEO with concurrence of the Mayor. The board is responsible for setting policy, approving the budget, establishing goals and accountability standards and promoting parent, family and community involvement in the schools. The law further stipulates that after four years under this governance structure, the community would vote to determine if the structure remained as the model for Cleveland. In 2002, the community voted by a
74% margin to maintain mayoral control.
In 1998, Mayor White recruited Barbara Byrd-Bennett from New York City and appointed her as the system’s first CEO under the new governance system. With her appointment the district has had stable leadership for almost eight years. Barbara Byrd-Bennett’s leadership placed Cleveland among the fastest improving urban school districts in the nation. The academic growth is not accidental. The CEO set a vision, mission and six goals which have relentlessly set the course for the district:

The single goal is for success for each child in each classroom in each school. The six strategic focal points are:

1. Insist on high standards and rigorous instruction
2. Instill commitment to excellence among all staff
3. Provide a safe, supportive, resource rich learning environment
4. Maximize the district’s financial resources
5. Engage parents and the broader community as meaningful partners in education
6. Meet both the academic and the non-academic need of students and their families

There are currently approximately 65,000 students enrolled in the district. The student population has reduced significantly over the past seven years. In 1998, enrollment was 77,000 students. It appears that there are several factors contributing to the loss of students. These include increased enrollment in charter schools, birth rate and population decline commensurate with the census reports for the city of Cleveland and general population exodus from the city of Cleveland. This has resulted in a largely poor, minority student population. Students enrolled in the district are likely to be three times as poor as their peers state-wide.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>CMSD</th>
<th>Ohio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligible Free/Reduced Lunch Price</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>78.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Population</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average School Enrollment</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>458</td>
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Upon assuming the leadership of the district, CEO Byrd-Bennett brought forward new academic standards and focused on needed reforms; including but not limited to, the immediate reorganization of the central headquarters; non-renewal of contracts for building administrators; establishment of a performance assessment processes for central headquarters staff and for building administrators; shift in resources to provide direct resources, both financial and human, to support classrooms; and development of systems for managed instruction.

She instituted a strong data base system to provide feedback on cohort student progress which also tracks administrator and teacher professional development which makes it possible to evaluate and assess the impact of the professional development on instructional programs and student achievement. Schools were required to complete an academic achievement plan which is a template designed to sustain alignment with the district overarching goals and maintaining resource balance.

After the creation and implementation of grade and content area standards, curricula guides, pacing charts and support material, the Cleveland Literacy System was well underway. The district began movement from a system of schools to a school system with a k-8 configuration and small 9-12 learning communities (both start up and conversion high schools). The district invested in school based coaches for literacy, mathematics and technology. Continuous progress is measured by continuous evaluation and assessment. Through the development and use of a School Performance Indicator system. The system checks for to review adherence to fidelity of practice and program implementation and provides needed data for grouping and regrouping of schools to ensure that the right resources are provided where needed.

In 2000, with support from the faith based community, elected official, the business and philanthropic communities, 74% of the community supported a capital bond to renovate and rebuild schools. The district had not repaired and maintained nor constructed a new school building in over two decades. The successful capital campaign leverages $1.2 billion. After input from community to develop a master capital plan, in 2004 and 2005 the district opened three high schools and five k-8 state of the art schools. Four additional k-8 schools will open in 2007.

And finally, in 2000, the CEO successfully negotiated labor contracts with each of the seven labor unions. Those contracts have been renewed and will remain in
effect through 2007. The result of contract negotiations with the teachers’ union won additional instruction time for students and greater flexibility in teacher assignments and required professional development.

Over the past two years reduction in funding, charter schools and increased health insurance costs have forced the district to reduce the operating budget by $148 million. This massive reduction has forced schools to close, essential instructional support programs to be eliminated and staff lay-offs at every level of the system. With increased class size, reduction in safety and security personnel, after school, supplemental and summer school program eliminated, much gained progress is eroding.

Much has taken place during the past seven years and much has been learned. The results have been substantial growth in student achievement. However, the district has a long way to go. The achievement gap is not closing quickly enough and too many children continue to underachieve as measured by state proficiency tests.