Overview of Baltimore City Public Schools

Prior to 2007, Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) experienced a long process of decline, reflecting the challenges faced by urban school systems nationwide. A 40-year trend of steadily declining student enrollment and graduation rates, deteriorating physical infrastructure and unacceptable student outcomes created a downward spiral that resulted in a systemic crisis in the period between 2003 and 2005. Out of that turmoil emerged a reinvigorated School Board, with a new sense of unity and purpose and a firm commitment to a determined program of reform. The Board’s goal was nothing less than a complete transformation of City Schools.

In the past three years, under the leadership of the School Board and CEO Andrés A. Alonso, City Schools has made sweeping changes in the way it provides education to the children of Baltimore. In both of the first two years of his administration, City Schools students reached their highest outcomes in the history of state exams (see data overview in the appendix). After elementary students made Adequate Yearly Progress across all No Child Left Behind subgroups for two consecutive years, City Schools exited “Corrective Action” status in 2009. In March 2010 City Schools reached an historic Settlement Agreement in the Vaughn G. special education lawsuit after 26 years of litigation. The agreement acknowledges the school system’s significant progress in meeting the needs of students with disabilities and marks an important milestone in the transformation of City Schools.

One of the centerpieces of City Schools reform is Fair Student Funding, which moved resources and autonomy to principals and school community leaders, while refocusing the role of central office to providing guidance, support and accountability for schools. City Schools also implemented an ambitious program to create 24 new Transformation Schools (grades 6-12) over four years, significantly increased the system’s Pre-K program, expanded alternative options and closed low performing schools, while expanding successful schools and programs. Student enrollment increased in 2008 and 2009, reversing a 40-year trend of annual declines, and City Schools attained its highest graduation rates and lowest dropout rates across all categories of students.

Historical Context:

Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) is one of the oldest and most historic public school systems in the United States. Established in 1829, City Schools boasts the nation’s oldest all-girls public high school (Western High School) and the third oldest public high school overall (Baltimore City College). In one of the most notable events in education history, prayer was banned in U.S. public schools as a result of a lawsuit filed by the parent of a City Schools student. In addition, a Baltimore high school (Baltimore Polytechnic Institute) was the scene of racial integration two years before Brown v Board of Education.

Unfortunately, by the fall of 2003 Baltimore experienced many of the problems besetting urban school districts nationwide. City Schools had had five CEO’s in six years, student enrollment had been declining for 35 years, student academic outcomes and graduation rates were low and
dropout rates were over 10 percent. In November 2003 the district CFO announced to a stunned School Board that City Schools was facing imminent insolvency.

By early 2004, City Schools laid off nearly 1,000 employees and secured a $34 million loan from the city of Baltimore to avert immediate financial disaster, but myriad problems remained. During the balance of 2004 and most of 2005, City schools underwent a painful process of self-evaluation and refocusing of priorities, starting with their own operating procedures.

Having regained a measure of financial stability and accountability through early repayment of the loan from the city, the Board was ready to move past stabilization and crisis management to a focus on educational priorities. Brian Morris, former Board member and Board Chair during this period, recalled the process. “We reaffirmed our top priority as improving student outcomes,” he said. “Our goal was to increase the number of students who graduated with options, because the diplomas would mean something. We needed to ensure that our graduates had the tools to succeed, whether they chose to enter the workforce immediately or pursue higher education.”

After extensive discussion, the Board agreed on the following goal as the primary focus of their program of reform:

The goal of City Schools is to prepare all students for success in post-secondary education or the 21st century workforce by establishing an environment of high expectations and a culture of accountability for our staff, our students and throughout the school community. We believe that excellence is the only acceptable standard, and we commit ourselves and our stakeholders to unremitting progress toward that goal.

The ongoing process of self-examination and common purpose convinced Board members of the need for dramatic change in order to achieve their goal. Incremental improvements were being made throughout this period, but members agreed that small steps forward were no longer good enough; City Schools needed to make an exponential leap if they were to achieve excellence. By the end of the 2005-06 school year the Board reached consensus on the need for new school leadership. They sought a dynamic, innovative leader who was committed to attaining their vision for City Schools, and was willing to be held accountable for results.

The selection of Dr. Andrés A. Alonso demonstrated the depth of the Board’s commitment to change. Dr. Alonso did not fit the usual superintendent profile in the Baltimore school system, whose student population was nearly 88 percent African-American. The choice of a Cuban-American immigrant and former New York attorney was initially controversial, given that Baltimoreans traditionally feel a strong sense of ownership and local pride in the people who run their institutions. However, the Board felt strongly that Dr. Alonso’s commitment to change, dedication to students and determination to expand parent/community participation in the education process reflected their unanimous vision and priorities.

Theory of Action:
Baltimore’s transformation is based on a clear and consistent theory of action that focuses on individual school communities as the critical arena where transformative change can occur most effectively, rapidly and permanently.

**City Schools’ Theory of Action:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If resources are in the schools:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- School communities have autonomy over resources;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Resources are allocated transparently according to a formula based on student population and characteristics; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There is appropriate guidance, support and accountability from central office,...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...then school communities will make improved decisions based on school needs, and student achievement will increase.

The initial chapter of transformation included the creation of a new portfolio of schools to ensure that students have more choice in every neighborhood, a dramatic reorientation of the system to revolve around schools, and the establishment of a fundamentally new relationship with parents and the community.

The portfolio of school options in City Schools had historically been limited, including a very small number of schools of choice and a large number of schools that performed poorly year after year. While the expansion of charter schools and high school reform efforts established some significant islands of innovation, the basic ecology of schools remained essentially unchanged.

Upon his arrival at City Schools, Dr. Alonso announced an ambitious program to create 24 new Transformation Schools (grades 6-12) over four years, while moving aggressively to close chronically failing schools and replace them rapidly with better options. This diversification of school options was accompanied by a corresponding expansion of parent and student choice, in which high school choice is nearly universal and middle school choice is beginning for the first time this year. At the same time, a new generation of school principals (90 new principals in the past two years) has brought unprecedented energy and creativity to a position that, under Fair Student Funding, offers unprecedented opportunities for innovation.

During this initial stage, there was also a fundamental reorientation of the organization, with profound changes in structure and process. Previously, central office was the center, with schools at the periphery. Now, schools and students are the centers of resources, and a much leaner central office provides guidance, support and accountability. Fair Student Funding was the critical lynchpin in this transformation, as school principals and communities increased their decision-making authority from just three percent of their budgets to more than 80 percent. This shift was accompanied by major restructuring in central office—including a 34 percent reduction in staff positions and the creation of a new Network Support Team structure to support schools around academics, special education, student services and operations. This initial stage also
involved a sweeping replacement of top central office personnel, in which virtually the entire City Schools Cabinet is new since 2007. The consistent emphasis on schools as the key point of focus means that everyone – staff, parents and central office—is accountable for making schools successful.

Finally, the initial stage of transformation involved a redefinition of the relationship between schools and parents, as well as community stakeholders. Previously, schools sometimes regarded parents and community as essentially external to – even a hindrance to - the professional work of teaching. There has been a profound shift in attitude and practice, reflected in the systems, policies and practices in City Schools, regarding parents and community groups as key partners in the strengthening of schools and the progress of students. In 2008 City Schools revised its Family and Community Engagement Policy to enhance the role of families in the school budget process and overall life of the schools. The revised policy transformed School Improvement teams into Family/School Councils, with enhanced parent and community participation. These parent/community members are also part of the school budget process and provide direct feedback to the CEO about the content and process of school budgets. The policy also includes a formalized role for parents, community members and partners to participate in choosing new principals.

The strength of the school-community bond was vividly demonstrated early in 2009, during a struggle to restore full state funding to public education for the upcoming fiscal year. The Baltimore Education Coalition, an umbrella group encompassing more than 20 community organizations, private philanthropy groups, education advocates and business associations, staged massive public rallies and organized public support for the restoration of education cuts in the 2010 state budget. This unprecedented outpouring of public support was instrumental in having the education funds restored, avoiding potentially catastrophic shortfalls in the system’s ability to deliver quality educational services to its students.

**Closing the Achievement Gap:**

The goal of City Schools is to ensure that students graduate with the knowledge, tools and motivation to succeed in post-secondary education and/or the modern workforce. Given a student population comprised of 87.8 percent African-American students, 83.6 percent low-income (FARM) students,* 3.1 percent Hispanic and 16.8 percent students with disabilities,* the task of improving outcomes for historically challenged student groups is a clear priority.

An important factor in closing the achievement gap is early childhood education. City Schools aggressively expanded its Pre-K program to include nearly every elementary school, with 240 primarily full-day Pre-K classrooms serving 4,800 children. The results in school readiness have been striking, particularly among historically disadvantaged groups. Overall, the percentage of students arriving at kindergarten at “full readiness” increased from 27 percent in 2003-04 to

Preliminary 2010 data
64 percent in 2009-10, an improvement of 37 percentage points; in the same period the readiness gap between City Schools children and students statewide has been reduced by 50 percent.

In the period from 2005 to 2009, improvement in disadvantaged student outcomes has been dramatic, especially in the era of reform since 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades 3-8</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>+29.6 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by nearly 19 percent since 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ELL Students</td>
<td>+39.2 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by more than 37 percent since 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>+21.3 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by nearly 25 percent since 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>+32.3 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by more than 37.8 percent since 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>+27.7 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by nearly eight percent since 2007.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>ELL Students</td>
<td>+39.2 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Achievement Gap eliminated in 2008.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>ELL students outperformed non-ELL peers by 3.6 percentage points in 2009.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>+26.4 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap has persisted at 15 +/- percentage points since 2005, despite significant progress in overall test scores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>+40.9 percentage points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Achievement Gap narrowed by 73 percent since 2007.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Progress to Date:**

Education reform in Baltimore City quickly resulted in dramatic improvement in student outcomes. The following are some of the major indicators of increased student achievement at all grade levels since 2007.

- First and second grade students exceeded the national average in mathematics on the Stanford Achievement Test 10 in 2009. For the first time, first and second graders reached the national average in reading.

- 2009 Maryland School Assessment (MSA) scores by students in grades 3-8 showed record gains across all grades and groups for the second year in a row.
The number of students exceeding the state reading standard increased 92 percent in two years, while the number of students exceeding the state math standard increased 107 percent in the same period.

Special education students are advancing at an even greater rate than general education students, while all racial and ethnic subgroups with achievement gaps also posted gains and narrowed gaps.

- Overall, high school students passed five percent more Maryland High School Assessment (HSA) tests in 2009 than in the previous year. The increase was greater among students with disabilities, while African-American and low-income students also posted gains.

The number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered increased by nearly 28 percent in 2008-09, while student enrollment in AP courses increased 21 percent. In addition, the number of students who took AP placement exams increased 16 percent.

City Schools’ 79 percent SAT participation rate in 2009 exceeded rates for the state (69 percent) and the nation (46 percent).

- In 2008-09, City Schools experienced a record high graduation rate (62.7 percent) and a record low dropout rate (6.2 percent).

- In 2009, City Schools exited state “Corrective Action,” after elementary grades made state standards for progress for the second consecutive year. City Schools had been in School Improvement since the inception of NCLB in 2002.

- In 2010, City Schools reached an historic Settlement Agreement in the 26-year Vaughn G litigation, representing an acknowledgement by all parties to the suit of City Schools’ progress in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

**Allocation of Federal Funds:**

**Title I (ARRA):** City Schools received $51 million in stimulus funds (see chart in appendix for full detail). Approximately $4 million support the required set-asides, including Nonpublic Education (equitable services), Neglected and Delinquent and Homeless Student Support, and Parental Involvement. The district submitted a proposal to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) requesting a waiver of the SES requirement (approximately $10 million) to implement an extended learning initiative in Summer 2010 and Summer 2011, as well as during SY 2010-11. School Based Allocations represent approximately 18 percent of the grant ($9 million), which allowed City Schools to expand its Title I services to an additional 22 schools in SY 2009-10. The Title I ARRA grant supports elementary and middle grades only. The remaining funding (approximately $28 million) supports the administration of the Title I ARRA
grant and system-wide initiatives including (but not limited to) Leadership Development, Pre-K expansion (2009-10) and maintenance of the Pre-K expansion (2010-11) and Teacher Leaders.

**Title I Part A (Basic):** City Schools received $64 million in basic Title I Part A funds (7/1/09 – 9/30/10). Approximately $16 million has been allocated to support the required set-asides, including Supplemental Education Services, Nonpublic Education (equitable services), Parental Involvement, Neglected and Delinquent and Homeless Student Support. Approximately $39 million (61 percent of the grant) has been allocated to the schools (elementary and middle grades only). The remaining funds (approximately $9 million) support the administration of the Title I Part A grant and system-wide initiatives including (but not limited to) an alternative certification program (Baltimore City Teaching Residency), a principal pipeline (New Leaders for New Schools), teacher leadership (Teacher Leaders) and a 10 percent set-aside by schools for school improvement.

**Title II Part A – Improving Teacher Quality:** City Schools uses Title II funding to provide professional development training and support recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers, teacher mentoring and teacher support. $6.5 million is held centrally for 16 Teacher Leaders, eight Teacher Fellows, one coordinator and systemic activities that support systemic leadership development and mentoring for new teachers, as well as teacher professional development. $1.4 million is allocated to nine select schools and is distributed to schools based on tiers. Tier I schools are those that excel in performance and significantly exceed AYP requirements. In FY 2010, Tier II is comprised of six new Transformation Schools that received funding.

Based on a school’s allocation, principals are required to budget some portion of their funding to each of six categories:

1. Professional Development through meaningful consultation with teachers of all grades and subject-matter areas in effective instructional strategies, based on a review of scientifically based research. This category can include principal and assistant principal training and mentoring sessions, training for mathematics and reading teachers, school-based, content-specific training, innovative training sessions for teachers, and school-based training to improve classroom practice.

2. Innovative Professional Development Programs designed to improve the quality of the teaching and administrative workforce, including technology literacy training and the cost of praxis exams, as well as leadership workshops.

3. Teacher mentoring programs, designed to carry out teacher advancement initiatives that promote professional growth and development. Initiatives include peer mentoring for new teachers, site-based new teacher induction programs, and teacher mentoring from exemplary teachers.

4. Teacher support, designed to provide teachers with additional resources that assist in improving instructional delivery and practice, while expanding their knowledge base.
Supports include teacher demonstration lessons and attendance at conferences and seminars.

5. Recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers through developing and implementing strategies and activities to recruit, hire and retain highly qualified teachers. Activities include administrator visits to local college job fairs and open-houses for teachers.

6. Class-size reduction initiatives, through the creation of additional classes in a particular grade or subject, taught by highly qualified teachers who were hired with program funds.

Most schools are using funds for class-size reduction, site-based staff developers, teacher mentors and professional development materials.