

THE PLAIN DEALER

Monday, July 2, 2012

Ohio Gov. John Kasich signs Cleveland schools plan into law

By PATRICK O'DONNELL

http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2012/07/gov_john_kasich_signs_clevelandan.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Gov. John Kasich on Monday signed into law the school improvement plan that city, legislative and school district leaders have sought for five months.

The Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools makes several changes in the school district's relationship with teachers and charter schools to help the district make education better for the city's children, Kasich said at the bill-signing ceremony at John F. Kennedy High School.

"Cleveland is now leading the way in school reform," Kasich said to cheers from school supporters and groups that helped create the plan.

Mayor Frank Jackson said the bill will "ensure an opportunity for quality education for all of our children."

State Sen. Nina Turner, one of four sponsors of the bill, overshadowed even Jackson, Kasich and the other three sponsors with her impassioned call for education to be a priority for the city's economic future.

"It will re-direct our momentum as a city and a region," she said in a speech that some likened to a sermon.

City schools CEO Eric Gordon has said the changes give the district the necessary tools to help carry out the transformation blueprint it rolled out in 2010 to increase the number of high-performing schools in the city and eliminate low-performers.

But Gordon also has emphasized that the cooperation among the district, the city, legislators, charter schools and the city's businesses and foundations must continue for the Cleveland Plain to succeed.

Jackson and Gordon publicly introduced the sweeping proposal to overhaul the schools in February, relying on input from the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Cleveland and George Gund foundations, Breakthrough charter schools and others.

After much lobbying and negotiation, the plan -- which applies only to Cleveland as the state's sole district under mayoral control -- was approved by the state legislature last month.

All four bill sponsors -- Turner, a Cleveland Democrat; Sen. Peggy Lehner, a Kettering Republican; Rep. Ron Amstutz, a Wooster Republican, and Rep. Sandra Williams, a Cleveland Democrat -- joined Jackson, Gordon, Kasich, House Speaker Bill Batchelder, school board Chairperson Denise Link and Cleveland Teachers Union official Tracy Radich on stage for the signing.

Radich said the plan was improved since it was introduced in February by discussions with teachers and that she hopes if it gets used as model in the future, cooperation will be an important part.

Kasich and Batchelder, in addition to praising the other officials, cited Albert Ratner, the retired co-chairman of Forest City Enterprises, who was in the audience, for helping make the deal happen.

Speakers repeatedly said the key was the partnership and cooperation between both political parties – starting with the Democrat Jackson working with the Republican Kasich – and between the district, unions, charitable foundations and the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the region's chamber of commerce.

Turner drew laughs when she called attention to a Plain Dealer photo used on cleveland.com of her hugging Kasich, once a political enemy, at a press conference in May when the deal was reached.

"That shows the import of the Cleveland Plan," she said. "I stand by that hug, Governor."

She then walked the few steps to him on the stage and hugged him again.

Amstutz said the plan offers tools for the district, but the city must decide how to use them.

"It does not self-execute," he said. "It will do nothing without the people of Cleveland picking it up and taking it forward."

Kasich joked that pressure now falls on district chief Gordon.

"It's all on you now, Eric," he said with a grin. "You screw up, we're blaming you."

Among the key elements of plan are:

- Letting the district keep high-performing and specialized teachers during layoffs by making tenure and seniority only secondary factors in those decisions.
- Allowing the district to share property tax money with selected charter schools.
- Giving the city and district a voice in what charter sponsors can start new schools in the city.
- Paying teachers on a "differentiated" salary schedule based on performance, special skills and duties, as opposed to the standard one that now increases pay based on years of service and education level. Higher-rated teachers will receive higher pay increases.
- Allowing the possibility of a longer school day and school year, with year-round schooling an option. The district and teachers union will negotiate pay for that extra time.
- Requiring parents of district students to attend at least one meeting at the school by Dec. 15 of each year so they can meet teachers and discuss expectations and their children's performance.

Kasich had students from the district and the Breakthrough charter schools that partner with the district help sign the bill by dotting the "i" in his last name or adding a period after his middle initial. They were: Tristen Simpson and Evelyn Manigault from Michael R. White Elementary, Sinead Robertson from Tremont Montessori, Eboni Blockum from Citizens Academy and Nataia Golson and Jerald King from Citizens Leadership Academy.

###