

# GREAT KIDS

# GREAT SCHOOLS

*Dear Families of Baltimore City,*

**MARCH 6, 2008**

Thank you for welcoming me to Baltimore with such warmth and hope for our children. My first eight months here have been productive and, personally, very fulfilling.

I have spent those months getting to know your children and our schools. Of course I don't know them all personally. But between weekly visits to schools and meetings with organized parent groups,



I have been in 112 of our 190 schools so far. I have also had hundreds of conversations with you about what it will take to put all of our children on a path to success.

I have heard you loud and clear. You believe that every one of our 81,500 public school students in Baltimore City can succeed in school. I know first-hand that this is possible. I spent my early years in Cuba, going to schools with 45 kids to a classroom and not enough textbooks to go around. But despite the poverty, we were expected to learn. 🖐️



I arrived in the United States when I was 12 and attended Union City, N.J. public schools, another poor place where my teachers saw through poverty and focused on potential. With their help I attended some of the best colleges in the country. Eventually, I returned to Newark, N.J., one of the most troubled school systems in the country, where I taught students who were emotionally disturbed and learning English as a second language. I knew that with adults who believed in them, they could excel. And I felt a deep responsibility to them—just as I do here, now.

We have great kids in Baltimore, with great potential. And they all deserve great schools. Right now, we have great teachers in every school, but we only have a handful of great schools. We need an entire system of them. But we cannot build that system by making excuses or maintaining the status quo. Schools must be responsible to kids. Great schools happen when everyone in the school, the system and beyond takes that responsibility to heart.

It's that simple. It will also be hard. But together, we will create great school options for all children in Baltimore City.

## HERE'S HOW WE DO IT:

At great schools children learn, but they don't just read, write, do math, and perform well on tests. They develop a broad body of knowledge that will carry them through life, and the skills to make the most of that knowledge; they learn to think, research, analyze, discover, and question. To be great, schools in Baltimore must have:

- Great principals.
- Great teachers in every classroom.
- Instruction that reaches all kids, with their many different needs.
- The freedom to create a unique learning community.
- Involved parents and communities.

To meet these demands, schools need the full support of the central administration—or “North Avenue,” as most of you know it. That will require changes. So, effective immediately, three key principles will guide all that we do.

**1. Fair, clear, open decision-making.** Key decisions at all levels of the school system will be made in the best interests of our children, with public participation and in the public view.



## **2. School freedom = school responsibility.**

Schools should have the authority to make the decisions that affect their students, from how to spend money to who to hire to teach science and math. In exchange, we will hold them individually and directly responsible for their students' progress.



## **3. Families as**

**partners.** Families and members of school communities will be at the heart of all of our efforts to make schools great.

It may take time for these principles to take root across the whole

school system. But they have firmly taken hold in my office. They have guided the following big steps we will take towards building a system of great schools, starting this spring:

### **FAIR STUDENT FUNDING**

We will move money and people from North Avenue to the schools. Baltimore City's current process for disbursing money is hard to understand, complicated and frequently unfair. Starting in the 2008-09 school year, all schools will receive funding based on the number of students they have, with extra dollars depending on those students' needs. This way dollars follow the student, and the same amount of public money is invested in the education of students with the same characteristics. This is a fair and simple way to help schools get better results for our kids.

### **TRANSFORMATION SCHOOLS**

In districts like ours where the struggles of adolescence are compounded by poverty, the seeds for dropping out of high school are sown in the middle grades. Too many students fall behind: fewer than half our middle school students are proficient in reading; fewer than a quarter are proficient in math; and of those that enter high school, barely half receive a diploma. Starting this year, we will address this crisis head-on. We will strengthen existing neighborhood schools by creating more options to prepare our students for college and career success, and by expanding alternative programs. We will also create Transformation Schools, small and innovative schools that combine grades six through 12 to eliminate the difficult middle to high school transition. These schools will transform secondary education in Baltimore by providing models for other struggling high schools that aren't getting better. What's more, we will open not just a few of them, but up to two-dozen over the next four years.



## **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

You—parents, family and community members—are essential to the education of our children; we need to treat you like real partners. We will put technology to work for you and make current information about your children and their schools available around the clock, every day of the week. If you need to email a teacher, we will make that not just possible, but easy to do. And we will engage organizations that are trusted in the community to help you stay connected to your children's school.

These changes and programs are an important start to creating great schools in Baltimore City. But they aren't enough. Just as we hold schools responsible for student success, we must be able to measure whether we are successfully supporting them. To do that, we must constantly be asking the following questions:

- Are our schools attracting more students, and are they staying?
- Are more students progressing and improving?
- Are more students completing high school, working and going to college?
- Are our kids secure and happy in school?

This one is harder to measure, but just as critical. Through tools such as school climate surveys, we will determine whether students feel safe, supported and happy in learning. When they do, they thrive.

I am confident that the answers to these questions will be yes, yes, yes, and yes—week after week, year after year. I am confident because city students are already making important strides.



State test scores for Baltimore City are up across all grades since 2003, in some grades by as much as 30 percent. I am confident because we have a new and talented team at North Avenue to lead the way.

And I am confident because of your commitment to city schools. You entrust 81,500 children—your future and the city's—to Baltimore's public school system each day, and it is our moral responsibility

to earn your trust in return. We must work hard to do that, I know. But you have my word, we will.

You share my strong sense of what we can, and must do. We need to enter this era of transformation together. When I arrived here in July 2007, the Board of School Commissioners charged me with ensuring that all students in

Baltimore City reach high, learn well, and succeed. In closing, I ask you to join me in that mission.

Let us insist together that all of our great kids get what they deserve: great schools.

With warmest wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrés G. Alonso". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Dr. Andrés Alonso