He also said, disappointingly, it fails to recognize the important role the public plays in the success of schools. Instead of encouraging public participation, the plan stifles it.

By RHONDA CROWDER

Staff Reporter

Because the pace of change has not been fast enough or deep enough to overcome the challenges facing Cleveland schools, Mayor Frank G. Jackson and Cleveland Metropolitan School District CEO Eric Gordon with leaders from the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the Cleveland Foundation, The Gund Foundation, and the Breakthrough Charter Schools, recently unveiled a plan designed to reinvent public education.

Recognizing that the current model is not working, this plan is supposed to create conditions for success by seeking changes in state policy and developing a sustainable financial strategy as

well as a fresh approach to how management and labor work together.

The plan is designed to grow high-performing schools, cut bureaucracy, revise labor management agreements, prepare the youngest children for success, and ultimately ask the voters to approve a levy to be distributed to high-performing public and charter schools.

The 15-page document, known as Cleveland’s Plan for Transforming Schools, states that Cleve land
must transition from a traditional, single-source school district to a new system of public and charter schools to be held to the highest standards and work in partnership to create dramatic student achievement gains for every child.

Since the release of the plan, it has received an array of reactions from those in the education community.

“Any plan that helps academic achievement and graduation rates, I’m all for it,” said Marshall Emerson III, founder of I CAN SCHOOLS in Cleveland. He also served as the headmaster at CMSD’s E-Prep school before starting his own charter program.

Emerson admitted that he has read over the plan but hasn’t had the opportunity to get clarification on the details. With that, he sees pros and cons.

He has concerns about the partnership with charter schools and the role of the Cleveland Transformation Alliance. He believes the one good point is having an arm to provide oversight to all schools.

“Anyone who has their act together shouldn’t balk at the plan,” Emerson said.

However, he does wonder who will sit on this board and make decisions and, if a school decides to not confirm, does that hinder them from opening more schools in Cleveland. Without

the clarification, some aspects seem a little scary, he said.

"What happens after a new mayor or new administration comes in," Emerson questioned.

"I don't know if I would feel comfortable, today, handing over our autonomy to this plan, at least not right now."

He went on to say the ability to make decision without bureaucracy is what makes high performing charters successful. He does think there can be highly effective collaborations with charter and public schools, but that charter schools should remain autonomous and independent of the district. "That's what makes them unique," he said.

"We can move with a sense of urgency that public schools can't."

Dr. Shane K. Floyd, business and community outreach coordinator for Ohio Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), thinks the plan is definitely a step in the right direction, that it's time we begin creating innovative ways to bridge the academic gaps.

"It gives the city an opportunity to reap the benefits of quality education opportunities that exist in public and charter education," said Floyd, who definitely sees the plan as a change from the norm that will take people out of their comfort zones.

According to Floyd, it's time to move past that public versus charter argument and simply think about what is best for students. He applauds the mayor for taking the first step.

"We can't put all resources in one sector and solve the problems across the board," he said. "We need to get outside the box, put politics aside that create greater disparities among children."

He doesn't see the plan as an end all to be all, but believes it challenges us to look at the inequalities that exist. At the same time, he thinks there is one missing piece.

"If we don't find a way to educate parents about the quality options that are available then the plan is not going to go over as well," he said, believing it needs to include parents in such a way that allows then to make informed decisions.

In a letter to the editor, David Quolke, president of Cleveland Teacher's Union, said despite its many good ideas, the plan also contains regressive initiatives that have been soundly rejected. Quolke sees the plan as a "restart" of Senate Bill 5.

"You can't get true education reform with attacks of teachers and their collective bargaining rights," he said. He also said reform requires trust and collaboration as opposed to exclusion and backroom deals.

Recently, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Ohio blasted the part of plan that would exempt the school's oversight board from the state's Sunshine Laws. Sunshine Laws refer to Ohio
's Open Meetings and Public Records Act, which allows the public access to meetings and documents that pertain to government business.

According to the ACLU, Jackson will solicit sponsors in the General Assembly to make this proposal a state law.

"Taxpayers have a right to know what is happening in their schools. There is no excuse for secrecy, and begs the question, 'What do they have to hide?'" said ACLU of Ohio Director of Communications and Public Policy Mike Brickner. "Allowing a board charged with oversight to operate in the shadows defies logic and opens the door to corruption and abuse."

He also said, disappointingly, it fails to recognize the important role the public plays in the success of schools. Instead of encouraging public participation, the plan stifles it.

“Before state leaders formally propose this legislation, they must ensure the people have a place at the table by guaranteeing all aspects of the program are subject to Ohio’s Sunshine Laws,” said Brickner. “Anything less will only undermine their work, and instill mistrust in the people who want to be part of the reform of our school systems.”