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INTERVIEW

Driving Change in Baltimore City Public Schools (MD):

An Interview with Andrés Alonso

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Driving Change in Baltimore City Public Schools:

An Interview with Andrés Alonso

ANDRÉS ALONSO, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER of Baltimore City Public Schools since July 2007, receives wide acclaim for the rapid strides he has made in turning around an historically failing school system. Fair Student Funding, creating more autonomy for schools and principals, and efforts to engage parents and the community are seen as key factors in achieving these results.

Alonso emigrated from Cuba to the United States at the age of 12. He attended public schools in Union City, New Jersey, and went on to graduate magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Columbia University and earn a J.D. from Harvard Law School. After practicing law in New York City, he changed course and taught emotionally disturbed special education adolescents and English language learners in Newark, New Jersey, for over 10 years. He subsequently earned an Ed.D. from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education's Urban Superintendents Program. He served as Chief of Staff for Teaching and Learning and as Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning under Chancellor Joel Klein at the New York City Department of Education during the launch of its Children First reform.

In this edited interview, DMC Managing Director Garrett Smith speaks with Alonso about his approach to change management, his views on the role of principals, the issues of cultivating leadership capacity, and his thoughts on special education.

You have effected so much change so rapidly. Some people are surprised that you didn't have a written blueprint for some months and wonder how you guided your board and other stakeholder groups through all this change. From DMC's perspective, you did many of the things we think are so critical to good strategic planning in that you set clear objectives and rapidly engaged people at many levels to work towards those goals.

The goals were clear to me from the beginning: we needed to decrease dropouts and we needed to increase enrollment. What had to happen in the first six months was an articulation of those foundational principles, and then everything else

had to be connected to those two objectives. Those objectives served to organize my discussions with the board and my message to everyone I talked with. For us, the theory of action emerged from those foundational principles.

Strategic planning can be great, but it needs to incorporate and engage everyone. Then, and only then, does the real work start. I have been a part of so many blueprint/strategy initiatives that end up sitting on a bookshelf gathering dust. The year before I arrived, the district's master plan had just been approved. I'm telling you, this book was the size of the chair you are sitting in! And it had led to an almost inquisitorial process where people were constantly checking against the thousands of ➤

items in the plan. It occurred to me that there is no more insane way to change a district because basically it is communicating, “We don’t trust you; we don’t trust your capacity; we are going to monitor you, but not fire you because that’s not how we do things around here.”

I’m exactly the opposite about things. If you don’t have the capacity, I’m going to fire you. If I’m entrusting you with 600 lives, you should be working hard with me towards making certain things happen. My conversations are always about the following: How are you doing? What are your goals? How can I support you to get results? How are you engaging the community so that you are not doing it on your own? These were the conversations that lead to a simplicity that actually helped us get things done.

For me, the strategic plan is about a set of beliefs that organize the work. It was about selling the community and the district on a host of things that needed to happen, and constantly reasserting why those things were important. The fact that three years in, we are able to communicate a clear and indisputable set of outcomes is because we have been working together on the same path from the start. To get at the core of the work like that is huge.

Absolutely. A good strategic plan is all about engaging everyone, and making sure all work at all levels is connected to the district’s ultimate objectives.

To me, the work has to be about engaging people at the school level. And, it has to be about how we configure it so that everyone at all levels can become part of the conversation. It also has to be deeply contextual. When I came here from New York, I was very clear in my conversations with the board about what my foundational principles were. How to put those into practice in ways that allowed a momentum to emerge was very much about Baltimore: the history of the district, the opportunities, and the constraints of the district. My view on this is shaped by who I am as a teacher. As a teacher, I always needed to know who each child was, and who their families were.

So, in terms of my approach to Baltimore, I needed to know the schools, the principals, the communities, and the neighborhoods. I went to 128 PTA meetings in my first year as superintendent. I went to every school my first year. You name me a school and I can tell you the name of the store across the street from it. This knowledge and understanding was far more important to me than engaging in a rational process that leads to irrational action and then wondering why things didn’t get implemented or why it isn’t working. What I am more interested in is getting everyone involved and creating large surges of energy that are going to change the culture of the system.

Fair Student Funding was a big driver in putting the responsibility at the school level. Can you talk about how that worked?

We moved towards Fair Student Funding during the first year. People thought I was crazy because the capacity wasn’t there to do something so vast. But, my theory has always been that you learn by doing. So, we were going to push the capacity by doing.

If anything signals what is the essence of a district, it is who controls the money. So, the thrust was very much about that. I would not be the leader of a system where we don’t allow schools to own their futures. The biggest problem I see in schools in America, especially urban schools, is the unwillingness to accept responsibility for outcomes. And anything that gets in the way of my being able to have a conversation with a person in a school about their actionable items and their results gets in the way of the work for me. I’ll tell you how schools now experience the work: they experience the work in that they can hire people, they can control time, they can control resources, and they can define the nature of the program. That’s how schools experience the work; everything else is just something on paper.

If you give them enough time and support, and if you engage them in the right conversations, schools will ultimately make the right decisions. When those decisions are bounded by certain key foundational principles, we are at a point where we turn around and all of the news is good—not just outcomes, but

process elements, participation in AP courses, career and technical education, pre-K and Kindergarten programs, etc. Why? Because schools are competing to make the right decisions, and there are clear elements that are guiding schools in those decisions.

Implementing Fair Student Funding in your first year was a bold move. How did you get this done?

The economic crisis was a huge opportunity for me, not a constraint. It made Fair Student Funding and the shifting of resources to schools far less contentious than it would have been without it. And overall, there was a real readiness here when I arrived. In these conversations about what we've done, I feel the focus often tends to be on me. But, I feel deeply that if I had come here three years earlier, we might not be telling the same story.

The kind of pain threshold that had been reached by the time I got here made so many things possible. It's actually miraculous if you think about the history of the district, the interference, the turnovers, the micromanaging and dysfunction, and the stronghold by organized labor. But, somehow room opened up for change. For example, with the labor dispute that occurred in my first four months here, the fact that the then-mayor and that almost every person of consequence in the situation chose to step back was an extraordinary thing. I knew what I had to do. What is remarkable is that not only was I given the authority, but I was given the opportunity to exercise that authority. All it might have taken was the wrong intervention or the board fragmenting and it might all have dissipated. The board deserves enormous credit in this conversation because that first year was hard. The board remained remarkably cohesive.

People were really fighting over "what does this mean." It was tough because I was moving so fast and the normal processes of most boards, which are ultimately political entities, are to go slow. I was exploiting the question of authority in every possible way to shift towards implementation. I felt strongly that if the board was not going to be with me, they couldn't hold me accountable. I am now on my third board, because the membership has changed, but it has been a remarkable story of how

that group of people has shifted over time, but has remained cohesive because of the nature of the work. They have held very fast to certain principles and actions, and that element of holding on to principles and bringing the community along has been critical. We were creating room while at the same time realizing that that room was there. And that's uniquely about Baltimore. We had so many folks that had been in the reform conversation for a long time and were frustrated. There were lots of people who were willing to take action.

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All of those things happened in the first year and every single one was about "this is who we are going to be." It was an assertion of the foundational principles in the work. It got translated to a set of responses that were about the district and about Baltimore. Every superintendent is going to have to bridge the gap between a theoretical framework and a real-world command of what is at play and the ability to channel things that happen every day in the district.

Engaging the community, communicating, and changing the conversation has been a very key part of your leading change in the district.

We have engaged more deeply in this question of the community and partners and their roles in schools than in many other places. That has been a fundamental element of the work. I just can't conceive of the work otherwise. It's about community and communication—about convincing people and about forcing a look in the mirror. Every interaction is instrumental. One can never forget that the most powerful communication channel that a district has is its own employees. I have 11,000 employees and every one of them is out there with ►

a story about what we're doing. They are the ones out there talking to parents. They are signaling either a sense of progress or a sense of frustration and stagnation.

Effecting change was also very much about politics. It was about understanding how hard to push certain things and about when to save certain things for later. And it was about creating a sense in the community that what we were engaging in was something that was going to be quantitatively and qualitatively different from what had happened in the past. I know that this is very much of a cliché, but it was going to be about the kids. We had to get quick wins; we had to assert certain things very quickly that pushed back against some very deeply held cultural assumptions. In this sense, the political work wasn't necessarily about compromise; it was about being in your face and saying, "We are not going to do what was done in the past because it failed." The work around keeping kids in schools, for example, was quick and it was an assertion of identity.

It's interesting that you have pushed reform and change so quickly, and yet you have been public that you are in it for the long run and have committed to stay for 10 years.

The commitment to stay here 10 years is solely about Baltimore and not about me. In a city that has seen seven superintendents in 10 years, it was important to assert that I wasn't going to be someone who would be here one day and gone the next. It's important in terms of what it signals about the norms and relationships and authority within the organization. Also, historical knowledge is a huge obstacle for people coming in with a reform mindset. Now, I have a lot of historical knowledge, which is a source of power to help me to continue to drive change.

You have mentioned that about 70% of your principals are new since you started. You are known to put a lot of faith in your principals and give them a lot of responsibility.

If my principals get better, the school system gets better. Principals need to engage teachers, engage

parents, and engage students. They need to do all these things. In schools that work right, you have a principal who is creating a kind of magnetic pull. If that doesn't happen, then other things won't either.

I give the school community as a whole a lot of responsibility. We worked with the board on rewriting policies so that instead of the old school leadership teams, we have family councils that incorporate parents, partners, teachers, and students. Those folks have a say in the recommendation to the board on who the principal will be, and on budget approval. The principals control the budget because ultimately, they will be responsible, but we do get parent and community input, and it gives us important information about tension points in individual schools.

Can you talk a little bit about the human capital strategy of the district and about how you built capacity at the leadership level and elsewhere?

Our impatience with results has been our human capital strategy. We always thought of Fair Student Funding, the lever that touches everything, as being a human capital strategy. Before you were a leader who had one role, and all of a sudden you're on a team in charge of \$4 million with a political role in your school. This triggers key decision points for people. We partnered aggressively with national organizations such as The New Teacher Project, Teach for America, and New Leaders for New Schools so that the teachers who are coming into schools are from these pipeline programs. At first, it was just about filling vacancies, but now, it is a question of accountability and seeing outcomes for our students.

Probability will tell you that if you have 11,000 employees in an organization, at least 300 of them are extraordinary at their job. If we look at those 300, if we determine what matters in their success, if we make it intentional rather than accidental, I have no doubt about the ability of the school system to generate capacity. What I have doubted is the willingness of the organization to find those people and put them in positions that allow them to reach all the students.



Andrés Alonso (left) and DMC's Garrett Smith

Part of what we are deeply engaged in now is how to make this intentional. We should know who the people are who have what it takes to be great leaders. Then, we have to make sure they have the experiences and opportunities to move into positions of leadership in the future. Basically, I should become irrelevant, and so should the central office.

We now have an entirely different cabinet than when I arrived. It's a high-functioning team intentionally, because I shouldn't feel necessary in the work. I don't think it should be any different in the schools. The work of a really great principal is, in some ways, to ultimately become irrelevant. It's about finding great teachers, and then our job at the central office is to figure out who can become the next great principal. Your job should be developing the person who is going to be as good as you are. I think we are better for it.

Every organization has to have a sense of efficacy about their work. When I sense that people don't have a sense of efficacy, then the game is lost. People are like kids and dogs; they can sense and smell fear, frustration, and hatred. There are very primal emotions at work. The work of the organi-

zation has to be about finding folks who are going to change that dynamic for other adults and kids.

The way that DMC has been thinking about it, the evaluation process serves as a critical opportunity to identify and develop your high performers.

Evaluation is essential. It's shocking how seldom it is done in schools around the nation. In one year, we went from 55% of teachers being evaluated to 98% of teachers being evaluated! That was about intentional processes at the central office. All these things led to the moment when we could begin to have conversations with the teachers around what was happening with compensation, what was happening with career ladders, around school-based options, etc. We are having exactly those conversations with principals now, because they are the next frontier.

Evaluation is important, but it may not be *the* way because most evaluations are about evaluating someone in a role they are currently performing. It's very difficult to evaluate someone for a job they are not performing. ▸

So how do you identify strong leaders?

It goes back to essentials. What do we think leadership is about? Leadership is ultimately about how one performs as a member of a team. How often do you have systems that can evaluate teachers in terms of how they participate as part of a team outside the classroom? The way people are interviewed is wrong. When you interview here, you are not given an individual one-on-one. You are put in a group and we watch how you function there. It's nothing really revolutionary, but it's unusual in a school system. Every time we dive into a problem, we find it is a problem of group dynamics. That is the lens through which we see our future leaders. And that is how we also see our teachers: a teacher is a single person who is interacting with a group—the group tends to be a group of children, which doesn't make it any easier.

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These group dynamics happen in the classroom, in the school, and in the community. I guess you could expand that and say that your approach to reform has been figuring out group dynamics.

My work is about making things happen. My work is about conflict. It is about effectiveness and success. We're trying to remove all the structural barriers that have caused the work to stagnate in districts for decades. All of these things are very co-dependent. You will not get any gains from curriculum realignment if you don't remove bad teachers. You won't get anything out of removing bad teachers if you are not seeing that teachers get the proper training. All of these things are tremendously interconnected. If we push teachers who are failing from one school to another school and

then ask principals why they are not getting better outcomes, that breeds the kind of cynicism we see in a lot of schools. That principal is going to go home to their community and think, “How could I possibly do it any differently? You are saddling me with something impossible.” I think it is all connected, and the organization has to somehow ramp up its game in all areas.

There is one more topic that I would love to ask you about, and I know it's something you care very deeply about. You were a special education teacher. As a superintendent, what work have you done around special education?

When I stepped into the district, there was this lawsuit that had been going on for over two decades. An implementation team from the state Department of Education was embedded in the system, and we had meetings with plaintiffs, the court master, the state director for special education, and some board members around outcomes and commitments. I joined those meetings and paid enormous attention to what was happening and how we were organized in order to respond to the work.

One of the first articulations of how we were going to work was our planned response to the courts. Plans were always written from the perspective of the central office: the department will do this and that. But ownership for the outcomes was in the department. We changed that right away because the interactions with kids are happening in individual schools. The solution has to be framed around what the principals will do, what the teachers will do, and what the school will do. The central office will provide support, but the accountability has to be at the school level. The larger accountability issue of how we support the schools was mine. It wasn't about the courts or the state Department of Education.

That early accountability conversation was huge in terms of broadcasting how I operate. All it took was for me to bring twenty principals and their special education directors to meet with me and with my special ed director. They knew that if we needed to have the conversation again, they would not have their jobs. I am very lucky to have

amazingly talented people working around me. I have the best director of special education services in the country, I think. It's a partnership. We managed to create a sense of partnership with the plaintiffs and the state Department of Education. And this is all because I knew what I was talking about—the fact that I had lived it.

So your experience in special education was critical in your first major hurdle as a superintendent. How do you see special education fitting in to your district as a whole?

I don't separate special education from general education, and vice versa. It is really part of the larger conversation about how we support kids. How do we make this commitment and then follow up on it? What are our systems? How are we working with the teachers so that they get better at what they do? If we know that things are not going well, then we know we have a responsibility to fix them. In order to do all that, we have to know the schools. The schools don't need me telling them what to do. They need me to know the schools so intimately that if something goes wrong, they can count on me to offer support and to offer guidance.

You mentioned earlier how you think some of that heat in your first year really was the impetus behind change.

I think heat and controversy fuel a fantastic environment for change and redefinition. I think the heat makes the metal. We are in the middle of an opportunity again! I don't want anyone to feel comfortable. We are thinking through the role of the central office again, and are trying to safeguard schools. We are having conversations at the board level about our foundational principles. We need to have those conversations now. The worst thing that could happen would be if the schools moved in one direction and then we had to pull them back. We are now in the fourth year of a structural budget shortfall which we have handled magnificently. Anything that is not essential goes away. Every single shortfall has been about sharpening the point of the spear.

It's an opportunity to make trade-offs and fund the things that really matter.

It's also an opportunity to assert that school communities need to be responsible in the work. We have safeguarded the schools, but maintained their accountability for what's happening. No one in Baltimore City can say we don't have any art teachers because you have taken money away. If you don't have a strong arts program, it is because you decided as a community that it is not important. That has to remain, as far as I'm concerned. Those are the hard conversations. I think responsibility at the school level is a far greater lever for change than anything dictated from above—even when the schools make mistakes. It should be okay for schools to make mistakes, as long as they get certain fundamental things right. It allows us to define ourselves again in relation to what we think matters.

People see budget cuts as something terrible. But from my perspective, you still have \$3 million at your disposal to go create the greatest program in the world! How are you different in that from an independent school, a parochial school, a charter school? This is our opportunity to instill our vision of schooling.

What's next for you in terms of priorities you want to tackle?

We played by the playbook at the beginning, but we did it with our own flavor. The gravitational pull tends to be about returning to a past way, so we constantly need to ask ourselves where to go next. I really enjoy the team that I work with because now we are fighting things that we couldn't even think about when I arrived. As long as I see them grappling with things that are hard to answer, I am happy.



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