



# Dr. Dixon's First 100 Days



## First Hundred Days Report

**Superintendent Dr. Talisa L. Dixon**  
Cleveland Heights - University Heights City Schools

### Enter Dr. Dixon...

Dr. Talisa L. Dixon began as new Superintendent of Cleveland Heights – University Heights City Schools August 1, 2014. Since then, in her first 100 days, she has tasked herself with meeting the constituents of the District in order to formulate an accurate 3D concept of the needs and values of the schools and community. Ultimately, her plan is to strategically implement the change that is needed in order to improve the District's bottom line: student learning.

### Goals

To ensure a smooth transition into her new role, Dr. Dixon set out to accomplish these goals:

- Gain District oversight by gathering appropriate and complete information
- Identify and understand clearly the challenges facing the District
- Determine priorities and responsibilities
- Develop effective relationships
- Host opportunities to meet District students and staff
- Engage the community during the new transition



Dixon at her welcome reception  
August 5, 2014



Dr. Dixon "pushes off" at a play date at  
Oxford Elementary School  
October 23, 2014

*“Tiger Nation demands excellence and our students have the capability of achieving excellence.”*

## Key Stakeholders

The first 100 days were used to learn about five different groups: 1) students, 2) parents, 3) staff, 4) community and 5) city leaders: the key stakeholders in the District’s success. Methods of data collection included personal interviews, group meetings and surveys. Findings were then synthesized to create a big picture of the entire District. Dr. Dixon has also spent a considerable amount of

time and energy learning about the District’s Master Facilities Plan and providing leadership around the implementation of Phase 1, which includes the complete renovation of the high school and middle schools.

The assessment in the first 100 days will inform Dr. Dixon’s first year of incumbency, the transitional phase in which more learning and gentle shaping are going on, preceding changes in strategy.

Towards the end of the 2014-2015 school year, Dr. Dixon will report her first-year findings and announce the progress of the District’s 5-year strategic plan at her 360 Degree Feedback/State of the Schools Address.

In the parts that follow, the five stakeholder group information syntheses are related. The Phase 1 Master Facilities Plan is covered in Part 6.

## Part 1: Students

August 25, 2014: the first bell rang at 8:05 a.m. at Monticello Middle School. Dr. Dixon was in the hallway greeting and directing students to their first class of the school year. She is making it a priority to understand the culture and needs of each school. This was just one of the numerous times Dr. Dixon visited all schools and numerous classrooms in her first 100 days. Her educator instincts kicked in as she read books to children, participated in hands-on floor activities, interacted with teachers and acted as a chaperone on the playground. Fully-

engaged students are what Dr. Dixon wants to see in every classroom.

She said, “I have learned that all children want attention and special recognition of their unique abilities. We can engage them by tapping into their individual gifts. Teachers, parents, community members, siblings and peers can serve as positive role models and act as sounding boards and recognizers of each student’s potential. We make up a learning community that is ubiquitous and embraces the fluid kind of learning that takes place in the lives of our students.”

Dr. Dixon took time to review the District’s state report card and other assessments with key personnel to determine

strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. “Our 2013-2014 State Report Card doesn’t even begin to tell our story,” she said, “but it does demonstrate that our District is not achieving according to the state’s terms. Our Ohio Department of Education scorecard shows ‘D’s and ‘F’s.” She continued, “The bar has been raised, and the high stakes tests are just getting harder. The state’s new rating system is unfairly slanted against us, but we are going to be strategic in our approach and identify and use instructional strategies that motivate our students to learn. Tiger Nation demands excellence and our students have the capability of achieving excellence.”



Oxford Play Date  
October 23, 2014.

From looking at the data, Dr. Dixon concluded that there is great potential for closing the achievement gaps. “Targeted professional development and procedures will help,” she said. She also made mention of needing to better support the growing ELL (English Language Learners) student population. And early intervention is very important to Dixon; particularly, she highlighted the District’s early childhood program: “If we can get them off to the right start at a crucial time in their development, it will give our students a chance to build a positive future.”

She commented on academic programming as such: “We are going to stay the course at our elementary and middle schools with either our proven International Baccalaureate or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) frameworks. Our teachers have received excellent professional development and mentoring opportunities and we’re seeing our students become more engaged and inspired to learn because of the real world

learning opportunities and hands-on projects.”

At the high school level, the Small Schools structure will change with the move into the temporary Heights High on the Wiley Campus in the 2015-2016 school year. The Small School feel and emphasis on relationship building with our students will remain a strong focus. Dr. Dixon said of the changes, “It is one part of a larger strategic planning process to identify the goals, values and tactics that will help the District ensure a successful future for our schools.” She recognizes that parents are concerned about the graduation rate and readiness for post-secondary education, an area where improvement is needed. Dr. Dixon organized a “Student Cadre” of high school students to tap directly into their thoughts and feelings regarding their

own education. “I learn the most about our students by listening to them,” she stated. “It’s better than reading data, although I do that, too.” Student Cadre agendas were created by students, and Dr. Dixon asked students to be candid as they discussed what they like at the school and what can be improved. One of her goals was to establish these students as leaders with a voice. Discussion topics included the amount of standardized testing that is required, students’ desire for more independence, the dress code, clubs and extra-curricular opportunities, and communication to students. Getting this information now is particularly important with regards to how the new Heights High functions in the future.

*“Targeted professional development and procedures will help.”*



Student Cadre meeting at Heights High

## Part 2: Parents & Guardians

Dr. Dixon was able to meet a diverse range of parents and guardians from different schools and different socioeconomic strata during her classroom visits and one-on-one at various community meetings. She was eager to learn first-hand about their concerns and ideas. “What

emerged from our conversations was the parents’ belief that their children could be better challenged, that different forms of engagement are needed, and that the expectations could be higher both at home and in school....It is my personal belief that we have, in some places, broken systems of student support, which could be repaired with parental assistance.”

Dr. Dixon participated in a Family Engagement Steering Committee to hear more parent and guardian voices on important topics. “Opportunities to engage with parents abound,” stated Dixon. Despite an urgent desire to start on her strategic plan, Dixon reflected that she needs to continuously work with families. She wants to narrow the “awareness gap,”

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as she calls it, in order to coordinate the parental support that could truly aid students. Dixon also met with PTA Council Presidents in a small-group setting to discuss ideas about improving the District’s relationship with parents and teachers. The group called for more District administration involvement in low-performing schools. Superintendent Dixon and other District leaders attended a community meeting October 14, 2014, held to discuss the future change in academic programming of Heights

High School. Many parents attended to voice opinions regarding how the Small Schools initiative worked from 2004-2014, and their concerns and hopes for the new programming. Dixon also met with parent music groups, or “boosters,” to discuss performing arts in the District including: the activities and funding of various students performances and trips, the hard work students do to excel as performers, and the committed efforts their parents make to support the success of the programs.



Dr. Dixon presents Master Teacher plaques at Convocation Day

### Part 3: District Staff

“I first want to say how impressed I am with the passion our teachers exhibit. I can see their personal commitment in the way they interact – nurturing and shaping, treating their students the way they’d treat their very own children.” This was the starting point for Dr. Dixon’s reflection on what she learned from interacting with District staff. She spent many hours visiting in classrooms to see learning and teaching in progress. She was interested in discovering the District’s teaching strengths and areas for improvement. To that end, one mission was to understand each school’s individual culture and the expectations of students. Dr. Dixon also met with each school principal one

-on-one in order to establish individual relationships and to address each school’s data outcomes. To improve student achievement, the District is using the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). “The OIP will be used in the District to emphasize the individual school role and culture, but we have to, at the same time, recognize that we are one District that needs to focus on aligned and coherent actions that minimize or eliminate conflicting directives,” she said. Dixon continued, “Our teams will continuously monitor for progress and learning – not compliance. Internal accountability has been established through our leadership structures, District and building leadership teams and teacher building teams. I’m very encouraged with what

I’m learning about the District’s staff. We are all going to do our part. Nobody wants to let their team down, because we know what’s on the line – student success. We will all have to hold each other accountable and focus on a few issues that have the greatest impact on student achievement.” Dixon is in support of curriculum mapping to help guide teacher instruction that also adheres to Common Core State Standards. She also has learned about some of the disciplinary challenges for teachers, and intends to see a reduction in the number of discipline referrals. “We won’t accomplish this by turning our heads away from inappropriate behavior, but by setting clear expectations for students and letting

students know when and why they aren't meeting our expectations." She sees opportunities for teachers to turn to colleagues, school social workers and guidance counselors to help guide students to behavior that will keep them in the classroom. Superintendent Dixon meets weekly with central office directors. In these meetings, Dixon has been able to determine norms, procedures and processes that govern how decisions are made. Moreover, the Board of Education Members have proven their passion for serving students and for the

Cleveland Heights – University Heights community as a whole.

Dixon communicates with the Board on a weekly basis.

In her first Board of Education and Board administrative retreat meeting, Dixon reviewed her important areas of focus:

Facilities Planning  
Family Engagement  
Comprehensive Program  
Evaluation & Assessment of  
Growth Measures

Dixon has also met with District administrative assistants and the grounds and trades team. They

openly shared a sentiment of dedication to their work, and wanted to discuss everyday matters and longer-term career concerns. Dixon has committed to troubleshooting and providing resources for professional development.

Having met with union representatives from the District, Dr. Dixon was able to make better sense of the District's labor history, and to establish decision-making protocols.



Dr. Dixon attends her first board meeting August 5, 2014

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## Part 4: Community

"This is a proud and caring community with ambitions beyond your average school district. Our surrounding community believes in us as well and has invested in us," Dr. Dixon stated in her 2014 Convocation Day speech to all staff at the start of the new school year.

In order to learn about the invested groups, Dr. Dixon made Friday morning "coffee klatches" a regular occurrence in the first semester of her incumbency. "My first 100 Days were about getting to know the community and building relationships. I have found these

intimate conversations over a cup of coffee to be invaluable, because people feel comfortable speaking candidly in these informal settings," she said. "They might not be scheduled as regularly, but I want to continue the coffee klatches well beyond my first 100 days." Dixon noted the value of getting first-hand information and giving community stakeholders a voice, and the benefit of being able to coordinate with the coffee klatch groups on next steps between the organizations and the District. At these meetings, Dixon has met with several parent and community groups, including the

Sustainability Working Group, Family Connections, Link4Schools, Parent Ambassadors, Reaching Heights, Future Heights and Citizens for Heights Schools.

Dr. Dixon was also the guest speaker at a Family Connections breakfast fundraiser on October 22, an event held at the Cleveland Heights Community Center. Family Connections is a valued community organization that provides early literacy, parenting support and school readiness services in the Greater

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Cleveland area. “I witnessed, firsthand, Family Connections’ involvement with parents and students at Oxford Elementary. The support and encouragement they provide to our families who aren’t sure how to engage in their student’s education or how to approach teachers and principals with questions are invaluable.”

In November 2014, Dr. Dixon met with a group of local realtors. The topics of academic programming, state report card scores, local taxes and the plans for facilities were especially of interest. “I wanted to highlight the attributes of the District that make it unique and attractive. I also talked about the future of our schools and how they are going to contribute to a better community,” she said. “Tax dollars are important to interested home buyers, as are strong schools. We have a lot to offer young families looking for a place to raise and educate their children. Our local realtors are best positioned to relay that information. We loaded them up with marketing packets full of our success stories.”

Dr. Dixon serves on the First

Ring Superintendents Collaborative, an association of suburban school superintendents whose school districts surround the city of Cleveland, Ohio. Through this association, she has been able to establish relationships of trust with neighboring school district superintendents. These meetings helped give Dr. Dixon perspective on the education climate of the Northeast Ohio area, the common values and the challenges of the region. Dr. Dixon also met with local college and university presidents and administrators to talk about partnerships to bridge secondary and post-secondary education. Also discussed were opportunities for college and university students to go into the schools as student teachers and volunteers, to bring new ideas and special programs to the District.

The cities of University Heights and Cleveland Heights abound with local educational groups. Among the groups Dr. Dixon met with to discuss partnerships in her first 100 days were Reaching Heights, Family Connections, Open Doors

Academy, Link4Schools, Lake Erie Ink and the Closing the Achievement Gap, all organizations that support school and home connections, best educational practices, supplemental instruction, enrichment and social and educational improvement. The District very much values the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) in supporting the success of the District’s diverse student body. The Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District is a founding member of the group. Dixon met with the national organization’s governing board in Chicago. It forms a national coalition of multiracial suburban/urban school districts that have come together to ensure racial differences in achievement are eliminated while improving the achievement of all students.

*“They might not be scheduled as regularly, but I want to continue the coffee klatches well beyond my first 100 days.”*



Dr. Dixon hosts a Coffee Klatch October 24, 2014

## Part 5: City Leaders

Dr. Dixon spent time meeting with local mayors and councilpersons in order to establish a clearer idea of the important interrelationship the District has with its cities and neighbors.

In Cleveland Heights, Dixon met with the mayor and city manager to reestablish joint board-city council meetings, and to schedule monthly meetings with the city manager to discuss future city-school partnerships. In University Heights, Dixon had

a personal interview with the mayor, in which she was welcomed to the community. The relationship with University Heights in the transition period for the facilities overhaul through 2019 will be an important one. A small section of South Euclid also makes up part of the CH-UH School District. Dr. Dixon plans to extend an invitation to the mayor and council in the coming weeks. In Cuyahoga County, Dixon had

a personal interview with a councilperson, whose involvement with the CH-UH District will include assisting the District with obtaining grant monies for a 2-year pilot initiative called Close the Achievement Gap. The grant will extend 2 more years depending on the measured success of student improvement.



Rendering of Heights High when completed in 2017

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## Part 6: Phase 1 Master Facilities Plan

Dr. Dixon came to the District at a pivotal point in the execution of the Phase 1 Master Facilities Plan, a plan to completely renovate Cleveland Heights High School and Roxboro and Monticello middle schools. The Cleveland Heights and University Heights communities passed a \$157 MM bond issue in November of 2013 and pre-construction community engagement and design activities commenced in February of 2014. Dr. Dixon closely reviews reports from the Facilities

Accountability Committee, a select group of community members overseeing the project to ensure needs are met and within budget. She meets regularly with the owner’s representative, Project Management Consultants (PMC), and the design team, Balog, Steines, Hendricks & Manchester Architects, Inc. (BSHM) to understand from their perspective how the project should and will unfold. Dixon is in a close working relationship with the Business Services Department, which serves as the District’s organizers of all parties involved in the

process. Dixon has also heard the voices of community members, staff and students at many meetings held for the purpose of getting District and community input. “This is a plan that necessarily involves many people, and may at times be challenging because we want to accommodate all needs for various academic and extracurricular programming, stay within our budget and be the kind of eco-friendly District that this community expects

and deserves,” said Dixon. “I feel confident that we are going to build fantastic schools for our students, and the more valuable input we get from the community, the better they are going to be tailored to our District’s unique needs. I am committed to getting this right.”

*“I am committed to getting this right.”*

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## Superintendent Dr. Talisa L. Dixon

### Conclusion

From students to families, staff to community, city leaders to facilities, Dr. Dixon has in her first 100 days of incumbency gotten a bird's-eye view of the District as a whole. "Understanding comes first," she said about entering a new school district, "especially one with this history and legacy.

"A lot of it comes down to communication and collaboration at every level," she continued. "First, our students must be engaged and encouraged to be the best students they can possibly be. Then our teachers need to understand our children and be trained well in order to meet student needs and establish standards and high expectations.

Teachers and families must unite over the challenges and celebrations of student activity and achievement.

Other staff personnel need to be appreciated by their superiors for the hard work they do, and must have opportunities to be heard and develop professionally, because they too have experience and insight into the workings of our District. The passion surrounding the improvement of our schools comes from both the bottom up and from the top down.

Our Board of Education has so much to take into consideration when making decisions for the district, so it's important to engage the community as well, to get the very best input from our partnering organizations, businesses and educators. We need our city leaders to understand and support our mission and we need to understand and support our three cities. It is my hope that we can get our schools on the same page with the promising future of this rich and vibrant community."

When asked about her next steps beyond the 100 days, Dixon had this to say: "My next step is to develop a 5-year plan for this district with all of the key stakeholders. There is a lot to be done, and it will be crucial to have a plan in place where we can work on multiple facets at a time, because none of it waits. We will deal with the daily distractions but not let them knock us off course. We've just gotten our community to invest in the future of our school buildings and our students. With this community's support I believe this district can execute a plan that delivers results in both the short and long term. It's going to take a commitment from everyone to see it through."



Find the First 100 Days Video on the [chuh.org](http://www.chuh.org) website at:

<http://www.chuh.org/First100Days.aspx>

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