

WEAA Town Meeting With Andres Alonso

Hour 1

5/19/08

Marc: Welcome back, I'm Marc Steiner here at WEAA the voice of the community, 88.9. And let me say before I introduce our guest what a pleasure it is to find a lovely home here at WEAA with all of you. Back on the air again and we'll be doing a series of specials over the next month or so here with a number of people. And tonight we are lucky and honored to have in our studios here at WEAA Dr. Andres Alonso who is CEO of the Baltimore City Public Schools and welcome, good to have you with us here.

Dr. Alonso: Thank you sir

Marc: Helping me- and thank you for helping me launch our first night here on WEAA

Dr. Alonso: Great honor.

Marc: Good to have you with us. - We want all of you to join us. There's a lot going on in our schools. I've been talking to a lot of people about Dr. Alonso's almost first year in office here at city schools- Less than a month it'll be a year, is that correct?

Dr. Alonso: Correct.

Marc: And many people have called up and some people have said "well he's making so many changes" that some people- the reformers- are saying, "slow down". (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: (Laughs)

Marc: And so, we'll talk about that and more. You can raise any issue you'd like about suspensions, about teachers, about the new structures of the schools, what's happening with decimating the bureaucracy on North Avenue, and more, whatever's on your mind. And so we're doing it today from 6 to 8 pm because we want teachers, students, to have a chance- parents to have a chance to join this conversation and talk to the new CEO of our schools. So join us here. The number is: 410 319 8888, that's 410 319 8888, or write to us here if you'd rather do that at steinershow@gmail.com. Email has already come in from that, we'll get to that in a little bit, but join us here and we'd love to have you on the air with us.

So, Dr. Alonso there's a lot been going on and- there's so many things we can begin- but let me start by talking about this new plan you came up with for alternative schools. And, there was a huge, obviously, explosion in the community here after the one teacher was beaten up and the beating was shown on youtube- Students put it up which is sort of a new world of students doing things like that and putting things up on the web for all of us to see their actions. And- you came up with this plan for

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alternative schools- let me throw out the critique that many people have thrown out, you can kinda respond to it first. And the critique is: Okay, its fine to put up alternative schools, but don't we need a unified student- a new unified policy in our schools that says "We do not tolerate violence against teachers , violence against other students, and people have to be dealt with."

Even some of the teachers I know who support you completely, many of them, on our broad cast on the center for emerging media, on the web, said "You've got to do something, you've gotta put these kids in jail, you just can't let them beat teachers and think they can get away with it."

Dr. Alonso: Well, first of all, we do have such a unified policy in that we say quite consistently and unequivocally that there is no place for violence in our schools. The question then becomes, in a school system in a city with very complex issues that involve students who deserve a good education and adults who deserve an opportunity to provide the education, what do you do with students who have a legal right to be in school when they do certain things that require that they be removed from the classroom? The present system that we have in place, even when there is an immediate consequence on the part of the school that expels the child or gives the child a long term suspension, has no structure within the system to put the kid in a school so that the consequence is not a reward. If you are a child who, or a young adult who doesn't like school, who is doing certain things to put him or herself out- you're creating a reward if the response of the school system is to say, "You're out." So clearly there has to be a way to continue the education process for these kids, in a setting that is structured, so that there is consequence, but the education can continue.

The alternative schools that we announced, where something beyond the notion of how to respond to incidents of violence. The reality of the conversation about student behavior in the last month and a half is that it has obscured some of the issues that brought me to Baltimore, in that, independent of the question of student conduct- and I continue to say that the overwhelming majority of our students are coming to school to learn everyday- we have a problem with the graduation rate, we have a problem with truancy, we have a problem with our students meeting standards. And what I saw, where actually thousands of students who were becoming over age for their grade, in settings that were not targeted to their needs. So the expansion of alternative schools, beyond the transitional setting for students in suspension, is really about creating options for students who don't have the options in their present school in terms of schools that work for them.

Marc: But, let me ask you two questions about that and I then I will open the phones here shortly so please join us at 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com as we talk with Baltimore City School CEO Andres Alonso.

The stake on these alternative schools- there are two issues here I'm gonna take them one at a time. One has to do with the suspensions- Before we get to the kids who are overage, which I really want to ask you about. Some people would argue: why is it not more important to create a system that allows students who are suspended, for whatever reason, to be at in-school suspension with counselors, therapists, teachers working with those students in school rather than shipping them across town to some other school and then bringing them back.

Dr. Alonso: Well, we're trying to do both things, in that, if you think in terms of the way in which we are operationalizing the district right now with flexibility of the school budgets at the school and with a shift in funding that actually provides more dollars to many of the high schools where some of these children are lumped- the schools can choose to use the flexibility over their budgets in order to provide those kinds of

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settings. Right now, that is not possible within the structure of the building, that's number one. But secondly, there will always be some offenses that require that the child be put out of the school. That's part of the law, and it's part of our guidance to the schools, that there are some kinds of offenses that should require that- for both symbolic force and for the well being of a school- the child should be asked to not be in the school.

Marc: But not in the streets

Alonso: At the same time the child should not be in the streets. So for that type of incident and for that type of child, part of what we would like to see is a systemic structure alternative which we are creating for the first time- Which basically allows a school, in the case of some highly defined incidents to say, "You go to this alternative place."

For many other students who engage in certain kinds of conduct that should not be tolerated in the classroom, my hope is that the schools become very creative in terms of creating the in-school suspension, the Saturday suspension, places where they can provide a consequence for the child that is not simply about pushing them out of the classroom.

Marc: Now- you're a man who has a reputation- from everybody I've talked to, from board members off the record, to teachers, to principals off the record- amazing how many people want to talk off the record, but it's fine. You learn a lot that way.

Dr. Alonso: (Laughs) And I'm always on the record.

Marc: (Laughs) But, the question is- People say, "Well, Alonso's good. His ideas are great, but he moves too fast. Alternative high schools, so, we're pushing for these alternative high schools, but then who's gonna man them, where are the therapists coming from, who's gonna run them because the two schools we have now that are alternative schools, are failing. They're not working, the kids have a--"

Dr. Alonso: And they're being restructured, but I should say now "Ah Baltimore" (Laughs)

Marc: (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: In that, my experience here in this fantastic city since I arrived is that people are, quite often, incredibly quick to point out "this is what's not working"

Marc: Right

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Dr. Alonso: And then when you, one, me chooses to do something about it immediately- as we all should when we see somethings that's not working- then what comes back is "Oh but you're moving too fast. Pilot it. Phase it in." Well, if I wanted pilots I'd be in the Air Force.

Marc: (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: My strategy has been- since I got here- is to be immediately responsive to the problems that are being outlined. Understanding that, if its not working then the worst that can happen is that we make it a little bit better.

Marc: But very specifically- and then I want to go to our first caller, Sandy, whose holding on and go right to her- You had this idea to do this, but its now almost June. These schools have to open in the fall. So, who's gonna run the schools? Who's gonna be the principals? who are the teachers-

Dr. Alonso: Well, its the same conversation that we were having in November and December about the secondary transformation schools. In that, we were being told, "You're doing it too fast. In one year you're going to do what took a different transformation movement more time to do." Well- lo and behold- within a space of three months we were able to get great partners, we were able to get extraordinary interest on the part of parents and kids, and they're gonna happen.

Now, in the case of the alternative schools, we have been thinking about the alternative schools for a very long time. As a matter of fact, we held off an announcement when we announced the secondary schools, because we did not want to confuse- especially understanding that there might be some push back on the basis of where these schools were going to be- we did not want to couple the types of schools. So, we have been thinking about the alternative schools for a very long time. The key has always been for us: can we design settings that work for kids? And then- and I have tremendous faith in the capacity of people in the system to rise to the challenge- can we find great leaders? Can we find great teachers? Absolutely. Can we also find great partners? Because if you look at the way the alternative schools have been framed, they're all about making sure that kids not only have time in school, but also have partnerships within the community for apprenticeship, for the kind of youth development types of interventions that they need to have. We are not going to be able to move these kids as they should be moved if we simply put them in a school setting and not change the nature of the school setting. I am convinced that by the end of August when we launch these schools, they will not only be in place but they're going to transform the nature of experience for these kids in the schools.

Marc: Its your turn to talk with Doctor Andres Alonso, CEO of the Baltimore City Schools. I'm Marc Steiner here with a special broadcast town meeting with the CEO of our schools here at WEAA, the voice of our community, at 88.9. You can join us here, at 410 319 8888 or write to us here at Steinershow@gmail.com. And lets go to the phones, and I think Sandy from (unintelligible) who has been holding on for a long time, you're on the air.

Caller Sandy: Thank you Marc for taking my call first of all.

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Marc: Thank you for calling.

Sandy: Absolutely- I'm a teacher in the Baltimore City Public School System. I've been teaching for Baltimore City Schools for 28 years. I've never seen the fear that many of the teachers experience that we've had this past year. My question is for Doctor Alonso- The alternative schools sounds wonderful, I would say we need them ASAP. The alternative schools are great, but what about the students who are in the Baltimore City Public school system who come everyday to do the right thing? What plan do you have for them, as far as gifted and talented programs or something to keep them safe in the schools that they're able to come to school, get the education that they wish to get and then achieve the goals they wish to achieve? Because we do have great students in the Baltimore City Public schools as well and they don't make the press and we know that.

Marc: Quick question Sandy: Why is this year different than other years in terms of the fear level of teachers? What's so different?

Sandy: Well I think that the teachers, with the gang activity that has become present in the Baltimore City Public schools, the teachers are more fearful than they've ever been. There has always been- well, I won't say always- but there's been violence. The youtube video just made the tube. Its nothing new, if you teach in the schools we know that's been happening for maybe four or five years.

Marc: Andres-

Dr. Alonso: Well, a couple of things. First of all, its not simply the teachers who might be afraid. The kids are afraid. Part of what I've been hearing from the beginning of the year- and its one of the reasons why we introduced an initiative to put metal detectors in schools if that's what the community wanted- is that we understood that because of the growth of gangs in the city, many, many kids- We are a school community where the kids are riding buses, coming from different parts of the city, quite often away from their home communities. We understood that many kids were carrying, sometimes, weapons because they were afraid of the consequences of being away from home at the end of the day [or] at the beginning of the day. So we've known from the beginning of the year that its not simply about adults in a school. Its about the children in the school, thats number one.

Secondly, I'm glad that you said that there are wonderful things going on in the school system. As I said before, I think the overwhelming number of kids are coming to school to do the right thing. Thirdly, and you've heard me say again and again and again, this is a community issue, this is not a school issue. If there are gangs in the city, then, in order to get at the root cause of the problem it can't be about what's happening in the school because many of the kids who are in gangs or the adults that are in gangs are not in the school. I mean, part of the problem is that the kids are dropping out to be in gangs or if we put them out of school, they are out of school getting into gangs. So there is the issue of how do we as a community- the churches, the men in the community, the agencies in the community- come together in order to own this problem as a community. Because you're absolutely right, the best way to hold our kids

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in schools and stop them from the kinds of behaviors that get them into trouble is to create options that they buy into.

One of the things that we did in this year's budget is to increase the funding for students that, in the past, would have been quote unquote gifted types of students, from roughly four and a half million dollars in this year's budget, to almost twenty two million dollars in next year's budget. So the hope is that in every single school- especially in the schools where the attention has been only on remediation for kids- that there be an attention paid to the kinds of enrichment programs that are actually going to hold these kids in schools.

The alternative schools are a way- and Marc forgot to come back to the issue of the over-age kids- a way to help the schools and the kids by providing options for kids for whom the traditional setting cannot possibly work because of some of the challenges that they present. If you're fifteen years old and your still in a fifth grade class, it's not gonna work for you. It has nothing to do with behavior, perhaps, it has to do with a need for a different setting. There are many many other students- the overwhelming majority of the students once again- for whom the answer is within a traditional program and then how we execute the traditional program is the name of the game- And quite frankly something that I have been consistently saying, also since I've been here: the answer is not in a central office. The answer is really in the capacity of commitment of people like you who are in our schools. You now have a flexibility over the programs that you didn't have before so, my hope is that you use it to put on the best possible program for the kids.

Marc: Before I jump in with my thoughts (unintelligible) what you said. I think its important to go to another caller here. Sandy thanks so much for your call and lets go to John in Bowie, you're on the air.

Caller John: Hello, hi-

Marc: Hi John

John: Yea, I've got just a simple comment here. At one point I wanted to become a teacher myself on the public schools, but thinking about the violence, the respect level that the students have towards the teachers- I just remember when I was growing up, the teacher was really the king of the classroom and any student that really disrespected the teacher was just basically asked to leave the classroom and- at some point asked to leave the school. The focus was truly on the student that had a desire to be in the classroom and wanted to learn. Those that did not have the desire, you know, just became part of that 10 percent. In my opinion, I really think there should be much more of an emphasis on the students that desire to learn, that come to school to learn. That 35- 40 per cent failure rate, or non-graduation rate, those students- If you don't have the desire, you just gotta be out. We really need to focus on the students that have a desire to be in the school for educational purposes only. The social, the community, all that stuff- other components of the government can handle that.

(Both Dr. Alonso and John speaking at once)

Marc: John, let me let Dr. Alonso tackle that one. Go ahead.

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Dr. Alonso: The problem clearly is that the other components of the government are not handling the problem. If they were handling the problem they would not be turning to the schools as the solution so, I'll give you some examples John. We have almost 7,000 students in our schools who are in foster care. By definition these are kids who have gone through traumas in their personal life that clearly intrude on their ability to do schooling in the way that I did lets say- coming from an intact family with extraordinary support at home, even though I went through poverty in this country and where I grew up- and the question is: [can] we as a society afford to let that 10 percent go? Where do you think they go? As the chief of police has said when he was commenting two weeks ago on the issue of homicides and shooting of young victims and the issue of suspension and truancy- kids who are being put out are not going out to join soup kitchens. They are going out in order to become the kind of problem, quite often, that we then spend the rest of our lives bemoaning in terms of what's wrong with the society.

Let us also remember the following thing: the issue is not 30- 35 percent. If you look at the studies that have been coming out in the past two to three years in terms of graduation rates in this city and other major cities, the graduation rate as calculated by Ed[ucation] Week in Baltimore- and we can debate that rate- was 35 percent in 2004. So, its not as though we're losing a tenth of the population. We are losing a much higher percentage of the population and clearly there has to be better options and programs and we need to do a much better job in terms of working with kids who are presenting huge challenges.

But, the answer cannot possibly be to give up on any child because it would not be acceptable for my child and, I said- on my first day on the job- that there are no disposable children and I remain tied to that formulation. There is clearly a need to come up with different ways of working with kids for whom the present traditional setting is not working and who create such challenges for other classrooms that there needs to be a different formulation of the work. But, its not as though we can say we should concentrate on some kids and then let the others go. That's not the job. No one has hired me to say "work with 60 percent and let the other 40 percent go."

Marc: Let me ask you a question. You're talking about doing things immediately- then we'll come right back to the phones here so Maxine (sp), Hakeed (sp), Tanya (sp) hold on we're gonna come to your calls and John thank you so much for your call. But- the problems that you talk about decentralization, putting the power into the hands of principals, budget power-

Dr. Alonso: School Community, not just principals. Lets be very sure that we understand that.

Marc: Okay, but the reality is that schools that run and work well work well because- as you say- dynamic principals whose hands are deeply involved in the day to day life of that school. Thats what makes the school different. The problem is there are a lot of schools, a lot of schools, that have principals who are not up to that challenge and, you wanna do things now, so how do you do that now? I mean-

Dr. Alonso: Because the only way to get this school system to be what it should be is to have very high expectations not only of students but also of the adults working with our students. I happen to think that- Look, you don't learn how to ride a bicycle and then get on the bicycle. You don't learn how to ride a horse and then get on the horse for the first time. Part of the way in which we as adults, as functioning human beings, get to become experts is by doing and my deep belief is that- two things. Number one: the

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expertness is not in the central office. The expertness is in the schools. In any single one of my schools, I'm gonna have some people who know far more about curriculum, far more about working with kids than people in the central office and I believe that to the bottom of my soul. And then secondly, the way in which we're gonna get every single school to be remarkably good about this is by giving them the capacity to work it out at the school level with high expectations about where they should end up.

Marc: Let's go to the phones here real fast and get a very quick thought- Actually let me do this instead let me make sure you all know who we're talking to. Dr. Andres Alonso, incase you're just tuning in here at 88.9 WEAA the voice of the community. The number here is 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com. When we come back from this very brief break we're gonna go to Amos and Maxine (sp), Hakeed (sp), Tanya (sp), all patiently waiting to talk to the CEO, so stay with us.

Commercial Break

Marc: Welcome back. I'm Marc Steiner here at WEAA, 88.9, the voice of the community talking with Dr. Andres Alonso the CEO of Baltimore City schools. The lines are open at 410 319 8888 or write to us at steinershow@gmail.com and as promised, right to the phones to a very patient man. Amos in Baltimore you're on the air.

Caller Amos: Thank you Marc for hosting this town meeting show this afternoon. Quickly, I have a couple of comments. First is school safety. We cannot respond to a critical issue of school safety with a public relations reaction to solving school safety. I have a report, a progress report that I prepared and added grades to for the CEO and I'd like for him to also respond after I make these comments and pay close attention to your progress report. The progress report comes from the responsibilities of what the office of the CEO for Baltimore City Public School System requires as far as the duties of the CEO. There's actually fifteen of them but I'll give only six.

Marc: Well- not six if they're gonna take half an hour, but go ahead.

Amos: Okay I'll cut it down to three. First and foremost, preparation and modification of the table of organization as needed as published at least annually by the Baltimore City Public School System. The CEO gets an F for that because the organizational chart does not anymore include student, parents and community. That's been cut out as of this year. The CEO gets a B plus for frequency of visitation of the public schools to improve the overall quality of education. The grading mark the CEO gets is a D in the preparation and presentation of the annual budget and activities designed to secure the funding for implementation. The CEO gets a D for continuing evaluation of the instructional programming. The CEO gets a D plus for development of professional and support staff and that's aimed at the executive officers and the directors at central office. Marc I appreciate the town meeting that you're providing this evening and thank you very much and I'd like to hear comments from doctor Alonso about his midterm report. Thank you.

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Marc: Thank you so much Amos.

Dr. Alonso: Well I would like to know first of all- I have never seen this progress report so I would like to know: where does it come from A. B, who participated in the grading and I'm grateful that I'm getting a B plus for frequency of school visitation. I would rather get an A because I don't think anybody's every done what I've done in terms of visitation, but, you know, if whoever wants to give me a grade then that's great. I give grades all the time so I think that's wonderful. Thank you Eric [sic] and what can I tell you (laughs).

Marc: Eric [sic], i mean it would be great- if you wanna send an email.

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Dr. Alonso: Yes, let me know where the progress report comes and who participated in the grading.

Marc: And if you have one or two lines about some of the things you wrote, if we have time we'll come back to it here and talk about those things very specifically. 410 319 8888 as we talk with Doctor Andres Alonso and lets go to Maxine (sp) in Colombia. You're on the air.

Caller Maxine: Hey, hi Marc. Thank you for taking my call-

Marc: Thanks for calling.

Maxine: Hi, doctor Alonso you are a great visionary and I think that you will be good for Baltimore City schools.

Dr. Alonso: You mean I don't get an F, a B plus, a D, a D and a D plus? Somebody wouldn't come to you for the progress report?

(Laughter)

Dr. Alonso: What's going on here.

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Maxine: (Laughs) I know and- I'm not calling to complain I like to consider myself on one side of the fence or the other; part of the problem or part of the solution and I've worked for Headstart for a number of years and some of the Headstart programs have a partnership with Baltimore City schools. And, one of the things that I think would be really helpful that I've been trying to push- I'm a member of the coordinating council for a couple of Baltimore City schools- is that the city schools really could benefit from adopting the parent involvement model of Headstart. And what that involves and entails is a human services type worker who acts as an advocate between the community, the resources, and the parents, because the problems are so huge with our children that there's just a lack of knowledge on the teacher's part for what a lot of these kids are going through. So we can't just put it all on the parents. We can't just say, "Oh, its a lack of funds." We can't just say "Oh, its the problem of the principals." But we really do need to start with the families and families first, and thats what Headstart does and I really would like you to come out to our Headstart program and just take a look at the model.

Dr. Alonso: Well you know, we have a great relationship with Headstart and as part of the new pre-K classrooms that we're opening this year- Some of them are in partnership with them-

Maxine: And they are but listen- the difference is that the partnership focuses on academic and curriculum. What I'm talking about is also implementing the parent's piece, which includes parent involvement, parent education, parent resources- all of that- into the school because, when you take these kids out of their homes and think that you're just educating them and not putting something in place for the families or the parents, you're going to get the same situation that you've always been getting. So I think that they just need to implement the parent piece as well as the academic piece.

Dr. Alonso: And the key word there is implement. Trust me, don't I know it? We have a parent and community engagement policy and every school is supposed to be implementing that policy. We also have many, many professionals in our schools whose role overlaps with what you describe. We have guidance counselors, we have social workers-

Maxine: I know, but doctor Alonso-

Marc: Wait a minute- let me let Andres-

Maxine: Okay

Dr. Alonso: And part of what we encounter again and again and again is a, a multiplicity of issues that makes it difficult for the schools- and people who are employed by the schools to be quite frank- to be advocates for parents, liaisons for parents and at the same time be there for the school. One of the things that we're thinking through right now is a community engagement process where we partner with organizations throughout the city in order to have them become that kind of ridge that we need to have- A different kind of initiative that we have been thinking through is creating greater powers for counsels in

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schools with parents as members of those counsels so that they become part of the accountability process for the system as a whole.

The goal is to make sure that parents are participants in the process of educating their students- the students in the schools. The key thing, however, is that the fundamental role of the school system has to remain the education of the students, that's what we get funded for. The moment it becomes about taking care of all the problems of community and issues concerning everything that has to do with the kids, it completely overloads the schools. So that, that's what I was saying before in terms of partnerships and ownerships by the community as a whole, but I agree with you that that element of bringing the parent in is absolutely the key. And we have a board approved policy of community and parent engagement that we need to see it implemented in our schools.

Marc: Maxine thanks so much for you're call. Before we go- well, let's go to the next caller he's been holding on a long time then we'll switch gears here subject wise and lets go to Hakeed in Baltimore you're on the air. Hakeed you there?

Caller Hakeed: Yes, good evening.

Marc: Thanks for waiting.

Hakeed: Yes well, Alonso and Mister Steiner. Well, I have a question now. In Baltimore, you know, where its a large percentage of Black people and you have what is called gentrification. For instance you, have a Black mayor who allows for- for the most part other ethnic groups- predominantly white folks- in high positions where Black youth are seeing these types of things- I'm thinking about the global positioning of the economics and what specifically are you preparing these Black children for? Because, if they are seeing persons in government, and lack of jobs- for instance Black radio stations that, you know, kick Black folk out and allow for other ethnic groups- predominantly white males- to own and control all of the resources. What is your vision for teaching these Black children?

Marc: Andres. Thank you very much Hakeed.

Dr. Alonso: My vision is to make sure that, first of all, all the kids in this city- and the overwhelming majority of kids in Baltimore City Public School are African American- all the kids in this city are reading, writing, are competent in terms of their knowledge of society, their history, have knowledge of science and mathematics, have the knowledge of technology that they need, have exposure to the arts, and have exposure to careers in what the greater social order requires. So that they can become whoever they want to be rather than be pushed down and be forced into choices that I would not want for my own children. In the context of Baltimore City, the conversation in terms of the schools in Baltimore City- to me is not about one group of children or another, because the overwhelming majority of the kids has far lower variability here than in other places. [The students] are hitting a wall as they get older so that we end up having to have a conversation about kids who are two years over age. I have 1400 kids in my middle schools who are at least two years over age. Forty-nine percent of the kids in my high schools are already at least one year overage and- nearly half of them are dropping out-

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Marc: Forty-nine percent did you say?

Dr. Alonso: Yes- are dropping out at the end of the ninth or the tenth grade. So, the question to me is less about these larger questions of identity and society and fundamentally our moral obligation in order to make sure that we are giving the kids the tools that they need in order to succeed. If by the time my kids are at the end of the eighth grade such a huge percentage are already behind the eight-ball, its unfair to kids. And- What has been lost in this conversation- which I own, and I respect and most respond to around this issue of behavior in the schools- is that we have done such a phenomenally poor job in equipping so many of the kids that we then read about in the newspapers to succeed in our schools.

Marc: Okay. Let's take two situations here and then we'll go back to the phones and Tonya in Baltimore is the next caller up- who I think is a teacher in the system. So next year we have the first group of students who have to pass the high school assessment, 2009.

Dr. Alonso: Correct

Marc: So, where are they now? Where are the ones this year- in 2008- the testing going on now? What are they gonna face next year, as seniors? And what's their situation? Where are their grades? Where are their test scores? What's gonna happen if they don't pass?

Dr. Alonso: Well, the more accurate conversation is: what's happened with all those kids that graduated over time and having had the skills in order to succeed in the society? I'll give you another example of what statistics mean. Last week, I was with the building trades and went to one of their apprenticeship schools and they showed me the test that the kids have to pass in order to get into that program. Now that's a phenomenal program. Kids join an apprenticeship program and after five years they end up making money that teachers in their tenth year are making. The test is really a sixth or seventh grade, entry level, basic skills test. No word problems. Its very straight forward. Well only about 85 of the kids, of the roughly 450 kids that applied from Baltimore City actually ended up passing the test.

So in terms of the conversation about HSA, the real question is: how prepared are kids who have been graduating from high school until now? That's number one. In terms of the kids who are moving forward- the kids are taking the HSA's right now. The students who are now subject to the new higher requirements have an extra year to go before the first class is subject to the higher accountability. Our work is gonna be about working incredibly hard with these kids in order to make sure that they pass these tests. This year for example, I was criticized by some in this community because I introduced a program to provide incentives for kids. So, again, there is this dynamic of bemoaning what's not right. Then there is a demand to do something about it which is quite radical and then when the response is actually quite radical the response is then to say "Well why are you rewarding kids who are failing?" Well we might be rewarding kids who are failing in order to make them succeed. The goal is to make them succeed. Right now, we have a huge challenge in terms of students who are already at the end of their junior year and who require passing at least four of these tests or completing certain work that meets standards and the work is about making it work. We will analyze the data in June and July when it comes back-

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Marc: Let me ask you a question and then get back to the phones here. What do you do if at the end of 2009, a sizable minority- or even majority- of children, don't pass these tests? What happens?

Dr. Alonso: As far as I'm concerned just the fact that four years have gone by doesn't mean that we give up on these kids. Whatever needs to happen happens. The-

Marc: 'Cause you've said to me before- and we've talked in interviews- that, "I don't care if a kid is twenty one years old. They can stay in the system if they have to."- You said that.

Dr. Alonso: I am saying that- if a child gets to the end of their senior grade and have completed credits- we are certifying that they have met standards. And then, if they take these tests that are theoretically aligned to the standards and they don't pass the test, then where does that leave us in terms of what we have validated they have done? And I think that we have an obligation to work with the students until they complete the requirements for a high school degree. The reality, Marc, is that a lot of these students don't even make it to that point- I mean, that's the conversation that I was having before- number one- and then, secondly, the ones who make it to that end line they're already resilient. So, they have tremendous momentum in them to keep working in order to make it work, and that's what we should be doing with them.

Marc: I'm Marc Steiner here on WEAA, voice of the community, 88.9. The number here is 410 319 8888 and our guest in a special town meeting is Dr. Andres Alonso CEO of our city schools and Tanya in Baltimore you're on the air.

Caller Tanya: Hi Dr. Alonso

Dr. Alonso: Hi Tanya

Tanya: I'm a parent who has two children that go to Baltimore City schools and I have just a brief question on- one- how do[es] one reach you when you've been through every administrative office in 200 West North Avenue and nothing's been rectified through the chief administrative office? How do[es] one reach you? Because I have been calling your office for a year. I've faxed letters, emailed letters to you and never once have I gotten any response from you.

Dr. Alonso: Well, all I can say is that I am incredibly responsive to everyone who emails. As a matter of fact, I had said to Marc before that everybody must be on the phone right now trying to reach me because I haven't gotten any emails for the past twenty minutes. I have no recollection of your name so I don't know what has come to me from you, but I can tell you if you email me at AAlonso@BCPS.K12.MD.US and you identify yourself as Tanya, the person that I spoke to right now, by the end of tonight you will get a

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reply from me because I am so keyed on the need to get back to a parent when the parents reach out to me that- I mean, I don't understand what you're saying but, you know, what can I tell you?

Marc: We have to take a short break here, Tanya, but I'll tell you what: you can also just go to Steinershow@gmail.com and we'll forward it to Doctor Alonso. Stay with us. We'll be right back and head right to the phones when we return as we talk with Doctor Andres Alonso.

Commercial Break

Marc: Welcome back. I'm Marc Steiner sitting here with Doctor Andres Alonso on WEAA 88.9 your community- the voice of the community I should say and we're talking to him here this hour so join us at 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com and tanya who called in earlier: if you forward that email right now that you wrote to Doctor Alonso I'll make sure he gets them and he'll get back to you.

Dr. Alonso: Yea. Please send me that email because its just so unlike me not to respond that I need to understand where this is coming from.

Marc: And lets go right to Linda on the air. You're on the air Linda.

Caller Linda: Oh, sorry Marc I was talking to my three year old.

Marc: That's ok.

Dr. Alonso: Oh please put him in our schools no matter what happens thats all I want, okay?

(Laughter)

Dr. Alonso: I need that four year old in my pre-K program next year.

Linda: Well you know Doctor Alonso, I'm not sure. She's doing so well, she's speaking three languages at three. I'm not sure if I'm gonna do that.

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Dr. Alonso: Wait a second. He's speaking three languages and your not gonna give me a shot to teach him a fourth? Which languages does he speak?

Linda: She actually speaks Arabic-

Dr. Alonso: She

Linda: Spanish and English.

Dr. Alonso: Oh, okay. Well, she's one ahead of me already so what can I say?

(Laughter)

Linda: Well thank you all for this opportunity first let me say that. Thanks Marc for having this conversation.

Marc: Good to talk to you

Linda: And I'm excited about June third Doctor Alonso because, you know, we're gonna be there and we're gonna be prepared to ask some poignant questions when it comes to school safety. When you were talking about the 7,000 children- that's where my specific advocacy comes in is the foster children, the adopted children here in the city. My question to you is: when will the true school safety engagement occur? And the reason why I say this is because, until the two- And this is the way I see it Doctor Alonso 'cause we are very involved in the school system. We're partners with the state when it comes to this issue- when we get the parents and administrators and the schools together and speak that language together- all at once- Social workers, clergy all of them together and saying what we're gonna do, as a district to help represent those children. This week, unfortunately, I had one of my children die that was in the foster care system and so we're burying her tomorrow. She never got educated, she never got the social services she needed so we know how that works, but we know if she was literate- I mean being able to read- because you lost her before she even came to you. Of course, our school district lost her when she got in middle school, so then we couldn't educate her to get her to make the better choices for her life.

Even with that, the metal detector issue, I was very disappointed about that and the reason why is because the research- when we addressed the school safety team we wanted to make sure those metal detectors had the research to support it before we put it in our schools. Because we cannot deny the psychological effect that these things have on our children, and how do we know? Because we are with them. I have one of my surrogate children- that I represent from the public school system - she's in jail. So we understand what these types of environments can do to children. With that, we know that New York has them. We know that rate increases. This is the data that I think should be communicated- not only to

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the parents and administrators all at once 'cause this is really crucial when we make these types of decisions. Its life-long lasting.

Marc: Well let me see if- Dr. Alonso-

Dr. Alonso: If you follow the initiative closely, the initiative was not imposed by the school system. The initiative was essentially giving the schools an alternative where the school community felt that it needed that alternative. I understand the argument that it might not be right for many, many kids to walk through a metal detector. At the same time, it might be preferable to have a child walk through a metal detector then for us to be mourning that child because something got through a school door that a metal detector would have caught. And- if you heard some of the callers who were calling before- you can't have it both ways. You can't be saying that we're living in a city where there're gangs and where kids are carrying weapons and at the same time telling the school system that they should hid[e] their head in the sand and not understand that there are kids who might be carrying weapons before they walk through a school door.

Marc: Is that a school decision or does that come from your office?

Dr. Alonso: School by school. And not only school by school but school by school with the requirement that there be consultation with the school community. It was very, very clearly stated that it should not be a decision made by one person- the principal- it had to be a community decision. So if a community wants a metal detector because a metal detector might be something that prevents something, I don't see how anybody can have an issue because of psychological impact. As opposed to the psychological impact of what's happened in many other places. Some times we have to acknowledge what's going on in our streets, that's first. Then secondly, and I couldn't possibly agree with you more in what you said at the beginning, that the solution to the problem of violence in schools cannot possibly be the solution that comes from a central office. It has to be a solution that is forged in the school where a community- teachers, administrators and students- come together to understand what are some of the root causes that are leading to behaviors at the school. I don't think we're going to deal with issues of violence in a school until our schools get better. I mean, quite frankly I walk into classrooms and at the same school you might have a classroom with huge issues and another classroom two doors down where there's nothing going on other than learning. So, something has to be going on at the school where we honestly have a conversation about who do we have to bring in, what are some of the partnerships that we have to forge and how do parents, teachers, administrators and school partners come together to own the kids. I don't think its something where we have a forum- it gets solved. We put in an initiative where I say "this is the new policy"- it gets solved.

My responsibility is to make sure that the structures are in place so that schools are not just sending kids out there, the tools are in place so that if it takes a metal detector that's in place, the guidance is clear so that if I keep saying there's no place for incidents of violence against adults or other children in our school, maybe people believe it, rather than think that because of NCLB and [the] persistently dangerous list you don't do it. So its about all these things coming together but ultimately it has to be owned at the school level by the people who are closest to the kids. In that, it is consistently of a piece with everything that we're doing. It is of a piece with putting the resources in the schools, it is of a piece by talking about the responsibility of people in schools.

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Marc: We have to take a little break here and we want you to hold on if you'd like or continue to join us here at 410 319 8888 as we talk with Doctor Andres Alonso, CEO for the public school system. So don't leave us and Omar, Ricky, Maurice, Stephanie, you've been very patient people, we're gonna come to you for this live town meeting on the air with the CEO of our city schools, so stay with us.

-transcript by Stavros Halkias