

WEAA Town Meeting With Andres Alonso

Hour 2

5/19/08

Marc: Welcome back. I'm Marc Steiner here at WEAA, and happy to be here, at 88.9 the voice of the community. Before we come back to Dr. Alonso to take your calls at 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com, its time for a little bit of the news on WEAA and then we'll come right back to our conversation- our town meeting on our city schools. Stay with us.

Break for News

Marc: Welcome back. I'm Marc Steiner here on WEAA, the voice of the community, at 88.9. Phone number here is 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com as we talk with Doctor Andres Alonso, CEO of the Baltimore City Schools, on our way back to the phones to talk to some of those many patient people waiting to talk. There are a couple of subjects that we have to raise. Let me start one at a time, we'll go to a caller- raise another one. So we can try to get through some topics we have not covered.

First of all, is the controversy around Canton Middle School. The Canton Middle School controversy- there's some people in the community [who] want the school to shut down. They want it out. The majority of children- not all of them- in those schools are African American kids from neighborhoods just outside of Canton, though there are a number of working class white kids and other kids who are white as well at Canton Middle. I don't just want to put it in pure racial terms, but people see it as that. People can't see it as a mostly middle class white community going "Our kids aren't here. We don't want the school in our community." And there are kids in those schools- we went down there- who are raising havoc in the neighborhood, who are calling people all kinds of names at the same time, there's tension there and- As someone said to me this could be a situation actually right for something like Lauren Abramson and Community Conferencing to come in and, kind of, really work with communities and bring them together rather than see them blown apart. But talk about what's gonna happen at Canton Middle and the controversy thats taking place there now.

Dr. Alonso: Well, what's gonna happen is that there is going to be a six to twelve school. Grades six to twelve, beginning with grades six and nine next year.

Marc: What happened to eight?

Dr. Alonso: Well-

Marc: Oh, I got you. Six to go to eight to build the middle school and nine to build the high school.

Dr. Alonso: Exactly- Called the Friendship Academy for Science and Engineering that is going to open in that building. Friendship is a school presently in Washington D.C.. They just received an award from the College Board as an outstanding school because of the number of Advanced Placement courses that they offer. Its an extraordinary school. Ninety percent of their students graduate within four years, 80 percent of them go on to four year colleges. They don't select kids. They bring in kids through lottery and the kids that they bring in are African American kids, like many of our kids. So, when we put out a call for partners for these transformation schools, they were one of the schools that we selected as potentially great partners for the system. They are going to start a school in the Canton Middle School building.

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This proved controversial for two reasons. Reason number one: as part of facility solution- in the past- the neighborhood and the plan that was proposed to the state called for the closing of the building by the end of next year- number one. And, I guess for many people in that community this constituted a promise and an expectation that the school would not be there. Secondly, the decision to put the school there followed a very determined process to find space for the new school. We couldn't find a space for the new school and we chose to open the school in that location and for some people in the community- especially reacting to incidents having to do with kids from the school system in the past and recently- they felt that there should have been consultation and a process of communication that did not take place. Our communication was with the parents of the school who were invited to go to D.C. to see the new school, met the new partner, and expressed overwhelmingly the desire to partner with the new school in the location.

And, to me its very, very simple. I need great schools in Baltimore City and I need them everywhere in Baltimore City and I cannot possibly have conversations that begin from the notion that there are places in Baltimore City where I cannot have schools. That's not an acceptable departure from a conversation. And, what I hope from this is that the many, many people from Canton who have emerged in the past several weeks to say " We do need a conversation to support the school," continue to move forward in order to become partners for the school because clearly- and again I'm very consistent in what I say - our schools will not succeed until the communities all over the city become partners for the schools and support the schools.

Marc: Well, the key to the future of Baltimore is schools that function more than function [but] become excellent schools across the city, so that middle class families- White, Black, Latino, Asian, Indian- send their kids to public schools.

Dr. Alonso: Correct and clearly that is not going to happen if we create borders where the public schools cannot be and I'm very respectful of feelings of people in communities about communications in the past or expectations about what should happen in terms of what should happen in terms of neighborhoods. However, my obligation is not to neighborhoods. My obligation is to kids in the city and to the creation of schools that can become world class schools.

Marc: Andres Alonso, CEO of our Baltimore City Schools is our guest here on this special town meeting. Here on WEAA, the voice of the community, and I'm Marc Steiner. The number here is 410 319 8888 or write to us at steinershow@gmail.com and Ricky, you're on the air.

Caller Ricky: Good evening sir, how are you?

Marc: Hi, Ricky.

Ricky: And I have been very patient, I've been waiting for thirty minutes. Thanks for taking my call.

Marc: Thanks for calling.

Ricky: Mr. Steiner, Dr. Alonso, initially it was my intention to call to thank you for exposing yourself, making you available to have an honest dialogue with the community; but, what made me feel a little ill at ease was that the gentleman who initially took the call

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and put me on hold to go on the air attempted to- but I resisted- screen my call. Immediately I said to my self “If Mr. Steiner’s gonna have the type of shows where you screen calls, that takes away from honest dialogue and I would definitely boycott a show like that. So, nonetheless I thank you for making yourself available to the community and in the future I hope there’s no more attempts to screen calls.

Marc: Let me just say Ricky- and not to get into a sidebar here too much but- screening calls is not to keep people off the air its so we can see where the flow of the conversations going [and] know where we’re gonna go. That’s the only reason we screen calls. Not to- I would never screen a call to keep it off the air, but you’re on the air so go ahead.

Dr. Alonso: Let me say also that I have no clue who’s calling or what they’re calling about. As far as the content of what you’re gonna say, sir, and my ability to answer- I have no clue who’s calling or why so this is a very open conversation.

Ricky: (muffled) -somebody had something to say that’s controversial, that’s not in tune with what you want to hear-

Marc: No, so go ahead and say what you had to say.

Ricky: I’ve already said it. I appreciate Doctor Alonso making himself available to the community to have a dialogue because its much needed (loss of sound)

Marc: You there Ricky?

Ricky: - school leadership, but I do appreciate this attempt to have a dialogue.

Dr. Alonso: Thank you, sir.

Marc: Thank you so much. And let us go to Maurice in Baltimore. You’re on the air. Maurice hold on, let me just get you here. Go ahead you’re on the air Maurice.

Caller Maurice: My name is Maurice. I’d like to thank you for taking my call and thank you WEAA for taking my call. My concern is, Dr. Alonso, is that he talk[s] about volunteers for the upcoming year, for the Baltimore City Public Schools and I really think that the schools right now- the children are really, really- it seems to me- are really out of control. I’m a volunteer at a school and when you go into these schools and you see how these kids are acting towards the teachers- The teacher’s spending forty-five minutes for one class and they take thirty-five minutes to calm down the kids. If any thing could be done in the upcoming year, because sometimes you’re really scared to correct the kids. You can’t. The kids curse you out. Im trying to see where the end to this [is] at. And then, to get volunteers- it seems like most of the teachers at the schools don’t even wanna be here. And the children cuss- The way they dress- I like where I work- I mean I like where I volunteer[ing] at, but it seems like for the upcoming year of [20]08- [20]09- what could be

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done better? Because certainly the parents- you got a whole lot of good parents- but you've got some parents that don't even care about these children. So when you say to get the kids- and the community [is] scared of some of these kids-

Dr. Alonso: Well-

Ricky: I'm trying to see what-

Marc: Right- What do you do as a volunteer, very quickly, Maurice?

Maurice: I just help with the lunches sometimes-

Marc: Okay

Maurice: And the hallways. Trying to clear the hallways with the kids in the hallways, but the language- the language they use to you- And I'm fifty years old and my own kids don't even talk to me the way-

Marc: I'm sure not

Maurice: These kids make me feel- And what's happened [is] you've got good kids but the bad kids are hurting the good kids. The teachers are real good. At the school I volunteer the teachers are very, very good.

Marc: What you're raising here Maurice is a very important point and I hear from teachers- Well, let me just throw this out to you: teachers who you like, like my son in law Evan (unintelligible)-

(both talking)

Dr. Alonso: Yes, whom I really like (laughs)

Marc: -teaches at Carver. Says that- in his school- even though he goes out there to control the halls, kids are cursing, screaming, just disrespecting everybody all the time which is not an uncommon occurrence at many schools.

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Dr. Alonso: But at the same time- and I don't wanna lose this fact.- Maurice by the way, before you go I would like to know what school you're in and also take you with me to another school.

Marc: Maurice- call right back and we'll get that. It was my fault I clicked you off too quickly but- go ahead.

Dr. Alonso: Because I think that part of what we're losing is that there're many, many, many, many schools where you walk in- like I do everyday- and sometimes you see a problem; but, then other times what you see is the right kinds of environments -with exceptions because there are exceptions in every single place- so that's number one. Secondly, you said something that I find extraordinarily significant. You say people are afraid of the kids. No one- the people in this city cannot be afraid of the kids in this city. They're kids! That is such an abdication of responsibility-

Marc: Well, well- let me stop you for a second Andres. I mean, you say people should not be afraid of students, or kids. First of all, lets deal with reality here. Some of the kids we're talking about are tough kids who will get in your face and start something in a minute and that's real-

Dr. Alonso: At some point- absolutely- but at some point they were not at somebody else's face. They were second graders, third graders, fourth graders and what we cannot forget is that something took them there- that's number one. What was it? It's not like they were hatched, then at the end of the third grade they went away somewhere and then they came back to the eighth grade now being in somebody else's face. What happened in between? Secondly, when you say be real, I think you need to remember what my experience has been as an educator. I mean, I spent an awful long time as a teacher of emotionally disturbed adolescents, so no one should be presuming to lecture me in terms of how the most extreme types of kids function in schools. And, what I know from my own experience in places very much like Baltimore is that: yes there is a pull- especially when we group certain types of kids in particular places and we communicate to them that there is no hope for them.

Marc: So Maurice is asking what do you do about those kids now in those schools that exist? And maybe if we turn things around, kids in the second and third grade now- in our public-schools may not be like that when they're in the tenth or eleventh grade.

Dr. Alonso: I think we need to -number one- communicate very clearly what our expectations are. Secondly, it cannot be simply punitive. It has to be about options that kids want to buy into. Otherwise what we're saying is "buy into this or you're gone," and we know that what happens afterwards is they are gone but they're gone after making life miserable for everybody else around them. I mean, in 2004 there were 26,000 instances of suspension in this city. Number three, what happens in classrooms and schools has to change so that kids become engaged in their education. We need to have more vocational programs, we need to have more mentors, we need to have more classrooms where the kids feel that this is where they want to be. And then finally, in terms of the schools themselves, there clearly has to be better leadership in the schools. And the reason why I say that is because you can have two schools- its the same argument that I have been making from day one. You can have two schools, same kids, ten blocks from each other. In one school you see certain kinds of behavior in another school you don't see the same kind of behavior. And that to me is because you have some places that have found the key in terms of working with kids and other places haven't.

Marc: We're gonna go back to the phones here. I'll tell you there was one school we visited the other week, when we did a story about this program in an elementary school in Baltimore- Windsor Hills Elementary- on the west side of town. I walked into the school, the

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walls were painted lively, students working- you couldn't here a thing- the school was quiet, students were learning, kids were a joy. It was an amazing- to walk into a school- A zoned school that is run in a way that brings community in and kids are actually learning.

Dr. Alonso: And you can maybe go fifteen blocks to another school and you see an entirely different environment. And then the conversation is always about what are you going to do with those kids. And part of what I want to assert is that, without in anyway downplaying- Your son in law is somebody that I like a great deal and who's been telling me from day one, "There are things going on that you need to be aware of" and I have tremendous respect for that. And part of what I want to have the conversation about- in terms of the adults who I respect, who are telling me this kind of conversation is: What else is going on or is not going on in those places that leads to certain behaviors where if I go ten blocks away I don't see it? Part of what needs to happen- which is why in my conversation with Linda I said "It has to start at the school not at the central office"- is about what is there for the kids- Besides the punitive response or the statement that you cannot possibly tolerate these things that engages them- it makes them partners in terms of what needs to happen. Look, some of the kids that have been out there- calling for peer leadership for example, and that has been in the news in the past couple weeks or so- they are making the argument that part of what is missing is a conversation that engages the kids in the solution about what needs to happen in the schools, because they feel that there's a potential in all the kids in the city that we're not tapping because of the fact that we're afraid of them- number one. And secondly, at some level, we abdicate the responsibility to engage their intelligence and I agree with that.

Marc: Andres Alonso's our guest, CEO of Baltimore City Schools, a special live town hall meeting here at WEAA. 410 319 8888 and Stephanie you're on the air.

Caller Stephanie: Hi Marc, how are you.

Marc: Hi Stephanie. Well, thank you.

Stephanie: Hi Doctor Alonso

Dr. Alonso: Hi, how are you Stephanie?

Stephanie: I'm doing well. As a parent of children who have since come out of the public school system in the [19]80's, I was really, really disheartened when our previous city administration lowered the passing grade to- I think it was sixty or sixty-five.

Marc: Right

Dr. Alonso: To sixty, actually.

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Stephanie: To sixty, right. To sixty. And, both of my boys went to Poly- and I could not believe that not a parent in this city made an uproar about it because what it said to me- Had my kids still been in school I would've been marching down city hall in a heart beat because what it said was that our kids aren't capable of meeting the standards that were there and therefore the city had to lower the standards in order to have the African American children within the city to pass. My

children knew better than to come home with a sixty-five or a seventy-five-

(Marc and Doctor Alonso laugh)

Stephanie: -'cause I knew the potential within both of them and they went to Poly which is one of the best public schools in this city. And to say that almost says that the city was willing to give up on these kids by lowering the passing grade level to something so low. How do they expect these children to get into colleges and my question is, to you, are you going to stick with that- of the lowering of the grade to a sixty- because in actuality you're not even equipping the children at a sixty level. You're not equipping anybody to be a sufficient worker in the community.

Marc: Andres

Dr. Alonso: Two things. First of all, its a board policy. So in order for-

Marc: A board policy?

Dr. Alonso: Yes- in order for it to change it has to be something that is reconsidered by the board, that's number one.

Marc: But you can have them reconsider it.

Dr. Alonso: Absolutely. Then, the second question is- especially in the new context of accountability that we discussed before about high school graduation- its no longer about passing courses. Its about passing certain tests that validate that the student has mastered standards. And what is very clear is that we have been graduating kids who have not mastered standards. So the conversation really should be- and I agree with the caller that there's a question about what we expect from the kids that we always have to have on the table because otherwise we're not thinking about what it means to educate them- Which is that we have gotten used to a standard for children- and whether its a sixty or a sixty-five, look a sixty five is too low as far as I'm concerned- where we push kids through rather than educate them, to standards that make them competitive with kids from other cities, let alone kids within the city. Because if your kid is in Poly, then we know that that kid is outstripping many other kids within the city. So, I think the issue is that we have low expectations for kids. It shows in what's going on in many, many places- not in all- and its part of the problem that I see in terms of that conversation about what needs to happen in our schools.

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Marc: So where do you take this? And Stephanie thanks so much for your call we appreciate you being a part of the program today as we talk with Doctor Andres Alonso, CEO of our Baltimore City Schools in a special town live meeting on the air, 410 319 8888. But what do you do to ensure, in our city schools, that these lovely children we met at Windsor Hills Elementary who are just so full of learning. And what we know is that these exceptional children, when they get to sixth seventh and eighth go from the top of the chart to the bottom of the chart and start dropping out schools.

Dr. Alonso: Same kids.

Marc: Same kids. So the middle school becomes a disaster ground- Its a tough period for kids no matter where they go to school, but here in the city its a disaster ground.

Dr. Alonso: I think that it's not the middle schools. It's the middle grades because, even though we don't see as much-

Marc: What does that mean not the middle-

Dr. Alonso: I mean that we have middle schools and we have lots of schools that have become K to eights so the kids are no longer going to a middle school. They remain with the same school they have been since they have started school.

Marc: So you're saying thats a mistake?

Dr. Alonso: No, I like it because it keeps the kids within a community that has raised them. It allows for a conversation about who's accountable for the kids and it also keeps the kids next to adults who know them so that they should expect the things from them that they should. What we do find is that- regardless of whether the kids are in middle schools or in middle grades- the outcomes decline over time. Same kid- the kid who was in the 90th percentile in the fourth grade, by the time they get to the eighth grade they might be in the 40th percentile. So, clearly its not about the kid at that point, its about something else. And I think that that's part of the challenge of analyzing what is going on in our schools and in the settings-

Marc: Very quick question and then I want to go right back to the phones here. Very quick question. Very quick answer. What is it then? What is it about schools that kids in the middle schools fall off so precipitously? But especially in our city schools where the kids are facing the problems they face on the streets and at home and other places we lose them. It is a killing ground in many ways, emotionally and academically.

Dr. Alonso: A part of it is curriculum as in what is it that we're teaching them. Part of it is pedagogy as in how is it that we're teaching them. And part of it is what's going on in the community and with the kids that leads us away from that kind of investment that we have when they're younger to a kind of abdication where- Look I go into elementary schools and I see two hundred parents there and I go into some other schools and I see twenty.

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Marc: We're taking a short break. Right back with Doctor Andres Alonso at 410 319 8888 here on WEAA. I'm Marc Steiner. We'll come right back to Mike who's been waiting for a while to talk to Doctor Alonso. Stay with us.

Commercial Break

Marc: Welcome back. I'm Marc Steiner sitting here with Doctor Andres Alonso for a special on air town meeting at WEAA, 88.9, the voice of the community at 410 319 8888 or write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com. And as I said, Andres I asked you a very tough question, it was long but, you didn't have much time to answer it

Dr. Alonso: (Laughs)

Marc: I'm sorry about that (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: I said in the break, "Wait a second. You just asked the million dollar question and you said answer in twenty seconds?"

Marc: Well take another minute then we'll go right to the phones.

Dr. Alonso: Throughout the nation, every single school system in the country has been dealing with this question because its not simply about the urban schools, its also the suburban schools. The outcomes drop and everybody talks about how its about the middle school kid, but if we compare ourselves with kids in Scandinavia, Japan, in other places- they're outstripping us. When in the earlier grades we're up there with them. So, its clearly something that we're doing in terms of the educational system. Part of it it has to do just with what we teach them. I think that we're spending an awful lot of time in the early grades concentrating in skills and not concentrating on what the kids need to know- content. When they get a little older they take these tests that are all about what they know and then- Look, if you haven't learned what the Bill of Rights is, it doesn't matter how well you can sound out a word you're not gonna be able to perform well on a test. Then secondly, I do think that the middle schools lose the nurturing and enriching aspect of instruction in many of our elementary schools. If you walk into most of the elementary schools in the city, you see extraordinarily rich instruction. Then you walk into the upper grades and I do believe you see something missing in terms of the engagement with the kids. And then finally if at that same time the kids are challenging the parents, they might be staying outside in the society and nothing has taken their place in terms of the after school programs, the parks and recreations programs, the engagement with adults, especially male adults. I think that you're going to see a drop off in terms of our ability to hold the kids.

Marc: And if you go to some schools- Charter schools like the Crossroad School- you see actually incredible things going on. I interviewed kids from the Algebra Project who had gone there first-

Dr. Alonso: Ah, the Algebra Project (laughs)

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Marc: Those are some amazing kids.

Dr. Alonso: Yes, absolutely.

Marc: Those kids at the Algebra Project they're like you, they don't play. (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: They don't play, they don't play. They're making money out of tutoring other kids. That's what they do.

Marc: 410 319 8888 and Mike you're on the air. Let me get you on the air, though, before I said that and now you're on the air. Go ahead.

Caller Mike: Now I'm genuinely on the air.

Marc: Yes you are.

Dr. Alonso: Thank you, Mike.

Mike: You're welcome and, like you Doctor Alonso I don't mess around either. I'm a retired teacher and I've seen our kids wasted for so many years. I've seen good, decent educators like you doing everything you possibly can. My heart goes out to you, but my head says there's got to be a better way. If you have concentrated urban poverty and concentrated urban violence- and the waste of our youth will be a consequence. The people in this country have got to figure out how we can abolish poverty and use the creativity of our children to build a better world.

Dr. Alonso: You know what? I agree with you that urban education in this country is the shame of modern day America, in that 50 years after Brown, 40 years after King and we're asking the same questions in terms of what's going on in terms of African American kids in inner cities, in terms of what's going on in terms of urban education. So clearly, as a country we need to continually ask ourselves: What is it about this nation that leads to the persistence of the achievement gap? What is it about what we're doing in our schools- or in our neighborhoods, in our society- that leads to this circular conversation about what needs to happen in order to make our schools better? But then, that's the starting point of the conversation and I think the fact that you're calling and you seem to understand where I'm coming from, but, where is the solution, man?

My request of people like you is that you come to the forefront with, either the recommendations yourself as a contributor in terms of our schools- I don't think we can possibly be in a mind frame where we're giving up just because the challenges are huge. Its very clear that if you concentrate huge problems in some schools or some neighborhoods, its going to take to take all that much in terms of changing it. Now, what I would like from this city- and, city, please pay attention. What I would like from this city is-

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Marc: The city government right now is that what you're talking about?

Dr. Alonso: No, because the city cannot possibly be defined in terms of government agencies. It has to be the churches. It has to be the PTA's, including those who are calling rating me-

Marc: (laughs)

Dr. Alonso: -it has to be, rather, rating themselves. It has to be everybody. But what I ask is that- You cannot have it both ways. You cannot constantly be talking about what's wrong in the city, the school and the communities. Therefore, asserting how difficult the problems are and then- at the same time- pushing back against the comprehensiveness of the response and saying its going to fast- and then at the same time requiring that there be an immediate outcome that somehow makes it all go away. What clearly needs to happen is everybody becoming responsible for the solution. For example, somebody called earlier and gave me a grade- God forbid- for funding for the schools- In a context where a CEO comes to Baltimore City and four months after the CEO arrives the funding formula for the schools end and I go to Annapolis to fight for the school and- lo and behold- I don't see anybody there behind me.

Marc: (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: You have somebody calling about giving me a grade for the funding of the schools system when the entire city should've been up in Annapolis saying "The school system needs more money." I think there are a lot of people having conversations and blaming the kids or blaming the parents rather than having a serious conversation about what needs to happen- which is reasonable- in terms of what needs to happen in the schools. And lets begin with the premise that it is not reasonable to fix the schools by pushing away 10, 15, 20 percent of the kids.

Marc: Mike, thanks for your call. Is it true that after you made this- you cut North Avenue to the bone, took all that money [and] put it back in the school system to schools. Someone else told me to today, "Yes, but what Doctor Alonso also did was forced to say that any new jobs open in North Avenue, the first people to get a shot at those will be the ones that left North Avenue."

Dr. Alonso: Well no, I think that-

Marc: Is that true?

Dr. Alonso: No, there are jobs for which I have complete flexibility in terms of hiring somebody and then there are jobs for which I think the responsible things is to allow people- as long as they're fit and able- to compete for them first. I mean, I didn't cut 310 positions because of an evaluation. I cut 310 positions because of a structural need, and what I

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Marc: I thought it was a philosophical issue. That you think power should go back to schools and be decentralized. You made one quote once saying that you'd like to tear down North Avenue, I thought you said, and put all the power back in the schools.

Dr. Alonso: Absolutely, but what I have also said is that nobody should use the restructuring as a way to bypass the law. As in, if there're labeled contracts saying that if you get rid of a person you must evaluate them- I don't think that people should be using the restructuring to get away from the need to evaluate performance. So if I have an administrator and if I have done away with their job and I have done away with their job and- if that administrator is fit and able to compete for some other job- I think that I have an obligation to that administrator to give them a chance to compete if they're fit and able.

Marc: Does that mean that they have a priority to come back. If they come back before anybody else you hire?

Dr. Alonso: Only if they're fit and able. And then if they're fit and able then, they can do the job and somebody should be evaluating them if they cannot do the job. Look- for every job somebody should be hiring the best person for the job. But, within the context of many people who are qualified for the job, if you have people who have the capacity and the ability and they're losing their job then part of what we said from the start is we were gonna work with people in order to try to place them.

Marc: Okay- This is not the most important point to me, but the question is-

Dr. Alonso: A small point as far as I'm concerned-

Marc: No, I know but- part of tearing down [the] bureaucracy- North Avenue- was tearing down the blocks that allow progress to happen because people got so entrenched in those jobs-

Dr. Alonso: But look Marc-

Marc: -that nothing changed

Dr. Alonso: Next year from now. We'll do the same thing again. I mean, I have already said this that next year we will have to cut roughly another 300 positions. What I have said to people is that, [if] they want to have tenure in the school system they better be in schools. They cannot be in North Avenue. But what I have also said is that if I have people in my administration- the people that they have appointed they've already been there three, four, five months. They shouldn't come to me now and say "That person cannot do the job." My answer to them is gonna be, "Well, where is your evaluation?" They cannot simply hope for me to do the hard decisions for them, as in restructuring the system rather than people being evaluated out of their jobs.

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Marc: 410 319 8888. Elzora you're on the air.

Dr. Alonso: I'm sorry? Elzora?

Marc: Elzora

Dr. Alonso: Oh, Elzora.

Caller Elzora: How are you Doctor Alonso?

Dr. Alonso: I am doing fine thank you. How are you?

Elzora: I am just fine. I am a retired administrator from the Baltimore City Public Schools.

Dr. Alonso: Lots of retired people calling me. Where are my present day people?

(All laugh)

Elzora: Maybe they're doing lesson plans.

Marc: (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: I certainly hope so. I'm hoping that they're planning collaboratively for tomorrow.

Marc: Hope. There's the word. There's the word.

Dr. Alonso: (Laughs)

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Elzora: At any rate, when I was in the schools system my challenging but rewarding task was to discipline the children as well as to educate the parents. I now work for a non-profit organization called The Family Tree and I find that I am- again- educating parents. In November of [20]06 I made a presentation to the suspension services at North Avenue and ask them to consider making referrals to us because we do positive parenting education and we do parent support groups and we do some in-home parenting and a couple other programs. But my concern is- as I worked with the parents when I was in the school system- I found parents knew very little about child development and discipline strategy. And when we talk about the behavior that we see in our school systems and with our children and the suspension rate there is a study that says “problems at home [are] problems at school.” And some of the children came to school so very depressed and demoralized that we could not expect them to function at their best. I am suggesting to you Doctor Alonso that- some kind of way- we connect discipline, suspension with some form of parenting education before that child, or as that child, is reinstated into the process of going back to class.

Marc: Doctor Alonso-

Dr. Alonso: Well, thank you and I think that it surely makes sense when we see that there are issues of behavior with kids to make sure that we understand what is going on in the home and bring the parent in. Not simply to, quote unquote, educate them since - in the case of many parents- it may not be a question of education it might simply be a question of how do they cope with individual children, but also because they might be the best partners in terms of understanding what is making the child function in a particular way. I think that you make absolute sense and I hope that the people in the schools are bringing this kind of approach to the work. At the same time- and this is important- we cannot always abdicate the responsibility for what’s going on in the school to the question of what somebody else outside the school is doing. I think that we need to own the problems together, as in- and Ill give you one example. At the end of the first grade last year in Baltimore City there were eight hundred and ninety two children, I believe, who scored advanced in both the literacy and math section of the Stanford exam- eight hundred and ninety two. By the end of the seventh grade there were only eighty three children who were advanced in both literacy and math in the Maryland State assessment. So when you see that story of decline- and now we’re not talking about the high school, we’re talking from first to seventh grade- thats about something that we’re doing as well. And I think it points to the fact that we need to own the problems together.

Marc: But- Elzora thanks for the call- but let me just push that a little further. I mean there are two elementary schools in town that- Stuart Hill Elementary and Highland Hill Elementary Middle. And a man that I’ve talked to you about before, Donte Wilson, who happens to be-

Dr. Alonso: Whom I have seen, yea

Marc: Who is in those two schools- principals have said to him “We are going to use some of this money for mentoring programs.”- You say we have to own the problem, but what they discovered at lets say, at Stuart Hill, was a huge body of students who are struggling and what those students have in common is that one of their parents or both their parents are in jail. Or, groups of bodies of students whose parents are alcoholic or addicted and so they say “We gotta so some intervention here to come in, to save these kids.” The problem is outside the walls, but they have to save them inside the walls.

Dr. Alonso: That’s part of what I was alluding to before Marc, in the sense that, if you have a parent in jail, the question is not educating the parent. The question is understanding what is going on in the life of the child that might be triggering certain behaviors. The conversation with the parent should begin with the assumption that no parents wants their child to do badly and the question is what is triggering the behaviors. And maybe it requires a strong intervention in the life of the parent, maybe it requires just

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information about what's happening in the school- There's no disagreement between what I'm saying and what Donte is doing in those schools. It is at some level about understanding what's going on in the life of the child. He does not come to the conversation with the presumption that the child should be punished or sent away. I know that for a fact. He comes into the conversation with the assumption that something explains the behavior and then what is our obligation to respond which is precisely the opposite of what the thrust of many of these conversations have been.

Marc: 'Cause we cannot lose one more child in this city. We're talking with Dr. Andres Alonso, CEO of our Baltimore City Schools. Before we return to the phones at 410 319 8888, I'm gonna read an email that came in at steinershow@gmail.com, from Corey (sp).

And Corey writes in " I understand that gifted and talented students have often been shortchanged by the city school system, but I'm not sure that I understand how 2,200 dollar bonus, per advanced child is going to solve this problem. Setting up a good G and T program takes experienced staff that know how to set up classes that challenge these students. It seems that this money is given with no strings to force it to be directed to G and T programs would be probably much quicker and easier to throw it into a general pool to help out the whole school. Also, it seems that neighborhood schools that lose this extra funding by sending their best students to magnet programs are now going to be reluctant to do this. Won't this eventually lead to the end of magnet programs, for example Advanced Academic at Federal Hill Elementary, or Roland Park, or Francis Scott Key Middle."

You can answer that when we return from this break. Stay with us. [As] we talk to Doctor Andres Alonso. Back in just a minute.

Commercial Break

Marc: Welcome back, I'm Marc Steiner here with Doctor Andres Alonso, CEO of our Baltimore City Schools. 410 319 8888. Write to us here at steinershow@gmail.com, here on WEAA, the voice of the community, at 88.9. You were gonna answer the email question about the gifted and talented problems and money.

Dr. Alonso: Well first of all, whoever wrote that email, they're very sophisticated about what we did, so hopefully they work for me. (Laughs)

Marc: You're gonna claim this email? (Laughs)

Dr. Alonso: Hopefully. First of all, we're not giving a 2,200 dollar bonus for every child who scored advanced. Part of what the writer is missing is that we're extrapolating the percentage of kids in a lower grade- the first grade or the fifth grade- in order to be able to have much more money for these kinds of programs because, if we went by the actual number of kids who are doing this well in our schools, the number dwindles dramatically as the kids get older. By the time we get to the seventh grade, only eighty three kids are doing double advanced. We're no longer talking gifted programs, we're talking something else. So, the hope is to dramatically increase the funding from four and a half to twenty two millions so that schools develop the flexibility to create these kinds of programs. We put in guidance in what went to schools that asked that schools had these kinds of programs in place and we're going to analyze the budgets that are coming from the schools in order to make sure they happen. In the meantime, if a school like Roland Park

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wants to continue its advance programs, they've gotten a lot more money as a result of this methodology of distributing the dollars and they should be able to.

Marc: Now, that's part of the problem that you've been facing with schools saying "We're losing money because of this process- you're budget process" and somebody called actually and said "Waverly Middle's gonna lose all this money, Roland Park's getting more money. They are already serving a wealthier community- why should they get more money and Waverly get less?"

Dr. Alonso: Because the dollars should follow the student. Anything that was done beforehand where some schools got more and other schools got less was inequitable- number one- and backed by a transparent logic. What everybody in the city should be completely convinced of is that, if a school is getting less its because the same methodology is being used to fund them as another school and they're getting less because they either have fewer kids, they've lost enrollment, or they were getting more before and they were being subsidized by another school that was getting less.

The reality is- with our budgets becoming far more difficult to address- we put in a methodology for funding the schools that treats everybody fairly, pushes the money into the schools with greater responsibility so that the hard decisions are made at the school level. Now we have a hundred and one schools that have lost an average of fifty kids. Part of the problem is that you have people coming to me saying, "I cannot keep my staff." Well why would you be expected to keep the same staff if you have lost fifty students? That's the reality of the hard decisions we face as a system. The best way of continuing to grow as a system is to make sure that the kids don't leave, as in, keep them in the schools, prevent them from dropping out, and then our budgets will increase. If the kids are leaving and people just want to hire the same people that they had before its not gonna work. In the meantime we have a hundred and twenty two schools that are getting an average of four hundred and twenty thousand more than last year. That's a hundred and twenty two schools- Four hundred and twenty thousand dollars more. So the dollars [are] there and the overwhelming majority of the schools. There are some schools that are in a different position as last year because they were being funded inequitably, its that simple.

Marc: Andres Alonso is our guest in a special town meeting. Emily, in your car, you're on the air.

Dr. Alonso: You get to ask the last question-

Marc: There's maybe to or three more

Dr. Alonso: -Emily (laughs)

Marc: Emily you're on the air.

Caller Emily: Good evening Marc and good evening Doctor Alonso.

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Dr. Alonso: Hi.

Emily: I have two comments and two questions.

Dr. Alonso: Oh my God and we only got four minutes.

Marc: We may only- Let's take one at a time.

Emily: Real quickly- on the caller about changing the grades to sixty, I believe this was before your time Doctor Alonso. This is so that the failing grade was equitable across the state. Why should city schools be judged as failing at seventy and all other schools judged at sixty? That was one. The other thing was: what happens with the funding for the Algebra Project? You find projects and programs that do work and you're predecessor again- the children were protesting because they were trying to cancel the Algebra Project. They were trying to get Doctor Jay [sp] and fire him and all of that. That's a program that is known to work. Doctor Moses has it implemented across the country.

Marc: Robert Moses, right.

Emily: There is no discrimination in mathematics. Let's get that algebra project so that all the middle schoolers can get the peer tutoring through the Algebra project that would be a good thing. And the last comment and question is- whatever happened when Kurt Schmoke was trying to get the money for the schools because of the way that the state determined how money goes to the school. That has never been equitably evened out although there was millions of dollars won in lawsuits-

Marc: Okay we just a little time left and Andres let me let you respond to these questions.

Emily: Okay, I know that's a big question.

Marc: Thank you, Emily.

Emily: Thank you and thank you for coming on the show tonight.

Dr. Alonso: Thank you and I'll go backwards. In terms of the state funding, that's a huge issue. I walked into it very late. Clearly the school system has never been adequately funding and, unfortunately, I wasn't here four years ago when we were getting a lot more money every year. We take what we have and we're gonna make it work. The algebra project- I am a huge backer of peer leadership

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projects, the work that kids are doing in order to support each other and- The Algebra Project is not finished in the Baltimore City Public Schools. My expectation is that, on the contrary, they will grow as a result of the funding in the schools and I've been very clear in terms of that expectation. And then, in terms of the grades, thank you for the information.

Marc: That's true by the way what she said. What about programs like the Urban Debate League? Are they in danger?

Dr. Alonso: Same for (unintelligible). My expectation is that they be there growing. If that doesn't happen then I need to go back to the drawing board.

Marc: Doctor Andres Alonso, thank you so much for being here tonight in a special town meeting here on WEAA. Its been great to have you with us.

Dr. Alonso: Its a tremendous pleasure to hear from the town, so- You know what I need. You heard what I need. (Laughs)

Marc: Thank you, Andres, for being here. I'm sorry we couldn't get to all the callers. You've been tuned to a production of the Center For Emerging Media. Our program tonight was produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy. Our engineer is Zachary Coleman. He's also the operations and production manager here at WEAA. Special thanks to Kortni Alston and Lafontaine Oliver for helping make this special broadcast possible and for WEAA- the voice of the community- I'm Marc Steiner and take care.

-transcript by Stavros Halkias