School Violence

Dr. Andres Alonso

04/23/08

I'm Marc Steiner and welcome. We are in the office of Dr. Andres Alonso, who is the CEO of Baltimore City schools. Been in the news lately, in ways that he'd probably prefer not to have in the news, with violence in the schools, we're talking about that and much more with him, and—Andres, it's good to see you again.

And, can I say what an extraordinary pleasure it is, to talk to you again on the air.

It's good to have you back. So, I guess to begin with, the—I have to ask the one incident that lead to all of this, and there's been a lot of instances, but the one that hit the news and went to YouTube or wherever else it went, the beating of a young teacher—what happened to the student, is she still in school? Is she expelled? Is she suspended? I know she hasn't been taken to court because the teacher hasn't yet to decide whether to press charges. What's happened to the student?

Well, you—you know that I can't comment on that. Part of what has been most troubling for me in terms of, of just my, my response to the incident is that we have a rule that I've never violated, which is that on incidents that involve the confidentiality of a student or a staff professional, I never comment. It's a way to not slide down the slippery slope and it doesn't matter how slippery it gets, I've never departed from that rule. There was an incident earlier in the year involving a principle in one of our schools that—

I remember that.

—generated a lot of heat, including several consecutive demonstrations at board meetings.

There was a request that you were removed, if I recall.

I—won't even comment on what I did, because of that rule, I will all—I will let—I will say that, that part of what that community demanded was a reason, a rational, and I refused to give a rational, because of the ongoing investigation and because I just don't comment on, on issues that involve confidentiality. So there have been a lot of questions about that incident, and my response about the incident from the beginning was, number one, regardless of, of reasons for why it occurred, how it occurred, how it was resolved—it has no place in our schools. Secondly, I have said what my original question was, was a, you know I learned about it on Tuesday night when it had happened on a Friday so my original question is, you know, why didn't I hear about it before? It had not made the incident that goes to me every single night because there had not been an arrest made. And my third question was—well, how did the school respond? And at that point, I stopped talking about the incident because then the series of questions or responses that are dependent on exactly what happ—what happened, you know, I'll speak generally about the rules, then I'll speak generally about expectations, but in terms of the particular incident, I won't comment, I—my hope is that first of all that with both the teacher and the student, we, we do whatever is necessary in order to meet the needs of both, as in, insure that the teacher finds a place back in the classroom and for the students, take the steps that are necessary so that she can be successful.

Well, without asking what happened to the student, any student who physically assaults a teacher or another student—should there be an immediate policy that says, okay, you are either expelled, you're suspended, you're sent to some other alternative school, but you're not returning to this school. Shouldn't there be a—should that be clear?

Well, absolutely. And these are some of the challenges that we have. First of all, in terms of, of our suspension or expulsion policy, we have an extraordinary number of expulsions. Part of what has been reported out in the press is, is staff might not be following through on the need to act assertively in these

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kinds of incidents. The reality is that the number of students that are getting expelled because of such incidents has—has increased over last year, and historically, in this year is an extraordinarily high number. We do not have in place this year, we will in the future, infrastructures in order to ensure that these students have a place to go. Right now, what happens with suspensions in the—in the system, is the students go home with a packet. So the solution that many ask for is simply assuring that students are in the streets. Where—where all the people then complain about what our students might be doing. And this is what I inherited, and it is something that I will fix, this is why we're in a budget cycle that allows us to now respond to some of the elements that are not in place in this system so we will have in the school system next year, a alternative system which allows us to have far more settings for students, depending on their needs because for many students, it's not about behavior, it's about learning concerns. And will have transitional settings for students who might be engaged in certain—activities that require that they be removed from the learning setting and these kids should not be in the streets. The—so, there is a question in terms of where they go. Secondly, because of the number of incidents that historically have taken place in the system and you should know that in 2003, 2004 for example, there were twenty-six thousand instances of suspension in the school system. So when people are talking about this as only about a handful of students, yes. We have a handful of students that might have extraordinary issues that we need to respond to, but the incidents of suspension is not about a few students. It's about very many of them. The—if we remove them from a school, they have a right to be in school, because that's, that's, that's the law. And if we send them to a different school, then you have a community that responds with a complaint. If we sent them back to the original school, then there is the same complaint. So it's a catch 22 in a conversation, and we've been handicapped this year by the fact that that the structures have not been put in place. And my—planned—already, was to have the structures in place, which is why when we announced the new transformation of schools, we held back on the alternative schools because we said we—they need to be part of an overall plan that comes before the board which is about—not simply about the present schools or about new schools, but about new structures that are necessary in the system. And now—and we are going to respond very comprehensively, I think, about these needs.

Well—before we get into the structures, I do want to hear more about that, and—and have some questions about that. This will be your first budget that's in your control. Completely in your control, that you will submit to the board.

Uh-huh. That I have submitted already to the board.

Right, that you have already submitted to the board, excuse me. [laughter]

In—in *past.* [laughter]

And it takes effect in July.

Correct.

But—let me take—before you jump into that, because I have questions about what the structures going to be for the next year, but nobody has the statistics that are real, and have—that can really paint the full picture of disturbance and violence in our schools—we don't know it.

We do know it.

Well we do and we don't. I mean—let me explain what I mean, you can say I'm wrong but let me just put out a couple things. One is that every teacher that you talk to, that I have spoken with, numerous teachers—just about what's been going on since this incident, say through emails they send us, conversations—that the incidents of disrespect, violence, cursing, illegal

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use of cell phones, students fighting, teachers being threatened, are way under-reported. That the schools are—may of the schools, not all of them, are a very difficult place to teach. Even some of our city-wide high schools. And that principles are loath to intervene, because they don't want to be written up as a—what's the word, in No Child Left Behind, what am I—

Persistently dangerous.

Persistently dangerous school, excuse me, I'm sorry. And, and that when I say we don't know the extent of this, it's because officially it's not reported, and teachers were all saying—it's a—it's a horrible situation that no one is addressing.

Well, let's—let's—first of all, let's talk about the facts and the frame. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the accountability structure today creates a perverse incentive in terms of, of how incidents get reported. Because of No Child Left Behind, when certain incidents occur, if those incidents over the space of a year meet a certain percentage of the population, the school gets labeled as "Persistently Dangerous." Because of the force of that label, the symbolic meaning of that label, you might have schools and principles who are doing a very honest job in terms of, of reporting what's going on in the schools and might actually have exemplary climates. For example, a school might report that the have found five students coming in to a school with a weapon and they have caught the incident, they have reported, they have done everything right, and it counts as an incident that can work against the school in terms of the label. So the incentive is against the honest reporting. At the same time, not every incident counts towards Persistently Dangerous. It is only incidents that are related to violence. So incidents of disrespect are not included in, in the list. Many, many incidents that are being discussed as part of what contributes to the label are actually not part of what the framework calls for. So part of what we need to do first of all is be very very clear about what the label means. Secondly, what I have experienced in the past two to three weeks and it's partly because of how forcefully I asserted what I have been asserting all year, which is that there are—there are certain incidents that have no place in our classrooms, and if people are not reporting them, then they are really risking their jobs in terms of, of the integrity of their response to a student or a school's needs. What has happened in the past several weeks, is almost a hypersensitivity to the climate and everything is being reported so what I have discovered the past two to three weeks is a spike in terms of the number of incidents that are coming to me in terms of, of schools for example that, in the entire year, had not flagged an incident right now are flagging incidents. And some of them are not incidents of violence, they're simply incidents that are being flagged because I think people struggle with the meaning of where the line is drawn. The—the—and the reason why I'm saying the meaning of where the line is drawn is because the guidance, in terms of our discipline code—it is—it is not definite in, in as guidance. If you look at our discipline code the way it's written right now, and there's been a committee that has been working all year revising the discipline code, there are certain incidents that—where their response can range all the way from, from a parent conference to an expulsion. And I think that part of what we need to do—and we heard it from teachers in this teacher forum, is reduce the degrees of flexibility in terms of the response and make certain things very, very tight. The other aspect of it is that quite often you see schools that are responding with a suspension, but the nature of the suspension changes, so that you do not see a uniform response across the system. Now, one might argue that that's intentional, because a student doing something should trigger a differentiated response, depending on the context of the incident. But clearly, there's a need for tighter guidance, and for a way to predict certain responses. My discomfort with a conversation and what might guidance has been from the beginning of the year, is that suspension should be a last resort, and by definition, it is an admission that the instructional climate in the school is not working. The en—and by that, I mean the following. In schools that work, there are all kinds of intervention that hopefully result in an incident not happening. When an incident happened—happens, it's because something has not worked. It could be—and this is not about blame, it's about a recognition of facts—it could be because of problems in the home, it could be because of problems in the community, it could be because of problems in the city around safety so that our student feels that they need to carry a knife in order to have protection on their way to school, and then they get caught at the door with a knife. It could be because of our failure in leadership, in establishing the protocols and assuring that everybody feels safe, protected and the norms are clear. It could be about

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failures in individual classrooms, or it could be about a moment in time when somebody didn't realize that there was something off in something. Whatever it is, if the incidents multiply, it is—there's clearly a need to change something fundamental. And—and, if you allow me to finish, the—my guidance to the field from the beginning of the year has been—if the incident is one of—of violence, you must report, and you must suspend. If the incident is not one of violence, then there has to be a way to work with the student whether through in school suspension, whether through some kind of intervention, whether—some creativity at the school, where we keep the kids in school. Because if you look at our drop out rate, if you look at our graduation rate, if you look at the correlation between students being over age, failing courses, being truant, and getting suspended, the correlations are unbelievable. So at some level, what I have tried to communicate is that we need to keep our eye on the ball and the ball is about teaching and learning. And at the same time, we intervene in terms of these kinds of incidents. If you couple what you've read about in the last two weeks with lots of thing going on around the schools and the community which quite frankly are unbelievable in terms of the pressures on the schools—last week we had a elementary school that on two consecutive days was under lock down—because of incidents outside of the school. The pressure on teachers, the pressure on principles, the pressure on the students themselves, are, are extraordinary, and it triggers that kind of hypersensitivity that I think leads sometimes to, to incidents that, that we should avoid.

Now—the schools, libraries, rec centers—can't control what happens in the street. Can not.

They—they—

But—

They should influence, because we have an—an extraordinary opportunity, which—to shape the children.

You want to influence, but you can't control, you can't control gang kids do whatever they want to do outside in the street, you're not going to control that. You—the school system, aren't going to control that, nor the libraries, nor the rec centers, but what I'm asking is this. And I'll come back to where I left off. Because of—my sense of talking to a number of teachers is they feel that a lot of things are out of control in their schools. And then—A, they get no support when they try to do something from higher up, and B, they go into a hallway and say things like—"Take off your hat. Put the cellphone in your locker. Give me the cellphone. Stop screaming down the hall." The response is usually "F You. You can't tell me what to do." That—elementary school, the teachers are saying that, that kids throw bricks at them. That they get bitten, they get cursed out by little students. That there's no—that they feel like they have no respect coming from students or families and—I mean, obviously it's not every student, we're not talking about the majority of students—

Uh-huh. Well—

But there's this sense that things are out of control.

Well, let—let me respond in two ways. When I said before that when there are repeated incidents that get reported and if there coming from spec—from specific schools, my reaction is number one, this doesn't necessarily mean that it's about the list. But it triggers the need to go back and see whether there's something going on in those schools that requires an intervention. It's because the kinds of behaviors that you have described should not be happening in our schools. So if there happening, then it requires a change and a change can be in terms of the administration, and their behavior—it can be about the teachers and their behaviors. It can be about the community and it's behavior. It can be about the central office and its behavior. Something has to change and it has to change—

But wait, wait. You didn't say—what about the students and their behavior?

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Hold on, hold on, time out, time out. [laughter] *That* is the end goal of everything else changing. And the reason for that is—the kids come as is, you've heard me say that, our job, and I said to you, and I just said that we have an extraordinary opportunity to influence even what happens outside the schools—our job is to put the structures and put the, the interventions and behaviors in place so that the behavior of the student changes. That's the end goal. And whether the solution is more suspensions—and I don't believe that's a solution, because number one they come back, number two they go someplace else, and number three they go to the streets where they then pick up even worse behaviors—or whether the solutions are the schools getting better, the community getting more engaged, the city agencies working to end in a different way, administrators doing their job as well as they can do, central office providing guidance and the resources in fundamentally better ways. All those solutions, all those solutions play a part. What I'm going to take issue with is the general portrayal, because I visit schools every single day, and what I can tell you is that we have extraordinary people in schools and extraordinary kids as well. And yes, we have incidents in the system that you read about, that we try to respond to immediately, and that we will respond to in increasingly effective ways as we gain traction in terms of this reform and a different way of doing things. But the notion that the kids of Baltimore City are all doing all these things is part of what I consider to be the criminalization of the students of this city that I have experienced since I first got here. Which I consider to be an abdication of responsibility in terms of city and community—and parents, quite often. And that the kids, if they do certain things, there has to be an immediate consequence needs to be strong. But the question, then, is and then—what? And the "what" has to be about working with a student in order to make them successful because they're not disappearing into the ether. They're still here. And they're not born in the school, they don't—they don't go away at three o'clock in the afternoon, they wake up in somebody's home, they go back to sleep in somebody's home, they go into the community to be part of the community, and everyone must be responsible and responsive to the need for solutions that it is fundamentally—about the students. Fundamentally about the students. Because if the behaviors on the part of the students don't change, the problems will continue. And so much of what's coming back in terms of the normative climate as in, what—how do you respond, it's a punitive approach that does not recognize the fact that it's what has been tried before and failed. That percentage of students that graduated from high school, that made the news in Baltimore City, 34 weeks ago, 34.5 percent was the number that was bandied about, was from the year 2003 to 2004, which happened to be a year where twenty-six thousand incidents of suspension took place. If the kids are not in school, they're not going to graduate, they're not going to pass. So the responsibility for me, and you have seen me moving in this direction during the year, is make better schools. And already, when you think in terms of the transformation schools, we're going to have, over the next four years, we're going to create 6,000 seats that are not—that are not in place this year. If you think in terms of what I just mentioned about transitional settings for kids—right now, today, in Baltimore City, you have 700 kids in suspension. This is why I say I know I have the facts. 700 kids in suspension. 480 are in short term suspension, over 200 are in long term suspension. You know where those kids are?

Oh. Right. In the streets.

In the streets. So, so this is what I inherited. And in—in terms—how does help the student or the schools? They come back. The solution for the system is to create the settings, work with teachers, bring in the community forcefully into the, into the schools—not as officers of law and order, that's why I called for the volunteers, but as people who take responsibility for the kids. Somebody has to be talking the kids—and it can't just be the administrators and the teachers—about what does it take to be successful in this society. That's why the volunteers are going to be there. Work—provide resources to schools, so that they can respond. It can not be about the central office responding, it has to be about a principle in a school deciding that maybe they need more police people. Maybe they need an after school program. Maybe they need to be open on a Saturday. Maybe they need to be open all year long. Maybe they need a professional development program that runs all year long which is about peer mediation. Maybe they need a gang—somebody who comes in, into the school every week, twice a week, to talk to twenty-five kids who might be in that gang. Maybe all those things need to be happening at the same time, and a great principle, working with a core of great teachers, and working with a community that is supportive of the school, can

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do this. Together. Working comprehensively in terms of the plan for the school, in terms of the safety plan of the school. That's how the work should be done. It's not how it's been done until now.

I guess what I really am trying to figure out, though, in all the years of, you know, working in schools or being a teacher myself, recovering schools for the last 15 years, is that—there's been a difficulty moving from the rhetoric of what should have happened to changing a school. And that, you know, you have 700 students right now, you say, that are, that are suspended from our city schools.

That's one percent of the population.

That's a significant—

In one—in one day, that's two days. A snapshot in time. Today, one percent of our population has been suspended.

And I wrote you an email, when this first incident happened. And I, and I told you about a program I covered 15 years ago on Lombard Middle School, where there was an in school suspension program that was actually working quite well. And then it lost its money and went away.

Right.

So—you can leave it to individual principles, or you can have a plan that comes out of North Avenue that says we're going to have a plan of in school suspensions, but that means you're going to have to figure out how to reassign your social workers and counselors to actually do work with students who are in school suspension, teachers who are assigned to in school suspensions to work for those kids while they're in that in school suspension. And maybe expand it out to family therapy to work with families and kids—it's—it's a huge—to do it correctly, to really make a change, means a systemic change in how schools work.

And that is exactly what I'm talking about. If you think in terms of what's been going on in the last month in the system, some of, some of the coverage has been about violence, some of the coverage has been about a monumental shift in terms of how we operationalize our schools. Last year, a principle with 500 students got to have discretion over 45 thousand dollars. With that 45 thousand dollars, they could put on things like an in school suspension program, or buy books, or do professional development, or send their kids on trips. Not a whole lot of cash to spend. This year, principles are going to have discretion over 65% of their budgets. They're going to have extraordinary suspensions and guidance, guidance.

Suspensions?

I'm sorry, discretion.

Discretion.

And guidance, guidance, over the elements that they will be held accountable for. In order to ensure the success and the key elements, key essentials in terms of the schools, and part of what has to happen is a—an attention to who the kids are, what the problems in the school are, and a relationship between what comes to me in terms of budget from a school and what the data shows as the needs of a school. So part of what I will see is exactly how are the dollars being spent in terms of climate, in terms of a relationship with some of the things that we have discussed, as well as the academics, and that's because one of the things that has been cleared to me terms of the school reform, movement in this, in this country, especially in the inner cities, is that there has been this extraordinary emphasis on, on basic skills, while at the same time, some of the youth development components and the enrichment components that also

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have to part of the conversation about school improvement, have been left to the side. I couldn't agree more that part of the problem is that a great program that might have worked in Lombard Middle ten years ago went away because the funding went away. Part of the reason why the funding went away is because so much of the dollars have generally been controlled centrally, manufactured or shifted in terms of shifts in central office. Central offices change every single year in this system. I'm the seventh CEO in the last ten years. What needs to happen is sustainability in a school. With a school community that owns the schools, in relationship to the benefit of the students.

Well, what does—what does it mean that 65% of the budget will be in the hands of—of a principle? I mean, you have—a hundred percent, whatever that X amount of dollars is, now is that 45% teacher salaries you can't touch? Is—what is the 65%?

The—the 65% is—it's all the general fund dollars, and dollars that are—that previously had been controlled in the central office that, that can now be spent at the discretion of the principle. The 35% of the dollars are dollars that we quote unquote locked, because of certain compliance elements, such as for example, students with disabilities requirements. Or services that principles themselves indicated that they felt that central should manage. Cafeteria, for example. So a school community can now decide that instead of one position for example, which before had been mandated by central, they can use that—they can use those dollars for a different type of, of position in the school. The—the instead of positions, which is the way the dollars were distributed to the schools before, the budget is in dollars and school principles with school improvement teams are going to, to come back with plans that basically create an organization that, that responds to a vision of how a school functions effectively.

But when it comes to this, then, why shouldn't there be a policy that comes out of North Avenue, out of the office of Andres Alanso, that says "There will be an in school suspension program in every school in the city, and this is how we're going to—"

It does—there's no reason why they shouldn't, except that not every school in the city needs an in school suspension. So part of the—there are schools where there hasn't been a single incident all year, and there are some schools where, where—when you talk to principles and when you talk to teachers, there—this is not part of the conversation. And, and part of what's wrong with, with the way Central Offices work are responsiveness that either under-reach or over-reach, and what has to happen, what is, what, it's clearly a part of the guidance and clearly part of an accountability, is a school by school response that takes into account these needs in this conversation. I am completely in favor of in school suspensions, because they provide the opportunity for student learning to continue while at the same time they, they provide for an immediate con—consequence. I will also tell you that in the case of many other children, it should not be about an in-school suspension, it should be about an expulsion. And—and the response, then, has to be a systemic way of providing a setting for these students. In the case of older students, it should not be about suspension or expulsion, it should be about people responding in a different way. And, and—I am tremendously mistrustful of silver bullets in this conversation. Because we're not talking about werewolves, we're talking about individual kids with individual needs whom we are responsible for serving. And we are also talking about communities that need to become involved. The moment that we think that it's all about providing an in-school suspension, we're—we're absolving everybody else from responsibility.

So—so let me say something—when you make the changes here at North Avenue—

You mean—what changes?

The changes like drastically cutting the personality here—

Three hundred and ten positions eliminated.

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Eliminated. How has that changed the amount of money and the numbers of people that are working in our schools, on the ground?

Well—the changes take effect on July first.

Okay, well, how will it then effect—

The—the changes ens—the changes are part of the seventy million dollars that are now going into schools.

What does that mean, concretely?

Concretely—means seventy million additional dollars are in schools--

To divide up among schools in the city of Baltimore.

Correct. And, and—to put it in context, we begun the budget process facing a 52 million shortfall. Because of changes in the Thornton law and this is something that we discussed when I was in your radio, I believe the last time, your radio show. And we addressed the 52 million dollar shortfall by identifying efficiencies and savings and beginning to cut back on, on central staff and central services that we felt were better handled at the schools. And then we continued to identify savings in terms of centrally controlled services that we felt needed to be in the school. The, the result is a roughly seventy million amount that is now in school budget so that in spite of facing a 52 million dollar shortfall, out of 193 schools, roughly 170 schools are going to have already received budgets this year that include more money than they received in the past year.

So when you say that in your, in your new fiscal year, you're going to be addressing this issue of disruption and violence and, and disruptive students and—with a different way of looking at it, on the one hand you're talking about the principles have control over how they're going to implement what they're going to do, but there must be some—I mean, your question of alternative schools, of schools that—I mean, there was a time when I worked in the school system.

How long ago was that?

Uh.... [laughter] Thirty years ago?

Thirty years ago.

When I worked in the school system—

No, no disruptions then, I'm sure.

Plenty of disruptions.

Okay. [laughter]

And—where I worked, 30 and 35 and 40 years ago—I feel so old when I say that!

Where did you work, Marc?

We—I worked at Baltimore Prep, which was a special program on the west side, in a west side shopping center, for kids who had dropped out, were kicked out, were coming out of prison, they came do us.

A transitional setting.

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Yeah.

We need one, we don't have one.

We had—so we had these kids, small setting, counselors and teachers, ten kids to a group, it was intense—and we worked for these young people. So I worked in a lot of alternative settings, and I worked in our vocational schools. I ran a program at Mervo and at Carver.

I was at Mervo this morning.

Those two schools, I ran a program—it was called "Special Needs." And any kid—students who were disruptive, suspended, had issues in class, they came to us for intense counciling. We also created a program for expectant mothers in the school, to keep them in school, in the mainstream. And we counseled them and did all of that. So.

And—and--and we have roughly a 1600 seats in the entire system that are quote unquote "alternative" seats. That includes all the alternative high schools, the, the programs that are out there, an elementary middle program. The concern, the—the deep concern that I had from the moment I entered the system is that if you look at the data, the, the need outstrips the supply. If you just looked at students who are two years over age, we have 1200 students in our middle grades who are two years or more over age. The total number of alternative seats is 1600, simply in the middle school grades and this is just academic need, this is not about behavior. We, we do not, we have not had an infrastructure or school settings that addresses the needs of the students and, and if you hear me insisting on the academic aspect of the conversation, it's because what I see in the data is this extraordinary correlation between students who become over age and then suspensions.

What do you do about that? What do you do with the money you have to create those settings to put those students someplace that they might yet succeed, graduate or even be reintegrated back into the schools?

Well, first of all we need more slots. First of all. Clearly, we need—we don't need any 1600, we need far more. Number two, we need a different configuration of what we have, because we have these alternative seats, and in the same programs, we might have students who might be there for disruption, and students who might be there because they simply can not function in an academic setting, and it's unfair to both, it's a one size fits all approach. Thirdly, there's a need for fluidity in some of these settings for some students, it should be a matter of three weeks, four weeks, five weeks. For other students, there should be something permanent that insures that over a period of one, two years they flow back. There are no transitional settings in terms of kids that are coming back from incarceration, for example.

So how do you do—but how do you—so what—

We are making—we are—

How do you make that happen, though, given the limited budgets and what you don't have? What do you make of that?

Well, we—we are creative. One of the things—one of the things that we did in terms of the, the budget and the process is we, we first of all we fr—even though we went for a per-pupil approach, we froze the amounts that previously had gone to alternative schools and part of what we're doing is—which are, by the way extraordinarily on a per-pupil basis, and we're looking now at that part of money in terms of how we can reconfigure in order to make it successful. Secondly, we isolated different pieces that we set as a reserve in order to come back to the board in May with a comprehensive plan that looks at all these elements. We also as part of our secondary school transformation plan, called for the creation of settings that had an alternative approach as a perspective and we identify dollars—three and a half million dollars,

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as a matter of fact—in the budget that we were going to target for secondary school transformation and some of those dollars should be about alternative schools and alternative programs since we do not have the types of alternative programs that I think are going to carry us in terms of—of the needs for many of the students. So the question of the dollars, the question of—of the implementation—that's something that I am completely certain we're going to get done. The far more difficult question in this conversation is the notion of culture and how we're going to shift the culture of the city and the culture of the schools including the culture of the kids and the culture of the classroom in order to ensure that—that we're not reactive in terms of responding to the incidents, but we are incredibly proactive so that the number of these incidents declines. While at the same time we are completely honest and open in the response. What you have not heard in this conversation is an ounce of defensiveness. The—I think we need to own the problem. It can not be swept under the rug. It can not be about "this is not happening," it can be about it's the fault of the teachers or it's the fault of the parents or it's the fault of the principles. It is a problem in the city and we will only fix the problem if we have all on hands on deck and we have people at the top of their game so it isn't simply a question of structures, it is a question of doing things better. I've met some people—look. You look at some schools in this city and same—different school, this is a conversation that you and I have had. Same kids in two different schools, completely different outcomes. It's the same in a school. You might have the same one school, same kids, two different classrooms, and you and I know 'cause you were a teacher that in one classroom, the—the kids are lambs and in a different classroom, the kids are—can be fearsome. And—and that is not about structures and it's not about behavior of the kids. That is about adults who have capacity, have a tool kit that allows them to be extraordinarily successful where perhaps other adults are not. So part of the solution to the conversation is also clearly working with, with administrators and teachers around best practices and, and making them better at their work understanding that they might not have had the support that they've needed in the past. And that they challenge is great because nobody gets from ten or twenty or thirty miles an hour to a hundred miles an hour in one second. I want them to get there in seven seconds, I mean, I want Ferraris in my system. But it's going to take an awful lot of work and—but I am completely convinced that it's going to get better and it's going to be successful because I go to so many places that are doing extraordinary things. I don't know whether you saw the board meeting yesterday, and those robotic kids from—from the high schools, those kids are—are in those same schools doing extraordinary things and the testimony from some of those kids was amazing.

I—one last thing that—I'm going to come back almost to where we began and this has to do with a teacher question. How do you respond to teachers, many of whom support what your doing—

Yeah.

But I've talked to teachers who support you—

Yeah. Yeah. Tremendously. Tremendously.

—Who say what the school system should have done is expel that girl and the students who cheered her on.

Well, first of all, one—

I mean, it was something—I'm getting to—that kind of reaction should have been taken, and just—teachers feeling that we—teachers saying—are not being supported and backed up, we're being blamed for this, as opposed to being supported by this system.

Well, first of all, let me first thank the more than 300 teachers who were in, in the working session that we had on Monday. It was extraordinary. Extraordinary. And—and nobody, by the way, articulated that viewpoint—I started with the data that I shared with you today, and what came back was, was complete ownership in terms of the solution. I don't think expelling 20 kids who were cheering in a classroom is

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gonna make those kids successful and—and it's only going to trigger the same kind of cycle that has been part of the system for—for a very long time. Those kids are going to go back into the streets, and then what happens? They come back. I think that we need to be very mindful of what's happening with these kids, while at the same time making sure that we're responding to every single incident. Number two: people who are saying the child should have been expelled, they don't know what happened, and I will not comment about what happened, but they should not be making assumptions about what the system did or did not do. And then number three, in terms of—of the support, the support is there. If—if they're not feeling the support in terms of individual leaders in the system, that is exactly the measure of the challenge, because until we have the kinds of supportive leadership that all teachers need, we're not going to make progress. And my conversation with principles in our system, principles have been if you're—if you're playing games, and I'm not saying that they are. If for some reason they are trying to gain the numbers, they might be gaining the numbers, but they're losing their staff. And—and no principle can be successful with staff that doesn't believe in their strength, don't believe in their honesty, and doesn't believe in their integrity. So—it's almost a recipe for disaster in terms of school leadership. The expel all kids who were—I have been incredibly troubled, and I keep saying to principles "What have been the conversations with the kids?" The kids have to set their own norms. Part of the reason why 30 kids responded by cheering is because they have the wrong norms. And it is our responsibility to work with them and the community around the norms. Expelling them with a signal—you don't do this—and then what happens is that they go back into the same places that created the norms and we need to take them back. So it's not—it's a silver bullet approach, and what I said before is that I do not believe in silver bullets. I believe in hard work, I believe in tremendous commitment, and I believe that ultimately, we are all there for those same kids that we have to understand need a very tough response sometimes but also a very supportive response at the same time. Because otherwise, you know, we fail them. And our job is not to fail them. And at some level, you know, as complex as the question is, it's that simple.

We've been here a long time. Andres Alonso, thank you so much.

Thank you. Thank you. Good to see you again my friend, and I wish you the greatest success and you know, in every conversation that I've had with you over the past year, I have to say that I've been struck by the depth of your love for this city and the fact that the schools in the city for you are—are at the heart of—of what—how the city functions and—

Thank you.

You know. Can't thank you enough for that.

Thank you for listening to this special production for the Center for Emerging Media. This podcast was produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy. From the Center for Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take care.

-transcript by Judith Lloyd