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Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools): The [Entry] of a New Chief Executive Officer

On the morning of November 9, 2016, before heading to her first school visit of the day as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools), Dr. Sonja Santelises found herself comforting her own three daughters as they tried to make sense of the new president-elect, Donald Trump. After attempting to instill some semblance of hope at home, Santelises proceeded to Bard High School Early College (BHSEC), where she observed classrooms and listened to powerful reflections by the high school students on the outcome of the election. While some of the adults at the school politely attempted to give Santelises an out if she needed to be elsewhere, she mused, “This is the perfect place to be the day after the election,” and she then returned to the students’ discussion, eager to ask them more questions about their learning.

For Santelises, who previously served as the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) for the 83,000-student district from 2010 to 2013 under then CEO Andrés Alonso, BHSEC represented an opportunity to provide the students of Baltimore a different model for what “high achievement” could look like with its tuition-free college course of study for 11th and 12th graders. This new district initiative generated the same kind of excitement among the City Schools community as the return of Santelises herself. In May 2016, she was named the CEO of City Schools after working in nearby Washington, D.C., for three years. Even during her time away from the district as the vice president of the education non-profit Education Trust, she had remained a resident of Baltimore and sent her daughters to the district’s Tunbridge Public Charter School. In many ways, returning to City Schools was a homecoming for the former academics chief and City Schools parent. In other ways, however, City Schools felt like a completely different district than the one that CEO Alonso and she left in 2013. With declining student enrollment, decreasing test scores, and a growing budget gap (See **Exhibit 1** and **Exhibit 2**), Santelises realized her honeymoon period as the new CEO would not last long.

Professor Elizabeth A. City and Research Associates Dr. Stephanie Downey Toledo and Dr. Miho Kubagawa (Harvard Graduate School of Education Ed.L.D. graduates) prepared this case. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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The Return

The interim years, when Santelises was not present at City Schools, were difficult for the district. Amidst a legal battle filed by the district's charter schools and growing public criticism of then-CEO Gregory Thornton, a national search for a new superintendent began in December 2015 by the nine-member school board, comprised of members jointly appointed by the governor of Maryland and the mayor. Unlike previous searches, City Schools's school "board did not announce publicly that a search was underway"¹ because Thornton was still at the helm. Santelises emerged as one of the four finalists and received an offer by the school board in April 2016 who then proclaimed to the public that Thornton's four-year contract would end two years earlier than initially planned.

For Santelises, the return as the CEO was a career move that she had not planned. However, during this time period, the city of Baltimore was thrust into the national spotlight due to the events leading up to and involving the death of Freddie Gray,² who died from injuries suffered while in custody of the Baltimore Police Department. Gray's hospitalization and subsequent death resulted in an ongoing series of protests and civil unrest, including a major protest in April 2015 that was initiated across the street from a district high school, Frederick Douglass. These events led to the governor declaring a state of emergency in Baltimore. As Santelises watched the portrayal of Gray and City Schools in the news, she knew that the narrative of Baltimore portrayed by the media did not match the reality on the ground. The reality of Frederick Douglass High School that she had come to know was that of a vibrant learning community where she had observed AP classes, listened to band rehearsals, and attended pep rallies. She reflected:

The hegemonic narrative that was spinning was so counter to what I know to be [Baltimore]. It would be a privilege to return [to City Schools as CEO] and be able to demonstrate the untapped potential of a community of young people here in Baltimore who are also so representative of young people across the country who are being misrepresented and misunderstood. ... If we can inculcate the young people of Baltimore with love, drive, and the tools of learning, they will learn to jettison past any immediate obstacle that may be in front of them.³

With these thoughts in mind, she accepted the offer by the school board to return to the district as CEO. It was not her own career aspirations that made the decision quite simple for her. Instead she noted, "While I hope I have longevity in the role, this will be a one and done superintendency. This is about Baltimore more than the role. I have great care and concern for the city and system."

Sonja Santelises

For a district with over 80 percent of students identifying as African-American, Santelises recognized the significance of her own racial identity in her new role as CEO of the fourth largest school district in the state of Maryland. She drew inspiration from her father, who was raised in Mississippi under Jim Crow and went on to become a chemist. Her own education had taken her to three Ivy League institutions - Brown, Columbia and Harvard University (See **Exhibit 3**). In Baltimore, some in the black community told her that "all black is not black," while others in the white community told her that she was the "right kind of black." For Santelises, who viewed her race, gender, age and experience as assets, she did not get "so bogged down in the gender [and] race nomenclature." Her guiding philosophy was simple: "For me, it has always been about how I used the capital that I have gained throughout a variety of life experiences that I've been fortunate to have to advocate for [the] young people who could be me."

Entry as Re-entry

Santelises re-entered an organization and a community in which she had established credibility already as the former CAO. As such, Santelises opted not to have a large transition team. Instead, she set up four meetings with the school board right away. The Board expected that Santelises would lead with transparency to the board and in turn together they would lead with transparency to the public. That said, another central office team member noted, “We were working to make sure that there was as much good news as possible, conducted in a transparent way.” She also held a retreat with the board within the first month on the job, where collectively they set goals, established norms and determined the type and frequency of communication among the chair, the vice chair, and her. She also started a critical conversation around race and class to ensure that from the very beginning, the decisions that she and the board would make together were to be grounded in shared values of equity for all City Schools students. This kind of leadership was a breath of fresh air for an embattled school board that had felt immense disappointment and responsibility for the rocky tenure of the previous CEO Thornton. While more public facing leaders report the decision to let Thornton go was necessary, more internally facing employees shared that, “Thornton had to be the bearer of bad news. When leaders publically went after him, they had to know that they were shooting the messenger for naming the problem. He had only been in the role a month when the budget issues were named. You don’t lose 100 million dollars in 30 days.” Another employee under Thornton noted that broad staff failures reflected poorly on him and, as the leader, he took the fall, citing “Thornton was very personable. Thornton gave the impression that he believed everyone had good ideas. In the unique context of following a leader like Alonso, however, that accessibility eroded the mystique of the office.” While there were many takes on the trade-offs of different leadership styles as Santelises returned, Santelises resisted the common “knee jerk reaction to rip up [the] work” done by her predecessor and ensured that the arts programs and free-meal program that were established during his tenure remained because they were “wins for kids.”

Ultimately, her familiarity with the remaining City Schools team, who spent the past three years working with two different CEOs while she was away from the district, interim CEO Tisha Edwards for one year and CEO Thornton for two, set her up to have a “longer runway” for entry. While most of the senior leaders of the organization had left, her working relationship with key cabinet members like Chief of Staff Alison Perkins-Cohen, who had been with the district since 2011, remained intact even while she was at Education Trust. Even while outside the district for three years, Santelises took weekly walks on Sundays with the Chief of Staff. While new superintendents in other cities often had to prioritize building relationships with key leadership team members, Santelises already possessed deep, existing relationships throughout the district, including with many teacher and school leaders in the field, which freed her up to focus on issues that were impacting students directly. At the same time, Santelises felt increased pressure as a returner. She was aware that people might expect too much too quickly because of her familiarity with the system. As a woman of faith, she kept in mind that the same people who “welcomed Jesus with palms one Sunday crucified him the next.”

The State of Schools

In her first “State of Schools” address in August 2016, Santelises delivered a speech marked by an urgent and somber tone, largely influenced by her visit a few weeks prior to a funeral of a 15-year old City Schools student who was murdered. A portion of the speech was printed in *The Baltimore Sun* and read:

Instead of presenting the usual test scores and suspension data that usually anchors the annual address, Santelises used a city neighborhood map to illustrate the hard, every day, real life challenges faced by students that affect how they learn and whether teachers are able to reach them: the number of shootings per 1,000 residents, the number of adults on parole and probation, the percentage of children living in poverty, the percentage of mothers receiving prenatal care.⁴

At the top of Santelises's priorities was building relationships in the communities and with city agencies, which she viewed as critical partners in moving City Schools forward through its current challenges. In many ways, while she prioritized being in schools as CAO, she prioritized being in communities as CEO. In her words, "The role of the CEO is to set the standard for what community involvement looks like. Some of this is about being transparent. The education reform community has kind of faked [community engagement]. ... We bake it and ask [the community] last minute or we whiteboard it knowing fully well that we can't do it all. People appreciate it when you're being real." Transparency and community engagement alone may not meet the expectations of the community. A community member relayed, "We do not have reason to trust her and meetings alone are insufficient. Baltimore is a neighborhood town, you're not from Baltimore, you are from a part of town, that is very important to us." These genuine sentiments from families would not be easily or quickly changed.

Teaching and Learning

"Being real" also meant rebuilding teaching and learning goals. At every grade level tested, less than 25 percent of all City Schools students met or exceeded standards on PARCC standardized tests in 2015,⁵ which declined further to an aggregate 15 percent a year later in 2016.⁶ Additionally, for a district that once was a national frontrunner in progressive discipline reform, City Schools also experienced a 25 percent increase in suspensions during the year prior to Santelises's arrival.⁷ From her perspective, the uptick to 8,500 students who had been suspended at one point in the past school year represented the district's "general lack of clarity" around school discipline. The drop in scores and the increase in suspensions signaled to Santelises that greater support, clarity, and alignment were needed for schools. On the instructional side, teachers needed greater support in adopting the district's Common Core-aligned curriculum. Santelises strongly believed in the potential of an aligned, high-quality curriculum, citing, "A high-quality curriculum implemented well will get you as much growth as an experienced teacher. We have to make sure that [it] is in place."

On the culture side, school-based staff needed the kinds of tools and resources that were provided under CEO Alonso, during whose leadership the district had seen a dramatically reduced number of suspensions; a former principal noted that those same efforts "didn't get the priority they required"⁸ under CEO Thornton. Principals appreciated Santelises's focus on realignment, noting, "She has very high standards [and] even if it means we will have to work a lot harder again, we are confident there will be a clear focus, like there had been when she was CAO."⁹ Another leader said, "We're glad she's back so we can learn again."¹⁰ In a district often highlighted externally for the autonomy given to its school leaders and as a model for decentralization,¹¹ Santelises found herself wondering how to ensure that school leaders had "earned" that independence. She pondered, "How do we safeguard so that variability is not something less? Once someone has earned their seat at the table, then I am ready to give them some rope."

Instructional alignment came with its challenges, though, given that the Baltimore Teachers Union contract negotiations were a year overdue. The school board was not seeing the returns on investment in teacher performance and student growth that they had desired, and they needed to put the district

on a path towards long-term financial sustainability. The union had begun to circulate statements in October 2016 citing that City Schools wanted to cut \$10 million in compensation and benefits, even though the board had not put out any proposals publicly on the table.¹² While many believed that the contract negotiations should have been resolved long before Santelises's tenure began, she was now faced with two options: a very public, lengthy battle with the union or an appeal to the state for more funds. Neither option would be popular, and both options would likely end up playing a significant role in her legacy. She reflected that soon she would have to "pick [her] poison."

Human Capital

Santelises and her team believed overcoming the challenges they were currently facing in City Schools would not come about without a thoughtful human capital strategy. Horizontally and vertically across City Schools, there was growing concern about the difficulty in recruiting and retaining talent, particularly given the number of people who left under the previous administration and the ease with which City Schools employees could leave for nearby Baltimore County Public Schools. The principals and coaches who were responsible for building the capacity of current talent felt defeated that their investment in the human capital pipeline of the district seemed to pay its dividends for students in the suburbs of Baltimore County rather than for the intended students of Baltimore City.

Known while she was CAO for setting high expectations of people, CEO Santelises operated from the mindset that developing leadership throughout the organization was mission critical and that everyone needed to encourage and support "leadership from one's space." This meant focusing on one of her mantras: the way that we do the work matters. For Santelises, this meant that while there was complex work to tackle, she did not underestimate the importance of getting the more straightforward, though often poorly executed, tasks completed. As such, she charged her team to "help people get smarter to do the work because individuals are making micro decisions every minute on whether kids learn or not." In her first few weeks on the job, she ensured a successful first day of school, developed strategies to increase enrollment of students, and ensured all teachers received their first paycheck on time. These kinds of quick wins earned her an "A" grade on her entry by a range of stakeholders; a few, across schools and central office, even described her as one of the strongest CEOs that City Schools had seen.

Still, a question remained about whether or not Santelises had enough high-quality talent across the district, even as she promoted a former high-quality principal to a chief position. She knew development, not just recruitment, would be the key. As she laid out, "If we are waiting for 183 schools to have the right people, we'll be waiting for a long time. When I study high-performing schools after... exceptional leader[s] [have] left, it's those schools that have built the capacity of individuals throughout the organization that have sustainable success."

The Road Ahead

Amidst all these challenges, however, nothing was greater than the challenge of the looming budget cuts. The district had faced declining enrollment and increasing operating costs, which meant Santelises inherited a budget at her entry that was projected to be the largest budget gap in recent memory, to the tune of \$129 million.¹³ Santelises knew this meant making some tough decisions ahead, including layoffs and school closures, for a district that seemed desperately in need of more resources.

Though she had the support of her board in making these controversial decisions, Santelises knew that such moves would not be easy or popular for the community she sought to build and strengthen.

As she wrapped up her visit at Bard High School Early College, Santelises looked ahead to a meeting-filled day that extended well into the evening with a public meeting on her first set of recommendations for school closures. On that school closure list was Renaissance Academy High School, which had experienced a fatal stabbing of a student on campus and two more tragic student deaths in the last year alone. While Thornton had removed that school from the closure list last year, Santelises had added Renaissance as one of the five schools set for closure this year. Bracing for the pushback she knew she would receive from the community, she remained open to removing Renaissance from the list if the school found a different building. Her efforts to “lessen trauma for an already vulnerable group of kids” meant working with partners, including the University of Maryland, to secure new facilities.¹⁴ However, at this point, there was not a clear path forward for Renaissance or for the district as a whole for what would be a financially difficult few years.

Exhibit 1 Summary of Enrollment Data

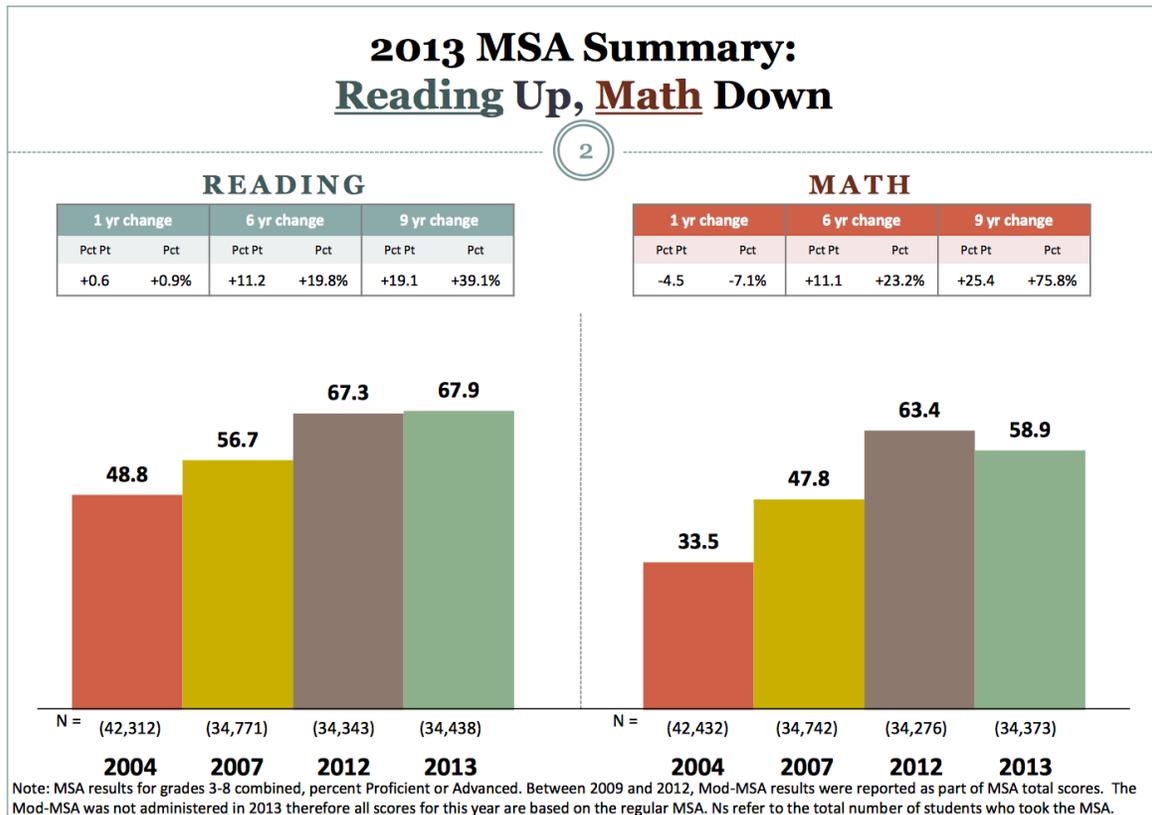


Source: Baltimore City Public Schools.

Exhibit 2 Summary of Test Score Data of % Students Performing Proficient/Advanced

[**Note:** Assessment changed from the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) to PARCC during years while Santelises was not working in City Schools.]

City Schools Grades 3-8 combined scores on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) from the previous Santelises tenure as CAO



Source: Baltimore City Public Schools.

City Schools PARCC Assessment from 2015 and 2016 while Santelises was gone from the district

	ELA		Math	
	2015	2016	2015	2016
3 rd	20.4	11.9	17.9	19.1
4 th	12.2	14.4	9.8	12.6
4 th	12.6	11.8	10.3	13.3
6 th	20	13.4	9.4	8.4
7 th	14	15.9	7.9	9.7
8 th	14	15.0	5.7	6.2

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools.

Exhibit 3 Biography of Sonja Santelises used during her entry in August 2016

Dr. Sonja B. Santelises has spent close to 30 years focused on building high-quality teaching and learning to help students excel, including her tenure as chief academic officer for Baltimore City Public Schools from 2010 to 2013. She returns to City Schools after serving for three years as vice president for K-12 policy and practice at The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit focused on closing the achievement gap experienced disproportionately by African American, Latino, and Native students and students from low-income families.

Dr. Santelises first came to City Schools from Boston, where she was the assistant superintendent for pilot schools, a network of 23 schools with broad autonomy and a track record of successfully meeting students' needs and improving the achievement of low-income students, particularly students of color. Prior to the pilot schools post, she was assistant superintendent for teaching and learning/professional development in Boston.

Before joining Boston Public Schools, Dr. Santelises lectured on urban education for two years at Harvard University and spent six years as a senior associate with Focus on Results Inc., where she coached superintendents and trained school leaders in five major urban districts. Prior to that, she served as executive director of the New York City Algebra Project, the local site of the acclaimed national math reform program, also present in City Schools.

Dr. Santelises began her career in education as director of professional development and teacher placement with Teach for America (New York). She then served as a teacher and curriculum specialist at Decatur Clearpool School, a year-round school in Brooklyn, where she oversaw the founding of the middle school.

Throughout her career as an educator, academic, and administrator, Dr. Santelises has been steadfast in her belief that excellence in urban education is achievable at scale. "Our students have the same capacity for success as any other children," she says. "We must communicate and demonstrate our complete confidence in that capacity, by charting a pathway to success for each individual child. The real challenge is ours - as educators - to hold ourselves and our students accountable for their achievement."

Dr. Santelises is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Brown University. She holds a Master of Arts degree in education administration from Columbia University and a Doctor of Education in administration, planning and social policy from Harvard University. She has lived in Baltimore with her husband and three daughters since 2010.

Dr. Santelises was named chief executive officer of Baltimore City Public Schools effective July 1, 2016.

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools.

Exhibit 4 Message from Dr. Santelises about the state's new report cards

Link to Video: <https://vimeo.com/304203185>

Note: This video does not fall within the first 120 days of Dr. Santelises's tenure as CEO of City Schools as does the bulk of this entry case study, but this video does demonstrate how she sets the expectations for the community as it receives highly publicized and highly sensitive per-school star ratings from the state of Maryland.

Source: Baltimore City Public Schools.

Endnotes

- ¹ Green, Erica. "Baltimore schools CEO to be replaced by former academics chief." *The Baltimore Sun* (2016, May 3). Retrieved from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/bs-md-thornton-out-20160503-story.html>.
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- ³ Santelises, S. (2016, Nov 9). Personal Interview.
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- ⁵ Bailey, Deborah. "New Balto. School CEO Lays Out Agenda." *Afro* (2016, May 18). Retrieved from <http://afro.com/new-balto-school-ceo-lays-out-agenda/>.
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- ¹³ Green, Erica and E. Cox. "Baltimore schools face \$129 million budget deficit." *The Baltimore Sun* (2016, Dec 14). Retrieved from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/bs-md-ci-city-school-deficit-20161214-story.html>.
- ¹⁴ Green, Erica. "West Baltimore's Renaissance Academy once again facing closure." *The Baltimore Sun* (2016, Nov 9). Retrieved from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/blog/bs-md-ci-school-closures-20161109-story.html>.