

State of Urban Education Address at the Fall Conference of the Great City Schools
Boston
October 27, 2011

By
Michael Casserly, Executive Director
Council of the Great City Schools

Good morning. And welcome to the 55th Annual Conference of the Great City Schools.

I want to begin this morning by thanking Carol Johnson and her great team at the Boston Public Schools for hosting this conference and for the outstanding arrangements they have made to make this the best conference ever.

I also want to say thank you one more time to Maryellen Elia and Candy Olson for hosting us last year in Tampa. And we look forward to Indianapolis next year.

Third, I want to thank Winston Brooks and members of the Executive Committee for your leadership and support in keeping this organization pointed in the right direction, running smoothly, and continuing to be a force for progress in our urban schools.

I would also like to thank the Council staff. They have worked extremely hard on this meeting's logistics, its speakers, and workshops: Teri ValeCruz, Terry Tabor, Michell Yorkman, Shirley Lathern, Alisa Adams, Henry Duvall, Tonya Harris, Sharon Lewis, Renata Uzzell, Candace Simon, Moses Palacio, Jeff Simering, Manish Naik, Julie Wright Halbert, Bob Carlson, Gabriela Uro, Ali, and Jon McLaughlin. Thank you so much. You are a great team.

Now, I know that it is unusual that I would address the organization beyond giving you a broad overview of the conference itself. But the executive committee thought it was time to make a statement on the overall condition and direction of urban education.

I do not have to tell anyone in this room that urban public education is under tremendous pressure to improve.

Urban school systems are being told to produce results or get out of the way.

We are being told to improve or see the public go somewhere else.

We are being told to be accountable for what we do or let someone else do it.

Some of the criticism is justified. Some of it is not. Either way, we are being challenged in the court of public opinion and by history to improve student achievement to levels that America has never asked of its schools.

Many groups might have folded under the pressure, giving up in the face of mounting criticism. But urban school systems across the country are doing what a lot of people didn't think we were capable of doing. We are rising to the occasion, teaching our children more effectively, and running our schools more efficiently.

The result: student achievement is increasing. Academic gaps are showing signs of narrowing. And management and operations are improving.

The gains have not stopped the criticism or muted the pressure.

But the state of urban public education in this nation—while fragile and in need of support—is on the right track and heading in the right direction.

It may surprise you to learn that the number of urban students demonstrating reading and math proficiency on state tests has increased substantially over the last several years.

Our latest Beating the Odds report, for instance, shows that over the last four years 83 percent of our districts increased the math proficiency of our urban fourth graders on state tests and 84 percent improved the math proficiency of our eighth graders.

In fact, 56 percent of our cities increased math performance in every grade tested.

In addition, the report shows that 66 percent of urban school districts improved the state reading scores of our fourth graders and 84 percent increased the reading proficiency of our eighth graders.

The data also indicate that over two-thirds of our urban school systems are narrowing the achievement gaps and are posting larger gains on state tests than other schools are.

These gains are important because these are the measures we are held accountable for improving.

More importantly, our reading performance on the much more rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – popularly called “The Nation’s Report Card” – has improved significantly since 2002.

The number of large-city students scoring at the proficient level or better on reading has increased by 35 percent among fourth graders.

And, the percent of fourth graders scoring below the basic level of attainment dropped by 18 percent.

The number of urban fourth-graders demonstrating proficiency in math has increased 45 percent since 2003 and the number of our eighth graders doing math

proficiently has improved by 50 percent over the same period--rates of gain that far outpace improvements nationwide.

These trends are important because they occur on the nation's toughest test.

All in all, we have narrowed the academic gaps between our schools and the nation by a third in math and 20 percent in reading in less than a decade.

The nation's urban public schools are not only making gains; we are catching up.

What you probably didn't realize is that the Great City Schools boast more Blue Ribbon schools than anywhere else in the nation, and our schools are perennial winners of the U.S. Academic Decathlon, the National Debate League, the Mock Trial Competition, National Science Bowl, Grammy school awards for the arts, Siemens Awards for Advanced Placement and science, and many other awards.

These are notable honors that signal that America's leadership potential is still strong, for the urban kids winning these honors are the best of what this or any country could produce.

In addition, seven of 10 of the nation's highest ranked public schools can be found in our urban centers, according to Newsweek magazine. These top schools include Dallas' School for the Gifted and Talented; Stanton College Prep and the Paxon School for Advanced Studies in Jacksonville; the School of Science and Engineering also in Dallas; Suncoast Community School in Palm Beach; City Honors High School in Buffalo; and Academic Magnet in Charleston.

Houston alone had 15 of the nation's top ranked high schools.

We are also showing important progress in turning around some of our historically lowest performing schools, including Philadelphia's Clement Middle School, Cincinnati's Taft High School, Denver's Bruce Randolph school, Boston's TechBoston Academy, and Miami's Edison and Central High Schools, and many others.

Atlanta's Carver High School, which used to have a graduation rate of 14 percent but now boasts a 94 percent rate, is an example of what is being done, and is emblematic of the graduation gains we are starting to make.

The Great City Schools also have the nation's largest concentrations of both Nationally Board Certified instructors and Teach for America graduates in our classrooms today.

What this means is that we have many of the country's best trained and most energetic classroom teachers.

And we are working to improve the environments in which our educators are teaching. Over the past few years, the number of discipline incidents in our urban public schools has declined.

We can point to progress on other educational fronts as well.

The tenure of our superintendents—our CEOs—has increased steadily from just 2.3 years in 1999 to 3.6 years in 2010. It is still too short, but it's getting better.

Every business executive in the country understands that tenure in leadership is important to ensuring momentum, continuity, and results. Our world is like theirs in that regard.

In fact, some of the nation's long-serving and most successful superintendents are with us today.

In addition, we have made substantial improvements in our operations. Despite the bad economy, we have more districts with "A" ratings or better from the bonding agencies than 10 years ago.

Our Key Performance Indicators project, moreover, shows that our audit problems have declined; our custodial services have improved; and the time it takes to procure goods and services has dropped.

All in all, I can report from the front lines of urban public education that the indicators that should be going up are going up; and the indicators that should be going down are going down.

Still, we know we have a long way to go and that our accomplishments and gains represent the most tentative foothold on the rocky shoals of school reform.

The academic achievement of many students in our urban schools is still too low. A recent report by the National Assessment Governing Board, for instance, shows that 44 percent of our fourth graders and 56 percent of our eighth graders scored below basic levels of attainment in science.

Our dropout rates are too high, despite our progress. Of the 2,000 schools across the country that are reported to produce half the country's dropouts, some 33 percent are in our cities.

In addition, some 30 percent of schools across the country that have not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act are also found in our districts.

Our personnel systems, moreover, fail to differentiate strong teachers and administrators from weak ones.

We continue to struggle with how to conduct fair and valid teacher evaluations; manage the push-and-pull over charter schools; maintain our progress in the midst of huge budget cuts; and better inform the public discourse about how we are doing.

And our achievement gaps continue to be stubbornly wide.

A major report that the Council of the Great City Schools released last fall indicated that only about 10 to 12 percent of African American males attending our schools were reading or doing math at proficient levels.

And a new report that we are releasing at this conference shows that only 16 percent of Hispanic fourth and eighth grade students are reading at proficient levels or above.

This is a time bomb that explodes slowly in a nation that has grown tolerant of its own inequities.

We can do better than this.

Many of the challenges we face, of course, are driven by ideas about who is valuable in this society and who is not. Who we have high hopes for and for whom we have no hopes at all. Who we have high standards for and for whom we hold no great expectations.

Our job is not to reflect and perpetuate the nation's inequities or to let them define us or hold our kids back. Our job is to overcome these barriers and teach all our children to the highest standards.

And you can see our city school systems beginning to deliver on that promise.

We see it in Atlanta and Boston, which have made eye-popping gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading and math exams over the last decade thanks to strong instructional reforms.

We see it in Miami-Dade County, which outpaced state averages five-fold in reading and doubled the state gain in math while reducing their budget by \$2.0 billion—the Miami Miracle.

We see it in Baltimore and Philadelphia and Tampa and Pittsburgh, which have forged some of the nation's most forward-looking labor agreements.

We see it in New York City and Denver and the District of Columbia, and Florida's Hillsborough County, which are developing new ways of evaluating our teachers and administrators to hold everyone accountable to the public for the results we get.

We see it in St. Paul and Dallas and Anchorage, which are spurring the achievement of our English language learners.

We see it in the new accountability systems emerging from Charlotte and Philadelphia and Tampa.

We see it in the turnaround schools in Boston and Miami and the elementary school reforms in Cincinnati.

We see it in the dropout prevention efforts of Baltimore and Newark.

We see it in new data systems in Denver and Milwaukee, and the technological innovations in Albuquerque.

We see it in the sustained academic progress of Richmond and Buffalo and Indianapolis and San Francisco, which is now the best-performing big city school system in California with nine straight years of test score gains.

We see it in Long Beach—a two-time winner of the Broad Prize for Excellence in Urban Education.

And we see it in the extraordinary urban school leaders who are in this room this morning.

The truth is that today's big city schools are the home of some of the boldest, most far-reaching reforms in public education today.

I am often asked about whether I am optimistic about urban education. I have to say that I am. And the chief reason I'm hopeful is not because we are making progress—although we are—but because we are figuring out why and what it will take to go further.

Over the years, we have learned a lot about making our urban schools better. And we culled these lessons from the experiences of our faster-improving urban school districts themselves. These school districts built their reforms explicitly around student achievement.

They sustained those reforms over time. They implemented their reforms consistently and systematically. And they focused relentlessly on them and on evaluating how well they were working.

We have learned that you couldn't pick and choose among these reforms, for they work in tandem to produce an overall culture of improvement.

Each step could not be taken in isolation because it is the combined force of the reforms and how they lock together that makes the difference in improving student achievement in our big city school systems. We learned that—

- Districts have to act at scale to improve at scale.
- You can't delegate your most important instructional and curriculum decisions to the schools alone and expect to get improvements across the board.
- You won't hit your districtwide goals by having everyone aiming in different directions.
- You can't sustain your academic momentum by replacing your superintendent every couple of years.
- You can implement all the central-office reforms you want, but if they are not reflected in your teachers' capacity to build stronger literacy and comprehension skills among students, then such reforms didn't matter much.
- We learned that structural or organizational reforms often have little impact unless they were accompanied by instructional change and capacity building.
- We learned that you can't buy reform off the shelf. There is no program or package you can buy or grant you can receive that will improve instruction all by itself.
- And we have relearned that ultimately what counts is the relationship between students and teachers in service of achievement.

In short, the districts we have seen improve acted with a sense of immediacy. Their sense of urgency was palpable.

In contrast, slower-moving districts are often very different. And we have seen lots of them.

They were often marked by little political consensus for reform. Distracted leadership that is constantly in a state of flux. Vague—rather than clear—goals. No accountability for results. Incoherent curriculum and disjointed professional development. Weak instructional rigor and lackluster teaching. And poor data systems and monitoring.

These slower-moving districts have instructional approaches that are less cohesive, more program-oriented, and less focused. And they lack the ability to link their reforms together in a seamless way.

We have worked very hard over the years to increase the number of faster improving urban school districts and to eliminate the number of slower ones.

You can see the results in big city school systems all over the country. And you can see the results in our kids.

You can see it in Ermias, a native of Ethiopia who came to this country alone after his parents were killed and who graduated last spring from Lee High School in Houston and is now an engineering major at Syracuse University.

You can see it in Steven, a student from East Boston High School who fought off brain cancer to anchor his school's swimming and baseball teams and go on to Boston University where he plans to study to be a neurosurgeon.

You see it in Geneva, whose mother was incarcerated during her pregnancy and was temporarily released from prison for her birth, and who never knew her father.

She graduated from Long Beach's Millikan High School after holding three jobs and volunteering for the Special Olympics. She's off to Columbia University this year where she is studying environmental chemistry.

You see it in a young man who calls himself "Peter" who survived the camps in Darfur to graduate from the St. Paul Public Schools last year. He is at the University of Minnesota now.

And you see it in a young lady named Natalia, who moved from the Dominican Republic to Anchorage, knowing no English, but who immersed herself in her school, graduated in the top 10 percent of her class at age 16, and went on to college and graduate school.

When she received her diploma, she noted that she could not control her origins, but could define her destiny.

She was right about that, for many of our kids come from nothing but find in their Great City Schools the sanctuary, the helping hand, and the intellectual stimulation they need to take their first steps toward the American dream.

Our urban school systems have not reached the Promised Land to be sure, but we are not passing the buck or standing idly by waiting for someone to save us. We are not discouraged or downbeat. We are not apathetic. We are not in denial. We are not stuck in the status quo. And we are not shrinking from the challenges we face.

On the contrary, we are focused. We are relentless. And we are determined to make this right for America's urban kids.

Heaven knows that we have stepped up when the nation needed us at other times.

When America needed us to educate and acculturate its many immigrants, we – the nation's urban school systems -- took them in.

When the country needed to desegregate its schools, the Council of the Great City Schools – representing urban school systems nationwide – helped set up the original

Office on Civil Rights, initiated the federal Magnet School Assistance program, and continues to serve as a voice for equity and opportunity.

When the country needed to know urban school systems were making headway on our reforms, we initiated the Trial Urban District Assessment that now gives us those NAEP scores I referred to earlier.

When controversy was escalating across the nation over who should run our big city schools, the Council convened the first summit meeting between mayors and our school superintendents to strengthen relations.

When America was shocked at the devastation in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, the Council led a team of urban school staff members who literally waded through the flood waters to find school buildings around which to anchor the city's renewal.

When America needed to see its public schools running more efficiently during this economic downturn, the Council developed the country's first automated performance management system to optimize the cost effectiveness of our educational operations.

And when America needed to improve its international competitiveness, our urban school leaders under the Council's banner called for what are now the common core state standards.

Our very organization was founded in a period of turmoil and national need in the mid-1950s.

Brown vs. Board of Education had just been decided. Emmett Till had just been murdered. Rosa Parks stayed in her seat on a Montgomery bus. The Interstate Highway Act, which accelerated the exodus to the suburbs, had just been signed.

The AFL merged with the CIO to form the nation's largest labor union. Milton Friedman proposed the idea of private school vouchers. Sputnik was about to be launched.

And President Eisenhower was calling the 101 Airborne into Little Rock to protect nine black high school students, who formed the vanguard of the nation's efforts to make the promise of Brown real.

The Council of the Great City Schools was formed in the midst of this upheaval by Sergeant Shriver, who was then the president of the Chicago School Board long before he came to Washington with his brother-in-law John F. Kennedy to head the Peace Corps.

It was a time when America needed its urban schools to provide leadership during the challenging days ahead. And it is clear that America needs us again now.

We—the nation’s Great City Schools—have not always succeeded, but we will not shy away from the challenges that face us as a people.

Our vision is the same as America’s.

We see a future where all our students graduate and go onto to college, a successful career, or the military.

Our graduates already include Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall, Golda Meier, Maya Angelou, Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, Warren Buffet, Supreme Court justice Anthony Kennedy, former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, First Lady Michelle Obama, Homeland Security Director Janet Napolitano, news anchor Dan Rather, author and activist Gloria Steinem, and more Nobel Prize winners and members of Congress than we have time to name.

And more leaders are on the way.

We see a future when no one remembers what a failing school or a dropout factory was.

We see a future where there are no racial or language or income-based achievement gaps and no one’s education is defined by where they grew up.

We see a future where parents have more choices of excellent public schools than they know what to do with.

We see a future where all our teachers come from America’s top talent.

We see a future where all our students speak at least one other language than English.

We see a future where our urban schools have all the resources they need to prepare our children to their full potential.

We see a future where the public regains its confidence in our urban public schools and competes to get into them.

We see a future where the gains made by our urban public schools propel the nation into first place academically on the world stage.

We too have a dream today.

The nation, for its part, also needs to step up to the plate and make the same commitment to our urban children.

Today, some 57 years after the Brown decision, urban schools are still asked to overcome the many barriers we face on a playing field that is distinctly uneven.

There was a time when America knew the power of its own generosity when it approved the Marshall Plan for the European nations with which we now unfavorably compare the academic performance of our own children.

Surely, we could do for our children and schools in Baltimore what we did in 1947 for Berlin; for Cleveland what we did for Cologne; for Detroit what we did for Dresden.

Surely, we could do for our own children in Thurgood Marshall's name what we did for Europe's children in George Marshall's name over 60 years ago.

The great civil rights battles were not fought over access to mediocrity; they were fought over access to excellence.

Our job is to create it, and to make sure that education vanquishes poverty rather than letting poverty undermine our schooling.

It was what Vicki Kennedy last night called our True Compass.

We have considerable work to do to ensure that this promise is real, but urban public education is moving in the right direction.

I hear more often than ever that America's preeminence is slipping; that America's best days are behind us; and that we are being surpassed by countries that will work harder, study longer, and compete better.

Urban public schools will determine, in part, whether those predictions come true or not.

The nation needs to ensure that its investment in public education remains strong now that our reforms have taken root and are showing progress, for education is a symbol of a nation's commitment to its own future.

The Great City School superintendents, school boards, staff, and teachers in this room and across the nation are determined that we will do more than our share to keep our Great Nation strong.

And we will do it not only for reasons of patriotism; we will do it for Ermas and Steven and Geneva and Peter and Natalia and the millions of other young people who count on us to pave the way for them.

The lights in the eyes of all God's children we teach every day burn brighter than ever and we will not let them dim.

We understand that America's fortunes rest in our ability to prepare our students for a new and more exciting future. And we ask for your help and your energy to make these dreams come true.

I hope we can fulfill the promise of this conference together and launch our own education revolution to reform and improve our Great City Schools for all our urban children.

I know you believe that nothing could be more important. It's what the Council of the Great City Schools believes too.

Let's have a great conference.

Thank you.