

Council of the Great City Schools

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By

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And

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Whenever I speak, I think of myself first and foremost as a teacher, a cheerleader and champion for our children and someone who continues to learn every single day new ways to achieve both excellence and equity. No matter how many times I have publicly spoken, I always feel a slight knot in my throat as I begin. I was once told by MN State Rep. Mea Moua, the first Hmong ever elected to a state legislative body in this nation, that she too had that same knot, but that her grandmother told her that it was the voices of the many ancestors who had gone before her who had no voice. Today we are given voice, and for all of us, that voice must be heard. Let them hear you.

Good morning and welcome to Portland and to the Council of Great City Schools meeting. We are truly grateful to our host, the Portland School Board, Superintendent Carole Smith and the entire Portland School Community for welcoming all of us and for helping us to make this a great week of learning. What a great performance by the Jefferson High School vocal ensemble. Great organizations have great leaders and great leaders have great teams. I also know the many hours and extra effort that Executive Director Michael Casserly and our CGCS staff put in to creating the sharing and learning environment that makes this annual meeting the best for urban leaders, for urban school boards, and school committee policy makers. For those of you who may be new to the Council, we extend a special welcome and invite you to actively participate, ask questions and take advantage of the great network of support that exists between Council members and urban school districts across this nation. This organization, originally conceived to focus on boosting vocational education in the fall of 1956 by then Chicago Superintendent Ben Willis and the Chicago School Board President Sargent Shriver has evolved and is unique in its efforts to bring superintendents, school leaders and school board members together to work toward our common goals of educating this nation's children.

We are extremely fortunate to have had this organization for over 50+ years and I can assure you that Michael Casserly and his team, time and time again, have brought our voices and the needs of our children to the forefront of this nation's education agenda and continue to influence both legislative actions nationally, and in each of our states. Their strategic reviews and beating-the-odds research and NAEP comparisons continue to be cutting edge and to impact daily what happens in our board rooms and in our classrooms. It has been their efforts to bring together our common challenges and develop our communications and human resource directors, our special education and ELL directors, and our business and financial officers, that we have learned more about what works, how to create the most effective and efficient governing systems and how we have made progress toward meeting the twin goals of equity and excellence.

Please join me in recognizing and thanking Michael Casserly, the CGCS executive board and the entire CGCS staff for their visionary leadership and persistent efforts to address the needs of the largest urban districts and the needs of the most vulnerable children in our nation.

I bring you greetings from Boston, from Red Sox nation, from our school committee Chairperson, the Rev. Dr. Gregory Groover, who is attending this conference, and from Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and the 56,000 students educated in our 137 schools and by our 10,000 employees.

And if I may, let me digress just slightly to say a word about Boston Public Schools. Because in so many ways, Boston's history begins our nation's history, and as we confront the urban challenges of closing achievement gaps, reaching proficiency and increasing graduation rates, it seems important to reflect on how far on this journey we've traveled.

Boston is the home of the nation's first school, the Boston Latin School, founded in 1635. The Boston Public Schools represent the oldest public schools in America. The Boston Latin School was followed in 1647, by a decree that every town in the Commonwealth of 50 families or more should have an elementary school and every town of 100 families should have a "Latin School." The Mather

School opened in 1639 in Boston as the nation's first elementary school, and English High School opened in Boston in 1821. These early schools were not free and universal and universal Public education was yet to be born. In 1778, Thomas Jefferson, as a member of the Virginia Assembly, called for publicly-funded schools. While his attempts were unsuccessful, he continued to state the critical connection between the survival of the democracy and our nation being literate.

In the early 1800s, the State of Pennsylvania attempted to establish a tax optional system for universal education, but affluent and well-to-do families who could pay for their own children's education questioned being taxed for the education of other people's children.

In the early 1800s, Horace Mann, a former railroad and canal builder, became Massachusetts' first secretary of education. He traveled across the Commonwealth to visit these schools. He observed great inequities in schools, in school facilities and in educational opportunities across the Commonwealth, and the first publicly supported schools were established. After convening a series of town hall meetings, he proposed a "common school" funded with tax dollars to offer students a free education. As early as 1787, Black leaders petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for equal school facilities and in 1808 the first school for African Americans opened. The Abiel Smith School was constructed on Beacon Hill in 1834, and became the first schoolhouse in America built to educate Black school children. In 1852, the Massachusetts Legislature passed one of the first laws to ensure that the children of poor immigrants were educated and that conditions for children were improved. And while we all reference the first federal desegregation case in 1954, Brown vs. Topeka, the first state desegregation case in this nation was initiated by Benjamin Roberts, who sued the Boston School Committee in 1849 for denying his daughter, Sarah, admission to an all-white Boston School. In 1855, the Massachusetts legislature enacted a law closing the all-Black Abiel Smith School, resulting in the integration of the Phillips School on Beacon Hill.

In 1860, Elizabeth Peabody introduced a new way to educate young children and the first kindergarten school was established in Boston. The North Benet Street Industrial School was opened in 1881, as America's first trade school, founded by Pauline Agassiz Shaw. The school's mission was to prepare newly arriving immigrants for skilled trades jobs.

Still, in most of this nation, the universal access to public education did not exist for all of our students, and certainly these early efforts did not apply to Black students, the majority of whom lived as slaves in the south and who were forbidden from learning to read. Slaves who sought to learn to read and write, and it was amazing that history records between 5% and 30% of them did, were subject to amputation, being beaten or death. Still, this powerful link between literacy and freedom encouraged many to memorize scriptures from the Bible and they used the one book they had some access to, to teach themselves to read. Education was and is today, also a pathway to freedom and a better life for many immigrant families. Between 1870 and 1920, some 20 million European immigrants arrived, needing to learn English, and to learn to read, and understanding that it would help them to get jobs. The Protestant and English focus of these early schools did not meet the needs of the arrival of many Irish families, which resulted in the development of Catholic schools that taught religion and basic skills. By now, you are no doubt wondering why I covered this history. It is a reminder that where we are today is not always where we have been. Today, the urban school districts of this nation welcome students from around the globe, and in our classrooms students arrive from Cambodia and Vietnam, from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, students from Honduras, Argentina and Cuba, students from Kenya, Somalia, Nigeria and the Cape Verde Islands, students from China and Mexico, from Somalia and Ethiopia. They and their families arrive for a better life, in search of liberty and in pursuit of happiness - a job, a home - a good school for their children - and in hopes that they too will have a college graduate. American public education has and continues to demonstrate over and over again, that it has the capacity to educate our nation's children, and urban public education has opened its doors and continues to welcome all who come, regardless of race and income, language or nationality, religion or disability, family background or family circumstances. We, the urban

schools of this nation, open our doors to all who come. We welcome and assimilate new non-English speaking immigrants, students from diverse cultures and religions, and we include those who arrive deaf and hearing impaired and teach them to communicate. We teach our students to be accepting of those who are different or who arrive in wheelchairs, and in the same classrooms offer instruction to those on the autism spectrum, those speaking other languages, and those who are gifted and talented.

Our schools, like no other enterprise, reflect the values, priorities and ever changing demands of our communities. Our teachers see the future and our schools are first responders. When Russia launched Sputnik, we stepped forward to strengthen science, math and technology. When our urban neighborhoods were segregated by race and income, and funding inequalities existed, we have been the engines of social and economic justice. When there was not equal access, our schools were asked to increase accessibility and implement Title IX in sports. And when we worried about the environment or drugs, we taught our students to recycle, limit consumption, make healthy choices and just say no. Today, as our health care industry confronts childhood obesity, juvenile diabetes, asthma and mental health issues, we will once again extend our mission to encourage more physical activity, nutritious food choices and with H1N1, we will add extra soap, hand sanitizers, more nurses, and face masks, and in some cases we will be asked to host immunization clinics in our schools.

But whether we are successful at any of the above will not matter if achievement gaps remain, dropout rates increase and graduation rates go down. We are being asked to do more - to educate **all**, not just some of our community's children; to educate **all**, not just some of our children to proficient and advanced levels, to graduate **all**, not just some of our children college ready. We are being asked to shift from a two-tiered system that screened some kids out, to a pump that propels all students forward. We are expected to move rapidly from Advanced Placement for some, to Advanced Placement for all; from Arts for some, to Arts for all; from the "bell curve" to a steep mountain that all are able and supported to climb. We are being asked to shift from school systems where

zip codes, language and the color of your skin predicts your future, to a nation where students achieve excellence despite these circumstances. We are being asked to shift from a nation with 50 different standards, to a common group of high standards that prepare our students to compete and to be successful in a 21st century economy that extends across international boundaries. In the new order, it won't be enough to have just some schools, some teachers, some principals, some students, as success stories. We shall overcome someday.

As Broadway actress Ruby Dee says,

“What is some day?” Is that Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday. What is some day?

On March 10th of this year, President Barak Obama in his remarks on education, said:

“The source of America's prosperity, then, has never been how ably we accumulate wealth, but how well we educate our people. The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens.”

He went on to say:

The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, unsustainable for our democracy and unacceptable for our children - and we cannot afford to let it continue. The time for holding ourselves accountable is here. What is required is not simply new investments, but new reforms.....What is at stake is nothing less than the American dream!!”

What is clear to me, and I hope to you, is that we, particularly the urban schools of this nation, are the true transformers – are the incubators for revolutionizing our urban classrooms and inspiring our youth to work hard and value this gift of an education. The monopoly (if there ever was one) is over. Whatever excuses or explanations we have made in the past will hold limited value with parents who have other choices. Choices of other schools within our district, the choice to

move away, the choice to be bussed to another district, and if they are high achieving and an athlete, a scholarship to a private school next door. Our affluent families always had choices. Today we must be prepared to convince our families at all income levels, that our school across the street from their residence will offer them the best education possible. As Robert Simons stated in 1995 in the Harvard Business School Journal, "The right of any corporation to exist is not perpetual, but has to be continuously earned." Let me repeat, "The right of any corporation to exist is not perpetual, but has to be continuously earned."

In the movie, "Remember the Titans", Denzel Washington plays a football coach that must merge two high school football teams, one predominately Black and another predominately White. In one scene during the movie, he says we must change the way we hit, we must change the way we run, we must change the way we block. To get to **all** requires us to change. The need to change is not an indictment of our past progress, but rather a recognition that to teach all demands more. Even as we work with Secretary Arne Duncan on the reauthorization of ESEA, we must make appropriate corrections while at the same time maintaining the parts that help us truly keep no child left behind. Over 2 decades ago, the late Ron Edmonds (Effective Schools Research) stated "We can whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far." We are the leaders of this enterprise. The Superintendents and elected and appointed school board members in every urban community represented here today. You are our nation's best hope for accelerating student performance, transforming lives and creating effective schools for this and the next generation of learners. We have a better view of the future than any of those who would criticize us and we better understand the complexity of the task before us. We still educate the majority of our nation's urban students and enroll more of the special needs students, more of the diverse cultures and more of our nation's new arriving students.

But transforming our schools for all; not just some of our students takes more than knowing what to do. It takes the courage to act. We must understand that our survival is at stake and be willing to speak up and to stand strong:

1. We must not prioritize the needs of adults over the critical necessity of every school, having a great leader and every student having a great teacher every year.
2. We must be willing to face the reality that all too often, it is we who have negotiated away the very access and opportunity gaps that have and continue to create achievement gaps.
3. We as school leaders must work toward cooperation and collaboration, and against our disputes and disagreements becoming a media circus and a distraction to the critically important agenda we have before us. I have a great deal of respect for those of you who choose to serve by running for elective office or agreeing to be appointed. Our democracy depends on your gift of time and commitment, but we must leave the bickering between the adults behind us and let the betterment of children lead us, whether between superintendents and school boards, between union leaders and administrators, between politicians, between parents and teachers, or between principals and staff. Education must be non-partisan. Our children hang in the balance of our ability to work together.
4. We must expect that we and our other fellow leaders in the education community, including our college and university partners, will join together in support of the resources and investments our children need to achieve high standards.
5. While we must work to ensure that all of our students successfully pass tests, we must also be willing to say that learning is more than about testing. We must remind our stakeholders that our children do need the enriching experiences and exposure that middle income and affluent families routinely give their children.
6. We must be willing to examine whether some of our traditional functions might more effectively and efficiently be outsourced, to ensure that our limited resources are directed to our classrooms.

7. We must be willing to learn from our competitors, whether they are charters, suburban or private providers, traditional educational leaders or non-traditional superintendents. We must learn what to do, as well as what not to do and we also must intentionally showcase and share the best in Atlanta, the best in Omaha, the best in Austin and the best in Long Beach, the Best in ELL, the best in Special Education; the best in graduating young men of color.

As someone who is African American, someone who began my schooling experience attending segregated schools in the south; someone who lived in a community where the NAACP organized secretly; where African Americans were not allowed in the city parks or the swimming pools, or allowed to drink from the “white only” water fountains; as a student who learned to read from obsolete textbooks discarded from white high schools, and someone who knew that the dedicated black teachers, like my mother, were paid considerably less than other white teachers in the same city, I simply cannot begin this conference where we embark on the important agenda of expanding excellence, closing achievement gaps, increasing access, and ensuring equity, without both reflecting on our past and our progress, confronting our challenges and being absolutely hopeful about the events of this past year. The swearing-in of Barack Obama as the first African American ever to be elected president of this nation or Sonia Sotomayor, as the first Latino to the U.S. Supreme Court, are reasons for hope. Neither my grandmother (born in Tennessee in 1889) who was some 60 years old before she felt safe enough to vote, nor my husband’s great grandmother, born a slave on the Blackstone Plantation in 1860 in Eastern Kentucky, would ever have imagined our Nation’s incredible progress or the educational opportunities available to their great-great-grandchildren. America is a great country and American public education, a powerful tool for transforming lives, ending generational poverty, and changing the trajectory for students who might otherwise be thought unlikely to lead or succeed.

We, who represent urban schools and students across this nation, must continue to work tirelessly toward the day when every child has access to great schools and every student is taught and developed by competent and caring teachers

who see them as college bound. We must, every single day, see it as our purpose to reduce the likelihood that we can predict student outcomes by race or nationality, by income or language, disability or family background. We must, every day, re-commit to making the tough decisions that close the achievement gaps that persist between black and Latino students and their white and Asian peers; and we must continue to expose and prepare our students to reach even higher standards, so that they truly are prepared to actively participate in the international community and the global prosperity that is possible.

In 1901, John Dewey said, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the entire community want for all of its children; any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; and acted upon it destroys our democracy.

American public education in many ways is a simple concept and in other ways an extraordinarily complex experiment; the education of all to high standards. We must never take for granted this notion for all, nor allow others to underestimate or undermine its significance and inseparable link to our democracies stability and prosperity. It is when citizens are illiterate, undereducated and not exposed to others who are different that they are most susceptible to those who would promote bigotry and violence, terrorism and hate, instead of tolerance and acceptance, love and compassion. It is in our classrooms that students learn about democracy; to understand the 3 branches of government, their right to speak, to assemble, to vote. It is on our athletic fields and in our after-school programs that they learn competition and teamwork, winning and losing, good sportsmanship and how to celebrate effort; it is in our classrooms that they will learn to sing, dance, paint and perform, protest the environment, make healthy choices and in our classrooms they will be encouraged to ask questions, examine and think critically as they experiment in science, and analyze the underlying causes of world events and use technology to learn faster and to travel to distant places without ever leaving their desks. And it will be in our classrooms that they will first see the faces of other learners from around the globe; and learn to appreciate the contributions of Latinos and Hispanics, Africans, African Americans and American Indians, Southeast Asians

and Italians, Irish and Scandinavian immigrants, Chinese, Japanese, and people and languages across the globe. It is in our classrooms that students will see strength in diversity.

And it will be throughout our hallways that we will nurture the potential in these global citizens to become the next great ethical and moral leaders - the next presidents and governors, teachers, scientists, artists, electricians, inventors and surgeons, police officers and fire captains.

Many of you know that I spent a good deal of my career in Minnesota. Today I was reminded of two leaders from Minnesota whose legacy continues to be with us. The first, the late Senator and Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who said

“The moral test of a nation is how we respond to those at the dawn of their lives – our children.”

And the second Senator, Paul Wellstone. I mention Senator Wellstone because when he was elected to serve, I had such confidence in his leadership that I assumed that he alone, in this elected position, would solve our problems. I did not realize then, as I do know, that voting for someone you believe in, isn't enough. When Senator Wellstone and his wife, Sheila, died suddenly and tragically in a plane crash, I realized how important it is for each one of us to not only vote, but to own and continue the work, and not only rely on leaders who are elected or appointed to serve; for the true test of our success will be whether we ourselves are able to carry forward this agenda for our children in every classroom, in every community.

Someone has suggested that “If we fail to educate and develop our children, the next generation of leaders may very well ask the question of why we ever existed.”

I began my remarks today reflecting on our early beginnings in public education and on Boston - so let me end my remarks today with just a final tribute to someone who truly belonged to Massachusetts, but who I believe also belonged

to all of us who work and serve, particularly in urban public education. This past year, we lost a dearly loved and admired warrior in our journey to give every child the best. This warrior, Senator Ted Kennedy, was your Senator too. He was our nation's Senator and among the strongest and most passionate advocates for our children's education. His voice never wavered and his commitment to those most vulnerable made a true difference. In his own words, I say to you today:

“The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.”

Enjoy the conference, but take back to your village the will and the courage to educate all of our nation's children. Let them hear you.