

Syracuse City



School District

Syracuse City School District

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STATE OF THE SCHOOLS ADDRESS August 19, 2009

Good Morning. Welcome to the State of the Schools message. The purpose of the State of the Schools address is to communicate to you how we are doing and where we are going. It is almost like giving the answer to the greeting "How are you?" Yet, in Africa instead of saying "How are you?" they say "So! How are the children?" And so it is this morning that I will take a few minutes to tell you how the children are.

16,000 of the children are living in poverty in our city – 16,000! So our children are not doing well.

Typically, in urban areas across the country this answer prompts the "Who's at fault?" response. We tend to place blame on the school system, the parents, and even the students. These conversations have NEVER provided us with any answers and are frankly fruitless. We need to talk about solutions and ways to overcome the obstacles. It is our responsibility as the leaders in this community to carve a new path for the children.

There were essentially three things our school district had to do. First, improve achievement; second, put our fiscal house in order; and third, gain the public's trust.

There are some who believe that we should focus narrowly on one issue at a time, but children's lives are not linear. There are so many things that affect their daily lives that we must "do everything right at once." And so it is with this sense of urgency that we began.

The Right People

The first step was taken to put the right people in leadership positions. And with the help of the Board of Education, that is exactly what we've done. We have the most extraordinary people working on this mission to educate all children. The Board of Education has enjoyed 3-1/2 years of stability. They know that they are facing new members, but make no mistake about it, many of the gains that have been made have been made because of the stability of the Board of Education and its leadership.

We have the right people in leadership positions now: our Corcoran graduate, County Executive Joanie Mahoney; Mayor Matthew Driscoll; STA President Anne Marie Voutsinas; SAAS President Brian Nolan; Say Yes to Education President, Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey; our members of the Common Council; and the State and County Legislatures. We have all of the right people in place to support our work.

Academic Structures

As the District approached improving academic achievement for all, it had to build structures in which our teaching personnel and our students could be successful. We have built Smaller Learning Communities (SLC's) for our high school students so that education will be personalized. We have built School Leadership Teams (SLT's) so that the administrative team and the teaching staff will now share the responsibility for the outcomes of our students. We have focused on improving instruction through Collaborative Coaches, the PAR program, Site Reviews, and an entire Districtwide literacy initiative.

This past summer we began the Urban Teacher Calendar (UTC) which is a groundbreaking structure that essentially makes urban teaching an eleven-month profession for staff and extends learning for students. It allows the staff to hone its skills in the summer by watching our best instructors teach. It avoids the downtime in learning which happens every summer for children from urban centers. We have built the ELMS – the Expeditionary Learning Middle School - which has had extraordinary results in its first year. Over the past two years we have begun a fifth high school in Tech Central. And, we began the Schools of Promise which holds as its basic philosophy that the entire school must be inclusive. We must instill a sense of belonging in our children if we are to assure academic and social success.

So, what are the results of our efforts? We have had steady gains in ELA and math scores – 20% in ELA and 30% in math over the past three years, after years of stagnate performance. Make no mistake about it, these are incremental gains that have not gone far enough or fast enough. But these are significant gains. I want to thank Deputy Superintendent Chris Vogelsang and her team for their energy, creativity, and perseverance.

FINANCIAL

The next most important area for our urban school district was to get our fiscal house in order. For this we need to thank first, Joe Rufo and now Chief Financial Officer Suzanne Slack for their extraordinary work. We set out to be totally transparent and to show people the cost per pupil of quality education. We have done this through our SyraStat presentations. We have taken on the tough challenge of right sizing our school system by reducing the number of employees. This year we took a larger cut than we had planned; we have again reduced 57 staff positions. We have developed a long-range financial model. We have proven that our expenditures will never be more than our revenues. We have entered into fair contracts with every one of our bargaining units; and I can't thank them enough for their reasonableness and their willingness to put everything on the table. Their willingness to develop a system of health insurance contributions based on income is groundbreaking. And we have been transparent about all of this - putting our budget on the web, and at the Board of Education's insistence, being willing to discuss every single dollar spent.

And so what has been the result? We have again added to our fund balance - \$5M - an extraordinary accomplishment. And due to President Obama's stimulus package and the hard work of Congressman Maffei we saved over 300 jobs. So when people ask "where is the stimulus money?" I can tell you that in Syracuse it has helped the schools.

PUBLIC TRUST

So with great progress in both academic performance and financial accountability we turn to the third area, the public trust and, in some ways, the most difficult.

I had a Board member in Utica who announced proudly, “I’ve got my opinion, don’t confuse me with the facts.” This point of view is more common than you might think. So how do you begin to alter people’s opinions in order to gain the public trust? First, we must make sure that we are honest and forthcoming in reporting no matter what the results. I need to thank Deputy Superintendent Anita Murphy and her team for collecting and reporting our data in a clear, concise, and honest manner.

We also needed the public to become aware of the many positive programs and accomplishments of our children. With the help of Clear Channel and Joel Delmonico, our students have produced three programs over the past three years to explain what it is really like to be a student in our School District.

Third, we needed the public to see that we are all working together to accomplish our goals and by all, I mean the Common Council and Board of Education as well as the City and County. Mayor Matt Driscoll has been a tremendous supporter of the District and very vocal about his pride in our schools throughout his tenure. We have many of our mayoral candidates with us today, and I believe I have spoken with each about the need to be partners with us and not succumb to the partisan political nonsense that interferes with educating our children. These individuals are bright and committed to the City of Syracuse. They truly understand the importance of education and that the solution lies in a unique partnership. This past year we have seen a renewed sense of collaboration and a coming together for the common good.

So what has caused this unique sense of partnership within the city? While we had been taking the right steps in the right areas, along came Say Yes to Education and Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey and Chancellor Nancy Cantor. I cannot say enough about these individuals and their vision and passion to make a difference in urban education, particularly in Syracuse, New York. Say Yes to Education is one of those ideas that has captivated the entire community. It makes sense logically and also creates a passion for doing what is right for our children. It combines educational reform and economic development.

So how did we get selected? Mary Anne often tells the story of how Say Yes to Education had the ability to go any place in the country. They had been successful in four different cities but with a small cohort of students. They stopped first in New York State because of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) lawsuit. Say Yes knew that the cost of school reform was about \$3500 per child and strangely enough, CFE found this to be the exact amount needed for true reform. Who would be willing to change how this new money was spent to truly embrace educational reform? As she tells the story, we were not the first place they stopped, but we were the first city willing to embrace the necessary changes. They looked at who was in the leadership positions and who was willing to drop the traditional animosities. For this, I thank Mary Anne Schmitt-Carey and the Say Yes team. I hesitate to mention names, but certainly Debra Schoening, Rachael Gazdick, Gene Chasin, and Chris Walsh deserve special recognition for their tireless efforts.

We will send over 600 students to college on scholarships in our very first year. I can tell you that the Pittsburgh Promise, which has existed for a number of years, has just hit 700 students. Kalamazoo, which was the forerunner, is now struggling because they realized to offer scholarships without support makes no sense. In our implementation, we are building in support for our students and families so that students will be in a position to take advantage of the economic promise of college tuition. I can’t thank all of the area college presidents enough for their support—Nancy Cantor, Fred Pestello, Neil Murphy, Debbie Sydow, and David Smith—they have all stepped up in different ways to help our students.

GRADUATION

Our graduation rates are too low. I am not going to talk to you about percentages. We need to be thinking about students, not percentages. In the 2004 cohort (the group that graduated in 2008) there were 786 students with diplomas and 721 students without. Of those 721, 381 are black, 234 are white, and 92 are Latino. I give you these numbers because I believe when we talk percentages, it allows us to fall back to the old issue of “Who’s at fault?” rather than we as a community saying, “Okay, 721 students didn’t receive a diploma.” So what do we need to do 721 times to make sure all of our students receive a diploma?

FUTURE

What does the future hold? We must be ever mindful of the two “s’s” that I stress with my team every day. The first “s” - is it Scalable? We will not start pilots any more. Every time we start something new we must ask ourselves how to scale it to all students, to all areas of the city, to all four quadrants. This year we will reach half of our city with Say Yes after school programming, social workers, and summer programming, but we have a plan for the whole city. We know how to make individual students or individual schools successful. What has not been done anywhere in the nation is to scale it to include all students and all schools.

The second and most important “s” is Sustainable. How can we sustain this? We have built the financial model. It will require all of us working together to make sure that it is sustained. But it’s doable.

We have several new initiatives that will help. We are beginning Talent Development, a ninth grade program in all five of our high schools. Their representatives are with us today. We are beginning PBIS –Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports – in every one of our schools. We are beginning a 5 Block Schedule to provide the necessary time for our high school students to receive the supports they need. We have developed a 4-Tiered System of Student Support which provides teachers with a blueprint for individualizing instruction to meet the unique needs of their students. We are improving our partnership with parents to make sure that they are informed and to enlist their help. The Parent Portal will allow every parent to follow their child’s attendance, behavior and academic performance online. In addition, we are embarking on a mission to enroll every child with needed health care.

We are continuing our efforts to secure the most talented staff we can get. Our emphasis is on increasing teachers of color. We are beginning programs in each of our middle and high schools in order to attract our students to our profession. With the help of Deputy Superintendent Jaime Alicea and his team, we are making sure that every single teacher is certified. This has been no easy task, and we thank them for their hard work.

We have set a goal for our students of a 70% passing rate in ELA and 75% in math. Some have questioned setting such a lofty goal compared to where we are right now. We must press beyond incremental gains. I want each staff member to look at their students, put a name to a face, and say “these are the children who must be at level 3 or 4 to reach our goal.”

Our fiscal house is in order but the challenges ahead are unprecedented. We will get through 2009-10. We have budgeted effectively. 2010-11 will be very difficult. To support Say Yes and our current expenditures, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) settlement cannot wait. Our 2010-11 gap may be \$20-\$30 million. The state legislature needs to deal with this. CFE is the law, it is right. It is the money that is needed to make up for over 20 years of a failed financial policy to our urban settings. And if it

means that we need to enter into a lawsuit to get our fair share for our children, I will recommend that course of action to the School Board.

BLODGETT

Finally, in the area of public trust there is something that we need to do immediately that will not only help but is right for our students and our community. We must move ahead with the Blodgett project. The time for conversation is over. Blodgett has become a symbol in the community of our unwillingness to put our resources where they are truly needed. We have many needs, make no mistake about it. But our poorest community is around the near west side. We now have the estimates and the project needs to proceed in phases. Immediately, we should start with Phase I which will include the windows, roofs and doors. There may be a small effect on the city/school budget. Then we need to start Phase 2. We may get funding from the federal stimulus or the state, but we cannot keep waiting. Blodgett has so much potential, not only for the children and the staff who learn and work there, but for that entire community. Through the help of Syracuse University and many others, the near west side is being rebuilt. The Blodgett renovation will be a positive symbol to the community, the state, and the nation. Even if no one comes forward, it would only cost \$9.00 per year for 20 years for the average homeowner with the STAR exemption for the \$10M gap. It is worth \$9.00 added to our taxes!

JSCB

What was a brilliant idea from our former Superintendent and our current mayor to renovate every single school in this city has now become an example of a bureaucracy gone amuck. This is not because of people with bad intentions. It is because we have lost our sense of urgency. Nick DiBello has built projects. He completed 15 this past year and knows how to get this done. We must turn this over to those who know school construction. I am calling on Gilbane and the JSCB to get this done. We can't redo the past, but we can move forward with the intent of starting H. W. Smith, Dr. Weeks, Tech Central, and Fowler next summer. This again will demonstrate to the community that we can get things done, and there will be a new sense of accomplishment. We are in a perfect position as a community to move ahead as we renovate all of our buildings and fully implement Say Yes to Education. We will give our young people hope that their future is bright, and it will give our adults pride that they are the ones who provided for our children's future.

Thank you.

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