

Superintendent Bennet's Opening Address to the Denver Principals' Institute

June 12, 2006

I've had this job for almost a year; helped put together a strategic plan for the District; had to begin to learn the work of an entirely new field to me, k-12 education; temporarily closed a high school, and was simultaneously criticized for that closing and for not closing enough schools; took a call about a school bus landing in someone's dining room; almost had to break up a fight between two parents over the virtues and failings of Everyday Math; failed to reach a deal with our teachers' union; and spent much of this weekend alone with my three girls, all six and under. And, what I know is this, the only people more tired than I on this June morning are the people in this room.

You have arrived at your buildings earlier than everyone else, and left them later; you have searched for the balance between instructional leadership and the needs of everyone around you – kids, parents, teachers, and community; you have pretty gracefully put up with a new superintendent who was fairly ignorant about the substance of your work; embraced the standards of a new chief academic officer's relentless commitment to our kids; you have challenged each other to think differently about our collective work.

So, I have some sense of how tired you are, and, for that reason, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your willingness to take on one more obligation, this summer institute, for the benefit of the children of Denver. To my knowledge, no other district in this country has set out to do what we are doing today. Sure, there are principal trainings everywhere, and some districts train a few, select aspiring principals for leadership. But, as far as I know, no other district has ever had all its principals spend two full weeks together to think about their work. I can certainly say that there is no other district where the superintendent and the chief academic officer meet with every principal every three weeks, and I know some of you are thinking there is a good reason for that.

As Jaime and I have said many times, enduring reform of this district begins with you. If Denver Public Schools succeeds where too many have failed, it will be because of your leadership, your creativity, and your imagination. Perhaps most important, it will be because you will have translated the knowledge acquired from your professional development and your own experience into something collaborative that inspires your teachers and other staff to reach every child in our district.

In this new century in these United States, every child's success is no longer merely a matter of rhetoric; it is a moral imperative that every child must learn. That burden you feel, that pressure all of us have, derives from something much nobler than No Child Left Behind or the CSAP scores. That burden you feel is the future of our

democracy, and that pressure comes from the realization that 21st century kids will not succeed with 20th century skills.

These are heavy very burdens, but ever person in this room has freely assumed them. You are all public servants, people who have signed up to do work that other people are free to criticize but would never willingly undertake themselves. You are heroes for doing that, and if we succeed in driving our kids where they need to be, you will be revolutionaries, every bit as important as any revolutionary that has come before you.

We have talked a lot this year about the role of principal as instructional leader, and you will hear more about that this week. But, I want to urge on to another role, that of advocate for Denver's children. Who better than you knows what our children face every day; who better than you knows the frailties and strengths of our current system; who better than you is positioned to lead us into the future? Your voices need to be heard beyond the walls of your schools as, together, we seek to transform this district.

None of us can predict the future. I certainly cannot, but one thing I feel pretty certain about is that 10 years from now, public education in this country will look very different than it does today. We should remember that we are not alone in this regard. As the world grows smaller and old alliances crumble and new ones emerge, every institution -- public, private, non-profit, and even religious -- is having to confront this change and, in some cases, radically depart from the status quo to remain relevant and useful to the world.

Rather than shrink from the change we know is going to come, let's seize this as our opportunity. Ten years from now, let them say that Denver's principals were the vanguard for reform of public education; let them say, 10 years from now, that Denver's principals saw what others could not, and laid down their adult burdens so they could have the strength to lift up our children; let them say that a spark flew in Denver that ignited a generation of educators and children across this country and gave them the courage to abandon the encrusted status quo for a shimmering future of success.

It has been the privilege of a lifetime to have spent this year with you. More than you can imagine, I look forward to the coming years ahead.