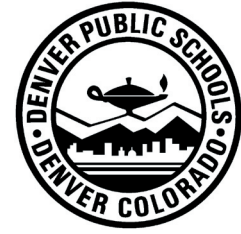


Denver Public Schools

STATE OF THE DISTRICT ADDRESS



SUPERINTENDENT JERRY WARTGOW
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2005
DENVER SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

Thank you for taking the time to be here this afternoon. Given that there was such short notice for this meeting your attendance is especially appreciated. I asked you to join me today so that I could share my thoughts on the near and long term challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in a “State of the District” type presentation. I am well aware that there is a great deal of speculation – rumors, gossip, outright guessing – about all the change that’s on the horizon. As has been said many times when rumors are rampant: “Welcome to DPS!” There has been a lot of change since I joined DPS four years ago, but the one thing that doesn’t appear to have changed at all is the desire to guess and speculate about everything and anything. On this particular topic I feel compelled to paraphrase Pete Seeger – “I am glad I didn’t know then what I know now”.

However, before we start thinking through the next few months and current batch of issues, I want to take a minute to step back and revisit why we are here and why all the issues before us matter so much.

I believe – and I know each and every one of you believes – that all children can, should and must learn. I also believe – and hope you share it, too – that the history of a city, a state, or a nation is written by its capacity to empower citizens to pursue their own dreams and ambitions, to be productive members of society, and to make a contribution. I believe that those dreams and ambitions start in our homes, among our families and cultures. But they are nurtured in our schools. Where children have no options, the future is really hopeless. But where children have a wide range of choices and see that they are growing up in a vibrant, diverse world that is rich with opportunities, they see a future that is ripe with optimism and possibilities. So too then will our city, state and nation be filled with optimism and opportunities. I think that’s why we are all here – that’s essentially our motivation: to improve the system that is making that hope possible, to provide a learning environment each and every day that provides our students with the awareness that there is a path to academic success.

You can take all the political discussions about the future of public education, whether it’s a neighborhood discussion about the conversion of Cole Middle School, or whether it’s a discussion in the U.S. Congress about making adjustments to No Child Left Behind, – and I think we all know, in our hearts, that we are all here to make sure each child is given the opportunity to learn.

So where does Denver Public Schools stand in this effort? Are we slipping back, standing still, or making progress? Without question, the clear answer is “making progress,” thanks entirely to your hard work, creativity, and focus on our goals. The issues ahead suggest, in fact, that as a district we are not insulated from change, nor afraid of it. Rather, we embrace it. Consider:

*First, our new professional compensation system – ProComp. All eyes are on Denver – coast to coast. ProComp is where the answer lies for the future of teacher pay, with \$25 mil-

lion annually set aside for teachers, if voters approve, and a resulting revolution in compensation systems for public school teachers with something we believe the community strongly desires: built-in accountability. This proposal has touched every single central office in one way or another. It has challenged us to rethink many of our key systems. ProComp is the definition of change. A side note: all the work is being done, again, hand in hand with teachers and principals who staff the dozen or so committees working on ProComp elements.

*Second, the DPS secondary reform initiatives. Building upon the secondary teaching and learning initiatives that were jointly developed by teachers, principals and district staff, and with funding provided by the 2003 Mill Levy election, the Board of Education established the DPS Secondary Reform Commission. The public discussions of this group have turned a bright spotlight on our high school dropout rates, graduation rates and overall achievement levels in middle schools and high schools. These deliberations, with full encouragement and cooperation of the district staff and principals, (many of whom have somehow, miraculously added this work to their already packed schedules), will result in recommendations for significant change.

*Third, revitalization of our neighborhood schools. This is another reform initiative that was launched by the Board and fueled with the passage of the 2003 mill levy. It's an initiative that has allowed thirteen schools to enter into deep and thoughtful conversations about, quite simply, how they do business. The process has been public and, therefore, drawn people together with different ideas. But the conversations are clearly healthy and productive. They have again stretched the capacity of principals at these schools – adding another series of meetings they probably did not need – but they signal a willingness to rethink our work and whether we are doing everything we can to meet the needs of students and parents, our key stakeholders in the community.

That is just the beginning of the change that's ahead. There's the expansion of the K-8 concept and the resulting impact on middle schools. There are six schools in the K-8 grade configuration this year. By next August, fifteen schools could be in the K-8 group. And we have on the agenda to close Gove Middle School and phase-out Baker Middle School, with all the ripples of change that those actions will have on elementary schools and other middle schools in the district. In these and other cases, the principals, teachers and staff deserve our thanks and appreciation for their hard work, professionalism and commitment to do what is best for the students we serve. By the way, the closure of these schools in no way reflects negatively on the quality or talents of the professionals who staff them. Rather, it reflects on the fact that cities and city populations change and, as a district, we are obligated to change as well by adjusting to meet new needs and demands.

And indeed, more change is coming. We are faced with finding ways to revive performance at schools where student achievement is still not where it needs to be. I've met with the staff at each of these schools and I have been impressed with the professional manner with which they have been willing and eager to tackle the challenge and do what is best for students.

As if that is not enough change on the horizon, we have some general nervousness out there about many near-term issues, too. There are rumblings that we might not be able to settle the current teacher contract. There are concerns about the merger of our retirement system with the state retirement system. And there are, of course, concerns about how we'll balance next year's budget.

If you put all this change and uncertainty together, one might wonder if it is possible to suc-

cessfully navigate this next stretch. There's an expression: why not just 'throw in the towel?' It's a boxing term, when the handlers of a fighter would give up and rather than send their boxer in for another round, they would toss a towel – sometimes bloody, certainly sweaty and often both bloody and sweaty – into the ring as a signal that they had given up.

But this isn't boxing. And this isn't a fight among adversaries. We all share the same goals. We are all in this together. We have much more common ground than differences. We are working together and we have worked together. ProComp, secondary reform, revitalization, budget cuts, teacher contracts – these are various opportunities for discussions about exactly what changes will be made and what shape the district will take as it moves forward. But our core values and our core beliefs span too much common ground to think this is “us against them” on any level whatsoever. As a point of reference, how many of you, who are now administrators, also served as teachers and continue to see yourselves as teachers? Please stand. I rest my case.

So, again, how do we navigate this stretch? The same way we have managed the last four years – working together, being creative, and focusing on our district goals – setting high expectations, improving the performance for all students, and closing the gap between better and poorer performing students.

I would suggest that these goals have served us well. I know that for the hard working people of this district that high expectations, by the way, is more than a mere catch phrase. It's part of who you are and what you fundamentally believe.

Let's take a look at where we've been.

A few months after I became superintendent, it was announced by the Colorado Department of Education that twenty-one of our schools would receive a rating of “unsatisfactory” on the first round of the School Accountability Reports. Did we act defensively or throw in the towel? Emphatically no! We implemented a district-wide literacy program, launched the Million Words reading campaign, hired literacy coaches, set about reforming math instruction, and started rethinking our secondary curriculum with the Secondary Teaching and Learning Project, just for starters.

One year later, thanks to the hard work of principals, teachers and students in all of our buildings, and especially in the twenty-one schools rated unsatisfactory, we had only six schools receive the state's lowest ranking. Two years later, we only had one. Twice we won the Governor's award for most improved school district in the state.

What else have we accomplished together? In November 2003 we put forward a bond and mill levy package that, thanks to the leadership of Steve Kaplan and an incredible broad-based citizens committee, drew tremendous support – nearly 60 percent approval in the case of the mill levy. As a measure of common ground, that confidence was virtually unprecedented for any school community, let alone one with urban challenges like ours. The passage of the mill levy was hailed throughout the community and by the press as a mandate to stay the course on our reform agenda, and it set in motion a number of new reforms, many of which are still on our plate – building and repairing schools, hiring art and music teachers in every elementary school, revitalizing neighborhood schools, purchasing new textbooks, reforming middle and high schools, and expanding all-day kindergarten and early childhood education classes.

What else? We are implementing a new professional evaluation system for principals – one that was developed with and by the principals and their supervisors.

We stopped using yellow school buses for high schools. By listening to our stakeholders, by working with students and parents, by patiently thinking through our planning and communication about this change, we did what they said couldn't be done. High schools, as a result, are free to offer a more flexible schedule that meets the real-world needs of today's students – which helps set the stage for further reform initiatives.

At the school level we see lots of innovation and change as well. The Career Education Center reinvented itself as the CEC Middle College of Denver, allowing students to earn credits toward a college associate's degree. And the students are responding positively.

DPS has also responded to strong parent and community demands by developing an intricate landscape of charter and contract school choices. Some of these are niche schools that target very specific student populations, such as the recently approved Denver Peak Academy which serves homeless teenagers. Again, common ground – who among us would say that this program is not needed? We may differ about the problems in our society that generated the need for such a service, and the budgetary pros and cons of providing alternatives to district schools, but I think we all feel compelled to make sure this population of children is being reached.

We've expanded the Dual Language concept. We moved and expanded the computer magnet program. We are expanding the implementation of AVID programs.

We have forged new and innovative collaborations with government agencies and our educational partners in the private sector. The results have been expanded service accompanied by reduced costs. Among the examples is Westerly Creek Elementary School, which shares space with Odyssey Charter School. That's an innovative and efficient use of construction dollars. Similarly, Omar D. Blair Charter School and the City and County of Denver share the use of a recreation center. This arrangement has drawn national attention and has become a model for working more closely with the city on sharing other facilities and resources – parks, libraries, maintenance crews, and more.

These are just two of many examples of collaboration that resulted in innovative and efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

Benjamin Disraeli has observed in a clever play on words that “the only constant is change”. That describes my view of where we are, and should be, in DPS. I said four years ago that I believe this district should pride itself on responsiveness. I said that we should welcome and encourage change and innovation, recognizing of course that change and innovation are only a means to an end – and that end is improved student achievement.

But we have embraced reform in a way that, I believe, has changed the fundamental relationship between Denver Public Schools and the community it serves. That relationship manifests itself each and every day, in the routine conversations between parents and teachers and between parents and principals. It also manifests itself each and every day in conversations between the district leadership and the city, between the district and the state, between the district and the federal government.

We are engaged in civilized discussions about the future of our English Language Acquisition program. Again, this is common ground. We all agree on the goal of making sure students who don't speak English learn the language and make the transition to mainstream classrooms.

We're engaged in civilized discussions about the mismatch between state and federal accountability systems. Again, we have common ground on the goal of providing parents with clear information about the quality of their schools with reports that contain information that is

readily understood.

We're engaged in regular and meaningful conversations with the state legislature, whether one political party or another has the majority control, over improvements to the many ideas forwarded by elected leaders.

We're also engaged in close conversations with another of our key stakeholders – the business community, which is looking for opportunities to support our efforts across the board, from individual schools to district-wide initiatives.

We're engaged in meaningful and supportive conversations with the philanthropic community, which has been right at our side at every juncture and every time we have an idea that requires extra resources that the general fund cannot or will not cover. We owe them our deep gratitude.

And we're engaged in a strong and powerful relationship with the leadership of the city, particularly Mayor John Hickenlooper, who has been a champion of our common ground and who has clearly recognized that we are all in this together - that the city's future is inextricably linked to the success of its school system, and vice-versa.

The result? Anytime your relationships are strong, you are that much richer – in many ways. Our improved relationships have resulted in strong voter support for tax initiatives and overwhelming support for our reborn Denver Public Schools Foundation, which under the leadership of Bruce Benson has evolved into a star-studded group of community leaders that are the manifestation of “common ground” – political rivals who have set aside their agendas for the purpose of supporting Denver Public Schools. The DPS Foundation has been a tremendous asset and we appreciate their enthusiasm and effort.

Even with all this change, however, the momentum is not slowing down. It's going to pick up. I believe there is a need to provide more for parents and students – based upon what we know to be things that work.

For instance:

- Every child should be enrolled in pre-school.
- Full day kindergarten should be mandatory.
- We should continue to build the capacity throughout the district to enable us to shift resources from central administration to schools.
- Principals should be free to hire and fire their own teachers.
- DPS should be free to select and assign teams of principals, teachers and other staff to take on the challenge of working in our most troubled schools, and compensate them accordingly.
- Our leadership and capacity in on-line education should be exploited to establish a virtual high school, which among other things, will provide new educational options for the home schooled and those students who are otherwise unable to access education through the traditional system.
- Every quadrant of our city should offer choices in curriculum and program opportunities for students. These choices should include programs that we know work and for which there is documented demand, including certified International Baccalaureate programs at the elementary, middle and high school levels.
- We should replicate current successful schools for which there is pent up demand, such as the Denver School of the Arts and the Sandoval Dual Language schools, both of

which have successfully responded to market demand and, as a result of that success, have created more demand.

- We should establish new, thematic high schools that will attract new students and energy to DPS. These might include English immersion schools that are designed to better serve the needs of our growing population of English language learners, an independent school evolved from the Center for International Studies at West High School, and early college and middle college schools that are operated in cooperation with our community college partners.

There is much common ground around the need and desirability to implement reform initiatives such as these and others. Yet, we have great difficulty in actually getting them implemented. In this context I believe that it is going to take much more than another round of enthusiastic cheerleading, quick fixes and empty promises to take our reforms to the next level. It is going to take hard work, creative thinking, courageous action, and a unified sustained effort. There are no quick fixes. Everything works and nothing works when we are talking about systemic reform of education.

What we are really talking about is the need to change a culture. And changing cultures is very slow and difficult work. Individuals and interest groups differ in their values, preferences, beliefs, information and indeed in their perceptions of reality. Such differences are enduring and change slowly if at all.

Allow me here to reference a quote from Joe Hofmeister, the director of technology from the Cincinnati Country Day School, a private independent, college-prep school of 850 students. Said Hofmeister recently: “There are no revolutions in education. Schools have an incredible immune system. They react to new things coming into the system the same way our immune system does: they gather around and try to kill it as soon as they can”.

This phenomenon requires leaders in a culture of change to possess a quality that all long-term successful leaders have: the capacity to resist a focus on short-term gains at the expense of deeper reforms where gains are steady and lasting, but not necessarily dramatic.

And while there is much being said and written on the importance of “The R’s” - reading, writing and arithmetic, or the currently in vogue rigor, relevance and relationships - in improving student achievement, there is another group of three letters that must simultaneously be addressed if we are to realize meaningful and sustainable reform and improved student achievement.

These are what I refer to as the “The Three L’s” - Legislation, Litigation and Labor Agreements:

Legislation. Our education system is over legislated with conflicting laws and archaic rules and regulations. NCLB alone consists of more than 1700 pages of fine print and it is inconsistent with other legislation such as the Colorado School Accountability Reports accreditation requirements and voucher legislation. We must use our collective influence and credibility to work with state and federal lawmakers to develop clear, simple rules of accountability that we can all understand – and that help our schools improve.

Litigation: Common Good is a national bipartisan, non-profit organization that is committed to reforming our legal system. It is currently working with DPS and the University of Denver Law School to identify the impact of the legal system on efforts to reform our schools. Using a model developed in work with schools in New York City, law students are developing a flow

chart on the legal steps that are required to be followed in the event a DPS principal wishes to suspend a student or dismiss a teacher. In this case a picture is worth a thousand words. (Display flow chart of steps in the legal process)

Labor agreements: DPS has nine different union contracts – they read like legislation and are the cause of much of the litigation. They influence reform efforts from the top down through sponsoring legislation such as discussed above. They influence reform efforts from the bottom up through collective bargaining agreements, many of which exceed 100 pages of fine print and are filled with provisions not only for wages, benefits and retirement packages, but for time off, job security, employee transfer and assignment rights, restrictions on how they can be evaluated, restrictions on non-classroom duties and countless other rules that eliminate discretion and result in costly bureaucratic administrative structures to manage. Since the contracts are “collectively bargained” the district and its unions must work together to hold our common ground and resolve and remaining differences in a professional and civilized manner.

“The Three L’s” present significant, but not insurmountable, challenges to meaningful reform. They can be overcome. But it will require a sustained and unified effort. The schools must do their part, but so must the community. We must all be leaders in a culture of change.

The leadership challenge is more than mobilizing others to solve problems for which there are known solutions. Rather, it is a challenge of mobilizing people to tackle tough issues – to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed.

There are examples of how this can happen. One is the ProComp system that has already been discussed and which was developed collaboratively between the Denver teachers union and the administration without the necessity of legislation and litigation – at least not yet.

I mentioned earlier that our relationships make us “richer”. In this context I don’t define richness as only as a monetary measure. I mean “richer” in the sense of trust and “richer” in the sense of thoughtful and meaningful conversation. When we say the land is rich, we mean it’s fertile and capable of producing crops in abundance. That’s the kind of rich I’m talking about – the relationships we have on all levels are strong and growing. They represent the ability of our schools and this district to engage parents and community leaders. They represent the ability of our individual schools and the district as a whole to listen to our stakeholders, to listen to those who come around and poke and prod us and take our temperature. (And there are plenty of groups and individuals doing just that – each and every day.) Those relationships also represent our ability to make change when it makes sense to do so.

The development of this richness has been a team effort right down the line, each and every day. Our credibility in the community is a direct result of your hard work and focus on our goals. Any capital we’ve gained, our stock, is due to the investments you made in schools every day. The talent in this room today is capable, I believe, of accomplishing anything that we decide, collectively, to pursue.

You are the team. The Superintendent doesn’t write plans for converting a school to K-8. The Superintendent doesn’t write school improvement plans or hire and evaluate teachers. I don’t negotiate pension mergers. I don’t develop enrollment projections or manage the complex implementations of new school programs. And I have not taught one of our students to read.

The future of this district is not dependent on any one person, it is dependent upon a combined team effort that includes the thousands of discussions and tens of thousands of relationships that are developed between a district with 150 schools, 74,000 students, all the parents

and guardians of those students, and the greater community of individuals who have every right to expect that the district is producing a tangible benefit at a reasonable cost.

And it is precisely because we have such a strong team, with a winning record of success in achieving our goals, that I have advised the Board of Education that I will step aside as Superintendent on June 30, 2005 – more than four years after accepting the opportunity to serve in this capacity. I have carefully considered the timing of my departure and I believe that this timeline will ensure a smooth transition and continued momentum of the many exciting initiatives that are currently underway in DPS.

I am honored to have been bestowed with the privilege of serving as your Superintendent. Beginning with the Board of Education that offered me this opportunity four years ago, I have enjoyed strong and consistent support as we worked together to improve educational opportunities and achievement for the children of Denver. In this context, I have full confidence that the Board will select a successor who will take advantage of our momentum to build upon our reform initiatives, and, among other things, ensure a successful outcome in the November ProComp election. I also want to take this opportunity to offer special thanks and recognition to Elaine Berman, who served as Board President during the first three years of my tenure, and Les Woodward, who is the current president. Their outstanding leadership, support and commitment for public education in general, and me personally, have been unsurpassed.

Just as importantly, I want to express my sincere appreciation to each and every one of you. I have had the pleasure of visiting hundreds of classrooms. I have had the opportunity to see paraprofessionals, teachers, principals, literacy coaches, and educators in action. I've witnessed the heartfelt dedication you bring to meet the needs of our wonderfully diverse student population. I've also visited and met with many of you who are engaged in support services. And I know that every classroom teacher relies on a network of support services – whether it's food service workers, custodial staff, bus drivers, computer technicians, or many others – that is too often overlooked because it often operates behind the scenes. After each of these visits and experiences I came away impressed with the effort and teamwork that abounds in this district.

I stand in admiration of your tireless efforts to raise the standards of performance in all operations and at all levels in DPS. We have set a pattern of embracing our challenges, defining our problems, drafting thoughtful plans, and implementing change with focus and determination. We are open to new ideas and fresh thinking. In the process, we have fundamentally altered our relationship with community, business, and political leadership at all levels.

Again, that's thanks to you. Our success relies on our credibility and the degree to which we honor the special trust placed in us by parents, the community and by our main stakeholders, the students themselves. The result of your dedication, hard work and professionalism is that credibility.

Notwithstanding this credibility, there are those among us who might see the current set of issues that I reviewed earlier as daunting for our reform efforts, and perhaps think that we should slow down, turn around or go back. But we must persist and continue to move forward.

Vince Lombardi once said that the difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will. I believe the same is true for organizations. And I know this organization has everything it needs – strength, knowledge and ample will to get the job done.

Our goals are clear and unwavering – setting high expectations, improving the performance

of all students, and closing the gap between better and poorer performing students. There are challenges, yes. But these goals have served us well in the challenges we've already encountered, and will do so again if we continue to be open, accessible, responsive and non-defensive.

As we engage in dialogue over improving our system, we share one valuable commodity: common ground. We all share the same vision-of students learning and being challenged at their highest potential, of our schools seen as nearly magical places that light up imaginations and send each of our students on a productive, fulfilling journey of lifelong learning. I believe that for all of us-students, teachers, principals, parents, central staff, community members and elected officials at every level – our differences are few. In some cases, our plans may be hampered by available resources. But I believe those resources will expand by the degree to which we continue to exploit our common vision in the interests of developing the kind of dynamic and successful school system that every taxpayer and parent has the right to expect.

We've already seen the resources grow through the very successful November 2003 mill levy and bond initiatives and the tremendous growth in support for the district that has been generated through the DPS Foundation. There is every reason to believe that support will continue as long as we continue to keep our vision – and our expectations – high.

In the coming months I intend to visit with as many of you as possible, to thank you personally, and to offer my support and encouragement to help set the stage for a smooth transition that capitalizes on our momentum and continues our tradition of successful reform. The stakes are too high to do anything less. Thomas Jefferson defined those stakes long ago: "For a nation to be a successful, self-governing democracy, its citizens must be well educated".

On behalf of myself and my wife, our children and grandchildren, and all the citizens of our city, state and nation, I thank you for choosing to dedicate yourself to the improvement of public education. Your guidance and relentless efforts have assisted tens of thousands of students to sustain that fundamental ideal of a self-governing democracy.