

Madame Chair, members of the school board, and members of the Superintendent's Leadership Team, it is an honor to stand before you today and present a mid-term report on the health and strength of the Wake County Public School System -- as we continue to reach for our vision that **every child graduates on time, prepared for the future.**

Several weeks ago, Pastor Alexander Herring invited me to the historic Juniper Level Missionary Baptist Church to speak to a packed sanctuary about the achievement gaps within Wake County's public schools. I was there to present the data -- the good and the bad -- about our students' performance. My message at Juniper was simple: as good a school system as we are, the time for "business as usual" is behind us.

Their response was passionate. They challenged me to do more, and what's more they challenged themselves to get further involved. It was one of the most gratifying moments I've

experienced as superintendent. It was a moment when a community gathered together in common purpose -- to secure a bright future **for every child in our schools, without exception.**

This is a school system that I am proud to lead. When you look at our school system from the 50,000-foot view, you see high performing students and high performing schools in every corner of our county. You see parents and business volunteers not just **involved** but **engaged**. You see a school system with a 31-year history of rising above all challenges to become one of the strongest large school systems in the nation.

And yet, our community has changed. While the breakneck pace of Wake County's growth may be slowing a bit due to the nation's economy, we will still add thousands of students every year for many years to come. Our student population is becoming more complex. The **world in which they live** is becoming more complex. The challenges of

technology and global competition are upon us, and we **dare not** ignore them. We **do** mean to graduate students **prepared for the future**, after all. And believe me, they know we mean business.

Just before the holidays I spent some quality time at Conn Elementary School, speaking to and talking with about 110 third graders. I talked with them about the vision for this school system. I asked them what it means to be “prepared for the future.” They know. And they told me. What did they tell me? “It means to be prepared to go to college. It means to be prepared for a future we don’t know about. It means to be able to work in a global society working with people from different places that I may never see, but will IM and email and maybe talk to on my cell phone.” Our world and their world, is changing before our eyes.

As an initial response to our changing world, the last 18 months have been a period of returning the Wake County

Public School System to its fundamentals. We have concentrated on teaching and learning as our core business, with every other function from student assignment to technology services aligned to **support** teaching and learning.

But now it is time for a new phase.

We are one of the strongest public school systems in the nation, but even a plateau of good performance is still a plateau. Ninety-one percent of our students in grades 3 through 8 performed at or above grade level in reading in 2007, but that percentage has barely changed since 2003. We must confront some brutal facts.

There exist significant achievement gaps in our schools. Our on time graduation rate for all students last year was almost 80%. Compared to the state and to large urban districts nation-wide, that's pretty good. But now for the rest of the story. For students qualifying for free or reduced price

lunch, a measure of socio-economic status, 63% graduated on time. For students with disabilities, 57% graduated on time. For our limited English proficient students, 44% graduated on time. We must concern ourselves with each of our student's academic growth—those who are academically gifted as well as those who are academically challenged.

Any child with the proper support **can** succeed academically, but the truth we must face is that even more of our disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency must succeed academically. And at the same time, we must also recognize that even our successful students may not be adequately prepared for the technological and global challenges of this century.

When you put those pieces together, the picture that results tells me that being a **good** school system **isn't good enough anymore**. Last year we requested and underwent a

comprehensive curriculum management audit that presented a number of findings and recommendations revealing opportunities for improvement. That audit is a tool that we must use to **change our course**.

We must **purposefully change** the culture of the Wake County Public School System to resume the academic growth that our citizens demand and our students deserve. We must make a shift in emphasis from "**teaching and learning**" to "**learning and teaching**," placing our children's academic needs first in every way. That culture change must be deep enough and broad enough to affect issues ranging from professional learning communities to student assignment.

What we are talking about, and I say this without exaggeration, is **reinventing the Wake County Public School System**.

As I said before, we've been concentrating on the

fundamentals, and that will give us the foundation from which to embark upon purposeful change. Tonight I'm going to briefly highlight some examples of that foundation from each of our four strategic directives:

1. focusing on teaching and learning;
2. retaining, recruiting and training high quality employees;
3. developing and implementing systems and organizational structures to support schools, insure accountability and engage the community,
4. and expanding our focus on fiscal accountability.

As I did in my last mid-term report, we'll go in reverse order, ending with learning.

First, **fiscal accountability**. This school year we have taken great steps forward in raising expectations of our staff. We have increased our system controls, streamlined some of our fiscal policies and procedures, including establishing for the first

time a policy addressing fund balance, and become more transparent to the public.

As an example, since July our area superintendents have become more involved in promoting fiscal accountability at the school level, by participating in quarterly financial reviews with our principals along with our administrative services staff. Area superintendents are also helping with the audit process for our schools' Fund 6 accounts, which are funds comprised of school-generated revenue. Our chief officers undergo a similar financial review each quarter as well, as we work to efficiently use resources provided by taxpayers.

What this means for the future is an increase in efficiency, transparency, and accountability at the school level, where 88 percent of our school system's operational funding goes. And this also connects to the curriculum management audit, which called for us to apply a deeper cost/benefit analysis

to all of our educational programs and activities. As we improve our fiscal accountability to our **citizens**, we will also ensure that every dollar has the maximum impact upon learning and teaching in our classrooms.

Second, **systems and organizational structures**.

When I talk about systems and structures, I am talking about the **processes -- how we work --** that support our schools, ensure accountability, and engage our community. Before we could embark upon **purposeful change**, we had to ensure that these structures were in place so that we could operate more effectively. A public school system may not be a business, but we certainly need to be business-**like**.

In terms of supporting schools, this year we began a five-year technology refresh plan for our schools as part of our capital improvement plan, supported by the 2006 bond. Those bond funds are directly benefiting student learning by

systematically replacing obsolete equipment -- one fifth each year for the next five years. We have worked closely with our principals to accomplish this, and this means that you will see greater equity among our schools as well as greater access to modern technology for **all** of our students.

We are also improving our systems and structures in the area of student assignment, and I'll come back to that at the end of my report.

Third, **retaining, recruiting and training** of high quality employees. This year, more than 20 principals will be eligible for retirement. In the next five years, a fourth of our 9,000 teachers will be at retirement age. When you consider those sobering facts, and also recognize that we are always opening new schools and welcoming new students, then our need becomes clear. We need to **keep** our strong employees, **aggressively recruit** talented new employees, and **constantly**

invest in their future potential. We need employees who can be **leaders where they are**, as well as employees who may become tomorrow's principals, administrators and superintendents.

This year, we provided leadership training for assistant principals for the first time since our **first** superintendent, Dr. John Murphy, gathered them together 30 years ago. It wasn't just about helping them get a leg up for a future principal's job, although **succession planning** is certainly on my mind. But we expect more of our assistant principals than was expected in the past. We ask them to be **instructional leaders**. They are uniquely positioned to be team builders as well as team players -- and that gives them a key role in orientation, induction, retention, and training of **teachers** as well.

Effective retaining, recruiting and training means enhanced professionalism, leadership and accountability at all levels of the Wake County Public School System, and it speaks

to aligning our resources for the best benefit of our students -- which was another point in the curriculum management audit.

Finally, and this is important, **teaching and learning** -- which, after today, in the Wake County Public School System, becomes **learning and teaching**. Make no mistake: it's more than it seems and this will be on the test! Over 18 months, we have examined our processes and relationships in the classrooms and in the schools. What we have learned, and what the curriculum management audit has taught us, enables us to change the focus from **how** we teach our children to **what** our children are learning.

We received the audit last September. Since then we have been studying it closely -- all 117 suggested action steps of it -- and have assigned eight senior level administrators to assemble a team responsible for planning and implementing the eight major recommendations. As I said, the audit is our tool for

purposeful change, and we are eager to use it.

As we have been reviewing the audit, we have also been moving forward with establishing Professional Learning Communities in our schools, to provide a team-based approach to solving new challenges in the classroom. PLCs make collaboration **part of a school's culture**, so teachers can benefit from the experiences and insights of their colleagues while sharing and analyzing individual student performance data. We have also made PLC's, or team-based collaboration, a requirement in central services, as we align and attune efforts to provide services supporting schools as our customers.

For the last six months we have been carefully establishing PLCs -- and the curriculum management audit itself -- as the drivers that enable us to change the culture of the Wake County Public School System. I'd like to wrap up by describing what kind of change it will be.

We are a strong school system with a strong foundation. There is no gimmick, **no** parade of new programs, no silver bullet that will have a **lasting** effect on students' ability to graduate on time, prepared for the future. Instead our change must be **purposeful**, it must be **strategic**, and it must strengthen our culture of **learning and teaching**.

"Learning and teaching" instead of "teaching and learning" is more than a semantic change. It is about attunement. It changes how we think about processes and relationships. Without question, the most important thing is it clearly places the **result first**. I've spoken often of the triangle that guides much of our work. That triangle has at the bottom processes and relationships—both important foundational components, but the focus, what's most important, must be **results**. Focusing upon results supports our purposeful change into a **learning organization for the current century** -- constantly going to the

data; going to our community; going to outside experts, parents and business volunteers -- to continuously improve ourselves.

Looking ahead to the end of the school year, we will **finally** begin the process of implementing the curriculum management audit's administrative recommendations, while continuing to gather information and working in tandem with the board of education on the audit's governance recommendations. The audit must not -- and will not -- become a "shelf document." We've had that information since September, and although it **is** a 400-page document, we've had enough time to study it. Implementation of the audit recommendations will take months and even years; it is, however, past time we began. This is the first of quarterly reports to you regarding our work with the audit recommendations and actions we must take to improve our system.

Also in the next six months we will continue enhancing our schools' professional learning communities to make them even more student-centered--**teaming** and focusing on **results for children** will be visible parts of our school system's purposeful changes in central services as well as in every school building.

When I come back to you 12 months from now, for the 2009 mid-term report, I hope to show further evidence of our purposeful change into a learning organization. One concrete example of that is in student assignment. Tonight, **for the last time**, our Growth and Planning department will present a one-year student assignment plan. Our staff has the data, the talent, and the community feedback. There is no reason we cannot provide a **multi-year** student assignment plan for our community, and we will be able to provide that greater level of stability and predictability for parents for the 2009-2011 school

years.

That is just one example of the kind of community responsiveness we intend to foster as part of this purposeful change. First and foremost we are accountable to student learning, but we must also become more nimble and more open. As quickly as our community is growing, and as complex as our lives are becoming, parents and citizens need more information and access to their school system to be reassured that we're doing the right things for children. Twelve months from now, I will be able to report that we're doing even better.

Let me bring this back to the vision, which we have followed for over 18 months. The full statement of our vision is: **working as a community of educators and stakeholders, with support of the broader community, we will ensure that every child educated in our school system graduates on time, prepared for the future.** Notice how important that word

"community" is. The vision describes all of us within the Wake County Public School System as a community, a learning community, working **with** and not **against** each other. The vision sees us as **engaged** with our broader community, parents and non-parents alike, business volunteers and people of faith and commitment, from every corner of the county.

The purposeful change I am talking about, the building of a culture of learning and teaching, will help us better realize this vision by binding us all together in support of children.

At the end of the day, when that vision is realized, our aligned focus from every classroom in every school to this board room will be on our children, our children will be achieving their potential, and any one of us will be able to stand before Pastor Herring's congregation ... and chamber of commerce members ... and third graders at Conn Elementary or any other

school...and Wake Early College parents ... and any other Wake County citizen and say with pride, "Look at the accomplishments of **all** of our children, look at the accomplishments of this great system, look at the accomplishments that this great community has achieved. **Now, what's next?**" And why ask what's next? Because that is the hallmark of continuous improvement focused on results in an aligned school system committed to learning.

And please know that this is more than a report to you, the board of education. It's a report to our community. Before you on the board table is a document summarizing much of this mid-term report. Citizens throughout our county will receive this information as an insert in newspapers in our county, beginning with the News and Observer tomorrow. I am proud of the hard work our 17,000 employees are doing every day in support of learning for 134,000 students. I'm looking forward to

the future with excitement as we consider the possibilities and make them realities for students.

And that, Madame Chair, and members of the Board, concludes my mid-term report.

Thank you.