

State of the Schools Address  
Verletta White  
March 28, 2018

Colleagues, friends, and supporters, welcome to the sixth annual State of the Schools! It is an honor and pleasure to be here this afternoon.

I want to begin my remarks from a place of sincere gratitude. This year, The Education Foundation of Baltimore County Public Schools has truly outdone itself by giving our students the opportunity to showcase their learning and their talents.

Please help me thank Executive Director Debbie Phelps, Foundation Board Chair Doug Eder, and the entire board and staff of The Education Foundation.

We are so grateful for their support. Funds raised by the foundation impact our students by way of grants and scholarships.

We are also enjoying a different venue this year thanks to our strong partnership with Towson University. Let's thank Towson University President Dr. Kim Schatzel and her staff for their hospitality and support.

I would also like to acknowledge former BCPS superintendents Dr. Bob Dubel and Dr. Tony Marchione, as well as former state superintendent Dr. Nancy Grasmick. Please join me in thanking them for their leadership.

And finally, thanks to all of you. Thank you not only for your investment in our students, but also for your commitment to our school system.

As you entered through the doors this morning, I am sure you did so wondering about the "real" state of our schools. I am here to share with you that the state of our schools is strong!

Yes, I know that many of us are concerned about and hurt by recent events in the news, and I also know that there are those who want to portray our school system as one that is broken. We are not broken.

We may be a bit wounded, but we are still strong. Now is the time for us to not only learn from the past, but also keep pressing forward because we have students in seats right now who deserve no less than our very best.

I submit to you that you never know the strength of an organization until it is tested. BCPS has passed this test.

I know we've passed because of the evidence that surrounds us. Our student enrollment is still growing, our students are still progressing, and teachers and staff members still continue to pursue their careers in BCPS.

On this year's Stakeholder Survey, additional parents continued to endorse us. We received 1,100 additional parent responses this year, and our BCPS effectiveness rating held steady.

So, I know that this is a busy time of year, and to that end, I appreciate your willingness to come together to celebrate the state of our schools, and I thank you for joining us to hear about the successes and challenges we face as a school system.

I don't know about you, but I stand here today with great clarity.

Just this morning, we were handed a clear charge from our most important stakeholders and our county's greatest assets – our students.

This event has always put our students front and center. But moments ago, we all had the privilege of experiencing our first Learning Walk of Knowledge.

We know, and we've known for some time, that our students need something more to be truly prepared for success in this century. They need something beyond the kinds of passive, sit-and-get learning that many of us experienced in school.

We know that this "something more" has to be infused into the school day in order to fulfill our commitment to equity. And we know how important it is to tap into what motivates and engages every one of our learners as individual thinkers and creators.

If you've been looking for inspiration, I hope you were moved by listening to our students talk about the art and science of everything from construction and the health sciences, to peer mentoring, robotics, and emergency planning.

If you've been wondering how today's students will fare in our workforce, I hope you are as impressed as I am. I witnessed incredible leadership, communication, and maturity at every level, from our soon-to-be-graduates down to our youngest learners.

Let's give our students one more round of applause for giving us so much to celebrate.

If you're fortunate enough to interact with our young people as often as I do, this comes as no surprise. What I want to emphasize today is that the enthusiasm and energy you experienced today are crucial to getting our students where they need to go.

We must be intentional about igniting those sparks in our students, and providing the foundation that will give them options throughout their lives.

None of this happens by accident. We've taken great care to transform teaching and learning with students at the center, and we – as a community of educators and advocates – must continue to create authentic, real-world experiences that provoke the deep learning and skills that the future demands, including the meaningful and responsible use of technology.

About eight months ago, I told you my hopes and dreams as an educator, as a parent, and as a resident in this county. I talked about graduating our kids not only ready to compete with their peers across the globe, but also poised to contribute to the world's problems.

This past weekend should have reminded us that yes, our students need to be positioned to compete with their peers for jobs, but more importantly, our kids want to collaborate and contribute to the greater good of humanity.

I am encouraged by our young people and I believe that we need to do everything that we can to empower them to be productive citizens of our society.

To that end, we have anchored teaching and learning this year to two priorities – literacy across the disciplines, and school climate. If I sound like a broken record by now, please indulge me.

Because I don't want us to get away from "the why." Keep in mind that our mission is simple – we must make sure that our students learn how to read, write, think, compute, and behave in socially acceptable ways. Some may see this as a return to basics, but some basic principles are foundational life skills that we must always champion.

Simply put, literacy enables lifelong learning. Without the many literacy skills that we are now emphasizing, our kids may struggle unnecessarily. They will simply not be ready for the rigors of postsecondary education and the work world.

So, let me take a moment right now to address our 173 remarkable principals. This year, you dove headfirst into leading a pervasive culture of literacy in our schools. Literacy is now visible and audible in all of our school buildings.

Would our principals please stand to be recognized?

I've asked you to stand because leadership matters. And it's because of your leadership that we are seeing literacy embedded into daily instruction across all of the content areas.

In our classrooms, I'm seeing literature circles, where students who have chosen the same book meet as a small group to reflect on what they have read and to discuss their reactions.

In our faculty rooms, I'm seeing professional learning communities where our social studies, math, and science teachers brainstorm the best ways to help students understand technical writing.

I'm seeing celebrations of literacy more than ever before – from the African American Read-In, to World Read Aloud Day, to Read Across America Day. Our students have entered writing contests from Halloween through Black History Month, and we've already received more than 900 entries into our second annual Team BCPS Haiku Poetry Contest.

I'm seeing school displays that highlight the connections between literature and math for students, educators, and families.

I'm hearing a renewed emphasis on subject-specific vocabulary, especially in the special areas, including physical education and the arts.

And if I can speak to our students for a moment – we have more than 300 kids with us today – what I hope is that you experience the joy in literacy. It is a gift that no one can ever take away from you.

Let's go back to "the why." Why is literacy so important for our young people? Think about what we as adults use every day as employers, employees, and as citizens.

We're interacting with information 24/7 through graphs, charts, and a vast range of writing, from reports and presentations to "fake news." For students to be able to navigate it all responsibly, we must teach them how to read and write like professionals, as well as how to decipher what is true and what is not, and how to draw conclusions to develop their own points of view, based on multiple sources of relevant information.

Our kids get it, and they understand the importance of this principle. Let's take a moment to hear from them.

We are preparing students to excel and thrive.

Once again, for the students in the room, literacy is empowerment. It enables you to understand yourself and to see multiple perspectives. It allows you to advocate not only for yourself, but also for others.

That's why literacy is at the center of what we do. Because it's at the heart of how you will live your life.

For teachers in the room, it's important for us to remember that "the how" is incredibly important. How we teach and learn is just as important as what we teach and learn. Learning environments also matter.

We should ask our students—where do you learn the most? Where do you feel the most accomplished and valued? Where are you made to feel that you can try and grow?

Again, I'm a teacher. I will always be a teacher. My dream for our students is that school is the place where children thrive as learners and develop as individuals.

But we know that's not true for every student. According to this year's Stakeholder Survey, 73 percent of our students feel that, yes indeed, they do feel safe in our schools. But 27 percent of our students do not feel safe in our schools. So we have to take this percentage seriously and ask ourselves, why do students feel this way and how can we get better so that all students feel safe in school?

As a parent, what I, and I'm sure most parents want—is to make sure our children are safe and that they are making good choices and making good friends.

We have to be vigilant by being proactive, making sure that we are investing the time and energy to talk to our children, to engage them in school and in after-school activities, to restore them where they are broken, and to provide logical, fair, and consistent consequences when they have crossed the line.

Students may not admit it, but they need and respect structure. We need to continue to make sure that our students not only feel protected and safe, but that they actually are protected and safe so they can reach their full potential.

So, how are we doing this? We are doing our level best to ensure safety by upgrading our infrastructure with cameras, controlled entry, and visitor identification. We continue to implement safety training and emergency planning. We have an incredible partnership with the Baltimore County Police Department, all of which is necessary to ensure student safety.

But you may have heard me say many times that we're in a people business. School climate is how we architect teaching and learning environments that bring out the best in our educators and our students.

This year, we've proposed a budget for next school year focused on "People for Our People," so that we can increase staffing and resources to support learning. Please join me in thanking our county executive and county council, who have demonstrated their continued support by investing in our schools and instructional resources year after year.

These precious resources allow us to prevent negative behaviors by providing effective, responsive daily instruction with supports that wrap around our students and remove barriers to instruction.

We are teaching students how to restore themselves and each other, how to repair relationships when conflicts occur, and how to make good decisions.

When necessary, we are providing logical, reasonable consequences to ensure an orderly environment while also respecting the fact that every one of our students has a story.

Climate is how we account for not only the achievement of our students, but their well-being. We invest in kids. We take whatever students bring with them into our buildings, and we meet their needs with incredible teachers, counselors, social workers, and other experts in social and emotional learning.

In the past two years, we even have two schools that have been designated as State Schools of Character. Glyndon and Warren elementary schools have been honored for their outstanding work to focus on character development as a way of impacting academic achievement, student behavior, and school climate. It's all related. Please join me in celebrating Glyndon and Warren today.

Additionally, restorative circles are just one strategy that many of our schools are using to nurture climate. We've talked a lot this year about restorative circles as a way for students to lead conversations about positive, supportive behavior. Let's hear how this is going from our educators.

So as you can see, it's all about building relationships. If we don't focus on all three aspects of school climate – prevention, restoration, and logical consequences, we are doing our students a disservice. It's up to us to teach this generation how to manage and overcome conflicts.

In fact, it's up to us to keep raising the bar and thinking about what else our students might need. My mother would say that helping students graduate is just our reasonable service, which is a minimum expectation.

That being said, I am so proud of our educators and families for graduating 89 percent of the class of 2017 with no gap between African American and white students. Few large school systems can say the same.

But getting our students across the stage – as far as we’ve come to make that happen – is not enough. Every one of our students deserves a leg up through concrete advantages while they are with us. It might be proficiency in a second or third language, or an internship. It could be traveling abroad, or earning college credit or an industry credential.

Our students need to graduate with not only a diploma, but also a resume that will open doors and possibilities for them. They may not be thinking about how to set themselves apart. They may not recognize their own strengths. Maybe they don’t know their potential.

Sometimes students need a nudge, they need encouragement, and they need to know we believe in them. If you were to think back over your life, you can likely point to a teacher or school leader who encouraged you to do more, to be more, to push harder – someone who allowed you to articulate your dreams, or who planted a visionary seed in you.

We need to do that for our students, our educators, and our leaders. We all have leadership potential and a responsibility to grow ourselves and each other through training and professional learning.

If I’ve learned anything from my own professional journey, it’s to always seek more for our students. What else can we offer to make sure that a world of opportunities is available for our students? To guide them toward possibilities that they may never consider on their own.

It goes back to the Learning Walk we took together this morning. A walk through hands-on, student-led learning experiences that are encouraging a vast range of future-ready skills and knowledge, like critical thinking and creativity.

It goes back to the clarity that our students have given me today.

Friends and colleagues, I would suggest to you that we are most certainly on the right track.

This past fall, we launched our first Early College Program @ Woodlawn High School, offering a diploma and an associate’s degree at no cost, thanks to our wonderful partnership with the Community College of Baltimore County.

Our second early college program is coming to Dundalk High School in the fall of 2018 through P-TECH. P-TECH stands for Pathways in Technology Early College High School.

In addition to earning a high school diploma and associate’s degree from CCBC, P-TECH students will benefit from skills training, mentoring, and summer internships that will lead to full-time, entry-level engineering jobs with our industry partners, KCI and Whiting-Turner. Let’s give those partners a special round of applause.

Again, some of our critics are trying to make the word “partnership” a bad word. The truth of the matter is that ever since we’ve had to order chalk and erasers, we’ve needed corporations to partner with us.

Today, I am grateful for the partnerships that we have with those who are willing and able to invest in the best and brightest students in our nation. Those who are willing to not only partner with us to make sure that we are able to conduct the business of schooling, but also those who are willing to invest in our children through internship opportunities like KCI and Whiting-Turner.

Also this coming fall, we will offer five new magnet programs and one significantly revised program to expand student access to international studies and health science. This is thanks to a \$15 million magnet grant that has been awarded to BCPS.

Additionally, our Northwest Area Career Task Force is harnessing the power of community members and educators to prepare students in that region by aligning curriculum to the productive local careers and businesses in the area.

And we are preparing students all across the county for the future through a college prep program known as AVID. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination, which focuses on study and organizational skills. We've expanded AVID to more middle schools and even to an elementary school.

We're also offering more middle school courses in science, technology, engineering, and math. We're giving high school students more chances to earn college credit.

When things are going well, it can be hard to keep our perspective. We might get used to success and achievement. So today, I want to make sure that you have the full picture of the state of our schools so you'll know exactly where and how we need your support.

So, the state of our schools also includes the fact that students are coming to us less prepared. This past fall, less than half of our entering Kindergarten students demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed for success on the state Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.

That's where our equity work begins. Equity is a living, breathing force in our schools. It drives how we prepare curriculum and instruction, how we build positive relationships with students and families, and how we continue to re-think our practices with students at the center of our work.

And as a result of transforming the way we teach and learn, our students have made gains in achievement on the PARCC and MAP assessments in both reading and mathematics.

These gains are led by our Lighthouse students, who were the first to use one-to-one devices for personalized learning. But these gains are also reflected across our non-Lighthouse schools.

Our students have moved from below state and national averages to above both state and national performance on multiple assessments. These gains are equivalent to receiving hundreds of additional hours of instruction, and they substantially outpace gains seen in other school systems in Maryland.

The bottom line is that our students and staff members are focused and are relentless when it comes to getting student achievement results.

But as proud as we are, this is not the time to become complacent. We might get used to expanding access and excellence. Because as more of our students take the SAT every year, up to 89 percent in 2017, our SAT scores continue to increase.

We might forget what it took to establish SAT Day so that all Grade 11 students can take the SAT during the school day, at their own school, and with no cost.

What I'm saying is that we can't let up now. It took all of us working together as a team to get to where we are. And it will take all of our efforts to continue making progress for our students, our families, and our county.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize the Board of Education for governing our schools with deliberation and conviction. Please help me thank the 12 members of our Board of Education for their service.

As a united community, we will continue to create opportunities that we may not have had in school, but that we know our students need. We are stronger and better as a committed team and as one BCPS family.

When you leave today, I hope you take with you something that you learned directly from our students this morning.

Take with you the determination and collaboration of the salad box project.

Take with you the new ways of seeing from our student filmmakers.

Take with you the focus and precision of our health science magnet students at Northwest Academy and Randallstown High School.

Take with you our urgency to provide these rich, deep learning experiences on a large scale in all of our classrooms, every day.

Stand with us to make sure that we never go back, that we instead keep progressing in the service and investment of every student in our care.

Stand with us to ensure that innovative and engaging teaching and learning keep evolving all across the county.

We are able to accomplish all of this because of the strength of our team. I want to extend a special thank you again to The Education Foundation for hosting this event and to our incredible, results-driven staff. You are absolutely the best team in the world!

I've said it before, but I will say it once more. The state of our schools is strong. How do I know?

Students, where are you? Stand up. You see, our students are still achieving, still performing, and they are still standing. Keep standing.

Principals and administrators? Where are you? Stand up. You are incredible, and you are still committed, even when times get tough—you lead with strength and conviction, and you are still standing. Remain standing.

Teachers, paraeducators, and staff? Where are you? Stand up. Our hardworking teachers and paras are second-to-none and they are still invested and are still standing.

Central office staff? Please stand. Our central office staff never stop finding ways to support our students and our schools.

Parents, community members, elected officials, and Board members? Please stand. You still believe in us and are still dedicated, and you are still standing with BCPS. We celebrate you.

Our corporate and university partners? You are still here and are still investing in our students and staff members, and we appreciate you.

And to all other BCPS family members from our broader community to our internal staff, please stand.

So, how do I know that the state of our schools is strong? I know because just like those of you in this room, we have the right people, at the right time, working toward the right goals for our children.

And we are all still standing.

Thank you!