

## Annual Address

Administrative & Supervisory Meeting 2008  
Baltimore County Public Schools

# ***“21<sup>st</sup> Century Education: Making it Relevant, Getting it Right”***

***Dr. Joe A. Hairston, Superintendent***  
Loch Raven High School – Friday, August 15, 2008

Good morning.

It is wonderful to see both new and familiar faces here today and for us to gather as a team.

We begin this year having filled some key leadership positions. We will benefit from the ideas and energy new administrators bring to our system. In particular, we are pleased to have Dr. Patricia Abernethy on board as our new chief academic officer.

This is the beginning of the ninth year – and the third term – for this administration. Together, we are making history as part of what will be the second-longest administration of Baltimore County Public Schools. As the students in our classrooms today take their places in the world, their success will be our shared legacy.

I know that many of you enjoyed time with family and friends this summer. I also know that you have remained focused on your work. We had a wonderful Principals’ Academy at Rocky Gap, and I want to thank all the principals and others who contributed to its success. The work that we do at Rocky Gap each year lays the groundwork for continued progress in our schools, and our progress is undeniable. If I could, I would like to ask our principals, our school house leaders, to please stand and be recognized.

As I moved about the county this summer, I met many teachers as well, enjoying their break. Being consummate professionals, all of them were also looking ahead and thinking about their students.

Our Board of Education has been looking ahead, spending time together this past Saturday in one of its annual retreats.

I want to welcome the Board members who are here this morning and to thank all of the Board members for their fine work and for their commitment to education in Baltimore County.

Education, as all of you know, is not just about test scores or grades. It is about students gaining knowledge and skills that prepare them for the future, and increasingly, for a future distinguished by globalization and technology.

Other nations clamor to emulate our nation's treasure: our creativity and innovation. This has been our global legacy and strength, and it will continue to move us forward. To succeed in this environment, our students will need a 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

According to The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, our students need a solid grounding in:

- Core subjects.
- 21<sup>st</sup> century content.
- Learning and thinking skills.
- Information and communications technology literacy.
- Life skills.
- Authentic 21<sup>st</sup> century assessments.

You probably recognize that the skills I just listed are the same goals our *Blueprint for Progress* promotes. The way we will support our students in developing these 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is what our *Blueprint* defines for us.

This is further evidence that Baltimore County Public Schools has been on a real and relevant path – and the *right* path. Our *Blueprint* is proven once again to represent an enduring idea.

The themes of making learning real for our students and pursuing quality in all that we do are woven throughout the *Blueprint*. Making education relevant and getting it right are what we will talk about this morning.

I plan to talk very little about “what” we need to do, however. We already know that. We will talk this morning about how well we do our work.

As Gandhi said, “The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.”

When I examine the gap between what we do and what we are capable of doing in Baltimore County Public Schools, the opportunities for improvement relate to three important concepts: business, bonding, and belief.

With regard to business, we are in the business of preparing our students for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our goal is simple: that our students leave us prepared for success in college, careers, and life. We want them to be employable and promotable.

Are we succeeding in this? Are we providing our students with an education that is relevant? Our credibility comes from a focus on real achievements.

How is Baltimore County Public Schools doing? Here is just some of the recent evidence that we are fulfilling the promise of the *Blueprint*:

- 10 high schools – 40 percent of all Baltimore County Public Schools high schools – were named among the top five percent of high schools in the nation by *Newsweek* magazine for the second year in a row.
- Two of these schools were also recognized as among the nation’s best by *U.S. News & World Report*.
- Our MSA scores have risen steadily for five years with significant gains this year in fifth-grade and seventh-grade reading and with some of our greatest increases among minority and low-income students.
- *Education Week* honored us again this year for having the fourth highest graduation rate among the nation’s largest school systems.
- In its latest report, issued just last month, The Schott Foundation has once again identified us as having the highest graduation rate for African American males among the 50 largest school districts in this nation.
- At the 2008 National AVID/College Board Conference, our school system was recognized as one of the districts that has implemented the program in an exemplary manner.
- AVID, which prepares students for college success, is expanding this school year to four middle schools in addition to the 23 high schools it currently serves.
- We were named one of the “Best 100 Communities for Music Education in America” in 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2008.
- Annually, we receive prestigious recognitions for the quality of our budget book and financial reporting.
- This year we became the first school district ever to receive a second prestigious outstanding leadership award from the International Society for Technology in Education. Congratulations to Thea Jones on receiving this award in 2008.

- We continue to achieve dramatic increases in Advanced Placement and SAT test participation.

Throughout the years, we undertake activities to support and expand this level of success. As recommended by our curriculum management audit – a process that we initiated, we have now refined the alignment of our curriculum. This curriculum defines academic rigor for *all* our students and provides more structure and support for teachers. That was the primary objective: for central office to provide teachers with supportive materials that inform their work.

We are also just beginning a new quality performance initiative aligned with our *Blueprint* that will facilitate and support our progress in doing more effective and efficient work. It is a tool to take our performance, the quality of our work, to the next dimension.

K-12 education cannot continue to operate in a silo as though it is separate from the world. We need to take full advantage of the gains in neurological research that show us how the brain learns and we need to apply that research to the work we do in classrooms every day.

We need to take full advantage of the institutions of higher education and the employers that surround us. It benefits our teaching and learning to work more closely with them. This is not something new for Baltimore County Public Schools. It is something we are doing and need to continue.

Programs like AVID, our College Board Partnership, and the College Gateway Partnership connect to our ongoing efforts to create a college-ready culture.

Through our College Gateway Partnership, eighth-grade students spend a day on a campus of the Community College of Baltimore County. We know that this experience of being “in college” becomes imprinted on their brains. Once these young people have walked into a college classroom, been taught by a college professor, and experienced lunch at the student union, no one can take away from them the image of themselves as future college students.

Internships link academics to the world of work for students in our career and technology education programs.

Elementary and secondary level STEM fairs reinforce our emphasis on innovation through mathematics, science, and technology.

Partnerships with area businesses from Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman to UPS provide students and teachers with access to professionals in various fields and to a multitude of experiences.

The “business” I am talking about here is taking the lead in moving learning to another dimension. Leadership is more than just knowing the variables. Leadership is anticipating the impact of these variables and staying ahead, rather than just reacting.

Exercising leadership means taking ownership of results, focusing on the goals – not the barriers, and being prepared to stand behind our work. We ask our students to put their names on their assignments every day. We need to ask ourselves if we are proud enough to put *our* names on *our* work every day, too.

I often say that being a superintendent is not for the faint of heart. That goes for all of us. Being responsible for the lives of the children who will shape the future is not for the faint of heart. Our will and commitment, and even our beliefs, are tested every day.

We talk in education about achievement gaps, and usually we are talking about the difference between where students perform and where we want them to perform. But the *real* gap is that adults, too often look back, while our students are looking ahead. It is important that we understand how students view *their* academic experiences.

Speaking to a group of educators, a 16-year-old student recently said, “You need to teach us where *we are*, not where *you were*.”

When someone recently asked one of our children if she was a fifth-grade student, her response was, “No. I am a fifth-grade *learner*.”

The message from our young people is clear. This is *their* present and *their* future. They are not simply recipients of knowledge. They are not vessels waiting to be filled. They are active partners in the process of learning how to question, how to research, how to analyze, how to understand, and how to apply their skills. If we want to reach them, we need to know them and to find and use the techniques most effective in engaging them in the learning process.

Through science, especially through brain research, we are learning more about how we learn and therefore how to effectively instruct and engage. For example, according to the George Lucas Education Foundation, “Based on brain research, technology provides opportunities to use such important science of learning principles as pre-existing knowledge, active learning, mental models, transfer, and learning for understanding.”

The book “How People Learn” notes that, because many new technologies are interactive, collaborative, and customizable, “It is now easier to create environments in

which students can learn by doing, receive feedback, and continually refine their understanding and build new knowledge.”

In other words, we learn by doing, and technology offers that opportunity – especially through virtual environments and “serious” games.

Some researchers describe good computer and video games as “learning machines.” The developers of these games face a challenge that schools face now – how to get young people to learn and to master long and difficult material and tasks – and even to enjoy the process.

We need to continually look even further ahead. Earlier this year, we brought together leaders in the video gaming, virtual reality, and simulation industries, along with representatives from Johns Hopkins University, government, and other groups. That meeting was just the beginning of a long-term and powerful collaboration designed to: create pathways to careers for students; and explore the ways we can support and advance instructional environments with virtual learning opportunities.

We are living in amazing times. The Institute of the Future shares information about technology that exists today and that is emerging. A few examples are on the screen behind me.

How will this relate to our classrooms? That is undetermined, but a great deal depends on how willing we are, as educators, to embrace the possibilities, seize the opportunities, and look for teachable moments.

IBM, among others, foresees that we are headed toward what they are calling a “nano-cogno-info-bio-socio” technology convergence. What this means is that, increasingly, we will think of technology as a way to share experiences and not just information.

Technology will become integral to a more holistic approach to education. In other words, life and learning can, should, and will become one. And, in the process:

- Teachers will become “learning agents” – meaning that they are subject-matter experts, learning coaches, network navigators, and cognitive specialists.
- Students will have personalized learning plans and take an active role in reflecting on learning through interactive portfolios, ongoing real-time updates, and collective input.
- The community will become the classroom.

- Students will become creative producers and convene communities of action using personal interactive media.

What I am describing is the new “business” of education, but excelling in education also requires success in bonding – bonding with each other, with our students, and with the community.

I want us to take a look, for a moment, at our organizational chart. It looks like the organizational chart of any other major corporation. We have divisions, departments, and offices organized by discipline, function, and even geography.

Each one of our functions has a carefully considered and essential role in the whole of the organization, but we cannot succeed by remaining in those boxes, columns, and categories.

To succeed, we must collaborate, cooperate, support, and facilitate. In the end, it does not matter who, or which office, gets the credit. It does not matter if the responsibility was specifically listed on a job description. What matters is if we worked together – with the best effort of each individual – to support student learning and achievement. Did we move forward as an organization on behalf of our children? Did those of us in central office provide support to the schools that *felt* like help? Did we provide real and tangible assistance geared toward helping schools get it right? *This* is what matters.

Education is a responsibility we share with the community, and our schools are a reflection of the values of the community. We need to continually expand our efforts to engage the community in education – to show them what we are doing for children and to inspire and encourage them to contribute to the process. A community that invests in its public schools is a community that believes in the future.

Our community’s belief in our capacity is a sacred trust we must not betray. To connect with the business community, we need to demonstrate our desire to understand how business works. Teacher mentorships are one way to do this. We also need to share with these leaders the business side of education by having them shadow principals.

Our school system is fortunate to operate in the midst of great institutions of higher education. Our partnerships with area colleges and universities support our abilities to recruit new teachers, enhance professional development, prepare students for higher education, and benefit from the latest research.

The most important bonding in the educational process, however, is the bond between teacher and student. This is the critical relationship that all of us must work to facilitate.

As I do each year, I want to take a few moments to directly address our teachers. I know that many of you will be watching this address in your schools in the coming weeks. I

want you to know that this room is filled with several hundred administrators whose charge is to support you. We are here for you.

The school system's several thousand teachers are represented here this morning by our current and some of our past Teachers of the Year. First, I would like to ask our 2008-2009 Teacher of the Year, John Billingslea, to stand. Now, will all of the past Teachers of the Year please stand?

Our Teacher of the Year program is one way that we publicly acknowledge the overall quality of our teaching staff and that we elevate the profile of the teaching profession.

This year's Teacher of the Year has expertise in psychology and a strong interest in how brain research can strengthen classroom instruction.

One of his students, Ciarra, writes, "If the teacher of the year is a person who initiates personal relationships with students, introduces out-of-the-ordinary teaching methods, and encourages students to succeed, then Mr. Billingslea is an incredible fit for that honor."

Like so many of you, John encourages his students to excel because he believes in their potential to succeed.

The issue of belief is key to the teacher-student relationship. If teachers do not have a fundamental belief in the potential of every child in front of them, there is nothing a principal can do, nothing central office can do, and nothing I can do to help those teachers improve their performance.

Belief drives our actions. If parents believe that private schools are better than public schools, then that is where they will send their children. If people believe that race and poverty are themselves barriers to success and fulfillment, they will act accordingly. If I believe that something cannot be accomplished, I will not try. Our success depends on us, not external variables. It is within *our* power.

In the classroom, in our offices, and in every aspect of our lives, getting it right begins with believing that it can be done. The strength of our belief becomes the force of our convictions that determines the power of our actions. That is how teams become champions, how workers become leaders, and how *good* school systems become *great* school systems. I know that our success thus far has been driven by the teachers who believe in the potential of *all* of their students.

Right now Michael Phelps – one of our graduates and the son of one of our principals – is the star of the summer Olympics, offering all of us a glimpse of what can be achieved when we believe and when we focus on excellence. In Michael, we are witnessing the combination of innate talent with intense passion, dedication, and hard work.

Each day, we have the opportunity to nurture young people who will set new world records and who will be the leaders and innovators this nation needs. Each day in our classrooms is another opportunity to fulfill the promise of our *Blueprint for Progress*.

I have told all of our principals, members of my cabinet, and I want now to tell all of you: If I did not believe in the fundamental potential of all of you – that you can be effective, and that with your support, our children can succeed – I could not stand here today and pledge my support to you as your superintendent.

Now let us look at our priorities for the school year:

In **Student Achievement**, our goal remains the same: to engage all students in highly rigorous learning and to ensure their success.

To enhance **Organization Management**, all schools and offices should model effective and efficient use of all resources – time, money, and human capital.

With regard to **Human Resources Management**, the employees of Baltimore County Public Schools are its most important resource. All of us need to develop and nurture the talent and leadership potential of our staff.

As I said last year, **Communications and Community Relations** are responsibilities we all share. We need to be certain that the quality of our work and how we present ourselves and our work reflects the overall quality of our students and our organization.

In the area of **Leadership and Organizational Culture**, we all contribute to setting the tone and establishing the work culture of this organization.

To address **Professionalism and Ethics**, we need to model ethical behavior and moral leadership.

Our priorities for this upcoming school year are similar to those from last year and the past several years. The reason for this is simple – we are following our *Blueprint for Progress* – a fundamental document that supports our stability and focus.

Being stable is not at all the same as being static. Our *Blueprint* and our solid structures and systems are a launching pad from which we can practice the science and artistry of helping our students learn.

Again, I remind you that this year, as in past years, we already know *what* to do. Our success will be determined by *how well* we do it. I submit to you that we need to prepare our students for 21<sup>st</sup> century success by taking full advantage of three main opportunities:

- By engaging in the **business** of education with integrity, creativity, data-driven decision-making, teamwork, and responsibility, and by demonstrating that the business of education today must be focused on the future – a world of no boundaries and no limits;
- By **bonding** with each other, our students, their families, and our community stakeholders in a way that links our actions today with their success tomorrow; and
- Primarily... by **believing** that it can be done.

Because, for the future of our students, our community, and our world – it *must* be done.

Thank you.