

Annual Address

Administrative & Supervisory Meeting 2006
Baltimore County Public Schools

“Nostra Aetate: In Our Time”

Dr. Joe A. Hairston, Superintendent
Loch Raven High School – Friday, August 18, 2006

Good morning and welcome to the 2006-2007 school year. I hope that you had some time this summer to reflect and recharge.

One of the points from the video we just watched is how quickly time passes. That thought relates to the theme I will discuss this morning, *Nostra Aetate*, which is Latin for “in our time.”

Nostra Aetate is also the name of a historical document about the need for people of all faiths to respect each other. To me, it is a reminder of the need for all of us to reach out to each other and work together. I find it particularly meaningful because our work in education is about respecting and embracing our diverse students and colleagues to do what we need to do, on our watch, in our time.

For the last several months almost all of us in this room have spent our time involved in the Principals Academy, the New Teacher Induction, the summer curriculum workshops, the Elementary Summer Science Institute, the Fine Arts Academy, the Curriculum and Instruction and Business Services Retreat, and the retreat for my executive staff. We all know that getting ready for a new school year begins long before the last school year ends.

I also want to welcome those administrators and supervisors who are new to Baltimore County Public Schools. We look forward to benefiting from your experiences and ideas.

This is the start of my seventh school year as Superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools. I want to thank the Board of Education, all of you, and the community at large for support in reaching this milestone. In a school district this large, the 24th largest in the nation – with 107,000 students and 17,000 employees, it is rare for an administration to have this much stability. But the length of this administration has allowed us to see initiatives through and build on our successes.

Getting back to the idea of preparing for a new school year, last spring I asked principals and administrators to read the book *Future Shock*. Originally published in 1970, Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* includes some accurate predictions about life in the 21st century. In our time, we have seen many of the things come to pass that Toffler predicted. Some far beyond what he could have imagined.

Toffler suggests that we can prepare for and shape change, if we can envision it.

So my question for all of us is: do we have the spirit to imagine and shape the future?

Usually I begin these talks by looking back, by offering plenty of context, reviewing what this school system is, the seismic shifts in the community we serve, the progress we have made. This morning I will not do that because you already know the context and because we need to look forward now, not back. History is just a reference point.

What I will talk about this morning is the urgency of this moment, the need for us to take action in our time. The message we need to pass on to our students right now – in our time, in this time – is that any one of them can do anything. That is the message that we need to incorporate into our thinking and our actions.

Public education is as much about belief as it is about knowledge and data. One of the problems in education is that sometimes we have more nonbelievers than believers. We say that all children can learn. But does every one of us truly believe that? If you do not believe, you will not try. If you do not believe you can teach *certain* children, you will not. If you do not believe the curriculum will be effective, you will not put effort into its implementation.

We may say that we want to reform and enhance the educational system, but then we get bogged down in talking about it. We debate why this possible change will not work. We even argue for continuing to do things the way we always have. But we must move forward.

Just as *Future Shock* challenged us 36 years ago, a new book, *Sixteen Trends* by Gary Marx, also urges us to be future-oriented and ready to change. Aligned with what I have always said, Marx notes that, “We have a choice. We can simply defend what we have or we can create what we need.”

I believe that those who look ahead, who believe in possibilities, find a way to get the work done. And the work that must get done now is educating every child.

People moan and groan about *No Child Left Behind*, but this law is in place because our country never before attempted to educate ALL children. When our society was primarily agrarian, education was only for the privileged. When our economy became more industrial, public education became a useful means for socialization. It is only in our time that we have taken on the challenge of preparing ALL students for success in college, careers, and life.

The law alone, however, is not going to change our educational system. As we have seen throughout history, laws are only effective when they coincide with the will of the people. For example, Brown versus the Board of Education desegregated our schools in 1954, but it took decades for the nation as a whole to accept that separate but equal is not equal. Some might say that we are still struggling with this.

None of us can exactly predict, in our time, what the future will be like, but the past 30 years do give us some indication that it will be global, technological, and fast-paced. And we do know that our students need stronger math, science, and communications skills than ever before. You cannot use yesterday's skills to succeed tomorrow.

Our students will need to possess a spirit of possibility to help them recognize and leverage all the opportunities ahead to help them become innovators and creators.

In *Future Shock*, Toffler suggests that educators must focus on increasing students' ability to quickly and effectively accommodate change. He also writes that students, teachers, and administrators must learn to make increasingly long-range assumptions about the future. Assumptions about the future will help us determine the skills and knowledge that will be needed for success.

Sixteen Trends describes the following:

- “Social and intellectual capital will become economic drivers, intensifying competition for well-educated people.”
- “Technology will increase the speed of communication and the pace of advancement or decline.”
- “Standards and high-stakes tests will fuel a demand for personalization in an education system increasingly committed to lifelong human development.”
- “Release of human ingenuity will become a primary responsibility of education and
- “International learning, including diplomatic skills, will become basic as nations vie for understanding and respect in an interdependent world.”
- “Pressure will grow for society to prepare people for jobs and careers that may not currently exist.”
- “Competition will increase to attract and keep qualified educators.”

As you can tell from this list, the future is already here, and we must be prepared.

You should also see direct connections between this list and the work that we have been engaged in for the past several years. We are looking ahead:

- Expanding opportunities in mathematics, science, and technology education.
- Increasing access for all students to rigorous courses and meaningful enrichment activities.
- Establishing vital international relationships with China, the United Kingdom, Israel, Switzerland, and Germany.
- Intensifying our efforts to attract and retain qualified educators.
- Using AVID and relevant curriculum to encourage our students to expand their vision of the future and of their place in that future.

Our students who graduated a few months ago are not only competing with each other or with students from Baltimore City, Montgomery County, or Kansas. They are also competing with young people around the world who are excelling in math and science

and who may live in nations where wages are considerably lower, even though they are producing work of the same or higher quality.

That was the point of the book *The World is Flat*, by Tom Friedman, that we discussed many times last year. Technology, the economy, politics, and shared cultures have made geographical boundaries meaningless. We cannot afford as a nation to overlook the potential contributions or productivity of any one.

I am not the only one trumpeting this message. Over the last year, I have brought in esteemed leaders from business and academia who have echoed these same messages.

[Video clips of several leaders]

It is on our watch to prepare the young people who will preserve world peace, who will save the environment, and who will fuel the economy. It is on our watch to prepare the young people who will cure cancer, heart disease, and AIDS and who will stop the cycle of poverty. It is on our watch to prepare the young people who will solve all the problems we have not yet solved.

Our foundation for this work is our *Blueprint for Progress*. It is our uncompromising value statement of what we want for our children in Baltimore County. And yet it is really nothing more than what any responsible parent would want for his or her child.

The challenge is in getting everyone to believe that it is just this clear and just this simple. The quality of our work will be embedded in its simplicity.

After all our county and our students and schools are impacted by a wide range of variables that are beyond our control. Everyone has seen my variables chart. It was born out of a policy governance course at Virginia Tech. I drew this one day during an energetic seminar debate. These are the factors, large and small, that impact the lives of our students and their families and that impact what goes on in our schools every day.

As mentioned in *Sixteen Trends*, "all organizations, especially education systems are of this world not separate from it."

The big question is not what the variables are. The essential question is simply how do we respond to the variables in our time. How do we respond to each student's unique personality and needs and learning style? How do we respond to all students?

In the words of Ron Edmonds, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

My response is that the education of **all** children must be important to us.

In addition to lack of belief in the simplicity of our goal, one of our challenges is complacency. This is a strong school system that over the past several years has consistently moved forward, even against the odds and so-called “conventional wisdom.”

We have more students taking AP and SAT exams than ever before in our history, and our scores are remaining strong.

According to the *Newsweek/Washington Post* lists, 30%, almost one third of our high schools are ranked among the top 1,138 high schools in the nation.

According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education, we have a higher percentage of African American male students graduating than any other large school district in the nation.

But good is not good enough, and having some, or even most, students excel is not enough. This past year, some may have seen our district scores on the English II high school assessment as a “red flag” that fueled a sense of urgency. But, I submit to you, that it is an urgency we should have been feeling all along -- not panic, never panic, but urgency.

Each time we advance students to the next grade when they are not on grade level must be a red flag. AVID classes that are not full must be a red flag. Tenth graders opting out of taking the SAT because they were not exposed to adequate course preparation -- that must be a red flag. The gap between the written curriculum and how many students are learning as a result of its delivery must be a red flag.

The urgency is that our students will be expected to know more and therefore that we must find ways to challenge and teach them more.

Right now about 60% of our students are doing well and that is enough to make this a successful school system. But it is not enough, if you believe, as I believe, that we must educate all children. What we must do now is focus on that 40%.

At this point in my remarks, I would like to directly address our teachers. I know that many of you watch this speech on tape in your schools or on The Education Channel.

First, I want to commend you for doing work that is essential for this community and nation. You are the backbone of everything that goes on in our school system. All of the rest of us are here to support you and your principals. Part of this support is to provide you with the tools to assimilate available data into an accurate snapshot of each student and each classroom. The idea is not to make teaching more complicated but to make teaching more effective.

At its core, successful teaching is what it has always been a process of connecting with students, engaging them in learning, monitoring their progress, and making adjustments based on each student’s success and challenges.

This work is more critical than ever before! As Alvin Toffler wrote in *Future Shock*, “The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

Beyond transmitting knowledge to students, when we talk about inspiring our students with the spirit of possibility, we are talking, most of all, about the teacher-student relationship. We are talking about all the ways that you can convey to your students your belief in their abilities and their potential.

I said this last year, and it bears repeating, we need to celebrate our youth. Everything about our interactions with them is important – the way we smile, our conversations *with* them, and our conversations *about* them.

We must embrace every child in Baltimore County Public Schools as our child. It is the right thing to do, and sometimes maybe it is not an easy thing to do. Children are not perfect. But neither are we, and neither is the world. But you cannot just choose to accept the perfect parts when you accept an individual; you have to accept all of him or her.

It is my pleasure this morning to take just a second to recognize some of the teachers who exemplify the best in teaching, who clearly understand the importance of teaching the subject matter and the student.

I would like to ask our 2006-2007 Teacher of the Year, Michelle Dressel, to stand.

Now will the past Teachers of the Year who were able to join us also stand.

Thank you.

All of us need to understand that our children are looking ahead and are connected to the future. They **are** our future. We need to connect to the future through them, with them, and for them.

I had the honor this past year of meeting monthly with the Superintendent’s Student Advisory Group. I never failed to be impressed by the wisdom, energy, and optimism of the members of that student group.

I want to offer this challenge: all of us must find or create more opportunities to connect to our students. We need to take the time to hear their concerns, interests, and needs.

We have a tremendous responsibility to educate the next generation, but it is also a tremendous honor and privilege. The students in our classrooms are smart, eager to learn, and eager to share their knowledge.

Let us take a look at some of the exciting work they are doing and plans they have for their future:

[Cut to video clips of various students engaged in work and talking about their future plans...]

Every day, all of us, must keep our students foremost on our minds. It is too easy in education to become encased in the four walls of the classroom. It is too easy to operate within the insular reality of the school building. But to be truly effective we must be connected to our students and their world – present and future.

We must ask ourselves: what else must we do, in our time, to prepare them for their time?

With an eye toward that future, I would like to present my priorities for the 2006-2007 school year:

[Student Achievement]

The emphasis for student achievement, as you will see on the slide, is on one word – “all”:

- Demonstrating high performance at all schools.
- Preparing all students for success, getting all of them ready for college and the opportunities ahead.
- Increasing access for all students through enrichment activities that extend learning beyond the school day and beyond the school house.
- Using tools, like AVID and the PSAT, to encourage all students to take on more

[Resource Management]

In resource management, we will continue to secure funding and undertake activities to ensure that our schools are clean, safe, and conducive for learning.

[Human Resources]

Concerning human resources, we continue to implement a comprehensive and aggressive plan to recruit and retain highly qualified staff.

Each of you is a part of this plan by doing your part to put the right people in the right positions to ensure that our students learn.

[Communications and Marketing]

In the area of communications and marketing, we are accelerating our efforts to share with the public all the good news about our school system.

[Fiscal Management]

Through sound fiscal management, we will continue to model the effective and efficient use of resources.

[Information Technology]

To remain a leader in information technology, we must continually upgrade our knowledge and use of technology.

[Other]

My final two priorities contain larger, overarching themes. The first is about the importance of our alignment as a staff. We must focus on how we can work together on behalf of student achievement. And finally, my last priority is about identifying and actively nurturing future leaders for assistant principal, principal, and central office administrative positions.

In closing, I want to end where it all begins – with our students. The message for this morning has been the urgency of instilling a spirit of possibility in our students and all of us who serve them.

My final point to you is that, more than ever, *our* time is actually *their* time. We may be in our schools and offices for decades to come, but our students have *this* time, years that are speeding past, to prepare for the rest of *their* lives.

We cannot wait to strengthen instruction.

We cannot wait to increase academic rigor.

We cannot wait to challenge our students to dream bigger and reach higher.

To paraphrase my third grade teacher, Mrs. Woodard: “Ladies and gentlemen we can do this!”

Ladies and gentlemen, the opportunity is here, the responsibility is ours...our time is now.