

## Annual Address

Administrative & Supervisory Meeting 2007  
Baltimore County Public Schools

# *“One Message, One Mission: Common Sense Leadership”*

*Dr. Joe A. Hairston, Superintendent*  
Loch Raven High School – Friday, August 17, 2007

Good morning, and thank you for being here. Each year at this meeting, we join together as a team to focus on quality and excellence.

I would like to thank our Board of Education President JoAnn Murphy for her words of encouragement. Your leadership is invaluable to this school system. Thank you also to our community stakeholders for your advocacy and support.

I would like to start this morning by doing something different. To begin, will those who have been administrators in the school system since the year 2000 please stand and remain standing? This is the year I joined the school system and made my first presentation at this meeting. I want to thank each of you for your enduring contributions to the quality of this school system. You are our foundation, our anchor.

Now, will those of you who joined us for the first time in 2001, please stand?

Will those who joined us for the first time five years ago, in 2002, please stand?

Will those who were new in 2003 please stand?

And – I think you all know how this works now – will those of you who joined us for the first time three years ago, in the year 2004, please stand?

Administrators who joined us for the first time two years ago, in 2005, it is your turn.

We are almost up to the present. Will those of you who came to your first A&S meeting last year please stand?

At today’s meeting, we are joined by 100 new administrators. Please stand and be recognized. You are joining a dedicated, capable, and successful team. We look forward to benefiting from the expertise you bring.

And now, if you would all please remain standing for just one more minute.

These meetings, these years, are all linked. Whether we talked about seismic shifts or taking leadership to a new level, we have focused essentially on one message. At each of

these meetings, we have talked about our mission to ensure that *every* child will succeed to his or her highest potential.

The second thing these meetings have shared is the recognition that all of us have accepted the responsibility to prepare our students for the future. Our students will succeed as a result of our belief in them and our behavior toward them.

As I look at all of you, I discern a shared level of distinction. You are the brain trust. You are the knowledge workers. Our children cannot succeed without you and without the nearly 17,000 individuals under our direction. This is the team that must deliver results.

Now you can be seated.

I wanted to do this today, in part, to remind all of us that we *are* a team. Our bonding as a team is a powerful force. When we support and challenge each other, when we mentor and celebrate each other, our team is stronger, and our work is much more effective.

We achieve and will continue to achieve when every person in this organization understands his or her role and responsibilities and *takes ownership* of the opportunity to lead.

Leadership is not learned from books. It is developed through experience and through a commitment to achieving results. As leaders, this is a time for us to geographically and philosophically come together.

Another element these meetings have in common is that we review our successes. Here are just a few of our recent achievements:

- Ten high schools – 40% of all Baltimore County high schools – are ranked among the top 5% in the nation, according to *Newsweek*.
- Baltimore County Public Schools has the fourth highest graduation rate, according to *Education Week*.
- Baltimore County Public Schools has the highest graduation rate for African American males, according to the Schott Foundation for Public Education.
- As student participation in Advanced Placement and student participation in SAT exams have increased dramatically, scores have remained strong.
- We were named one of the "Best 100 Communities for Music Education in America" for 2004, 2006, and 2007.
- We are a school system honored nationally and internationally for our use of technology and for the quality of our arts education.

- We have also been recognized for our vision in integrating science technology, engineering, and mathematics instruction, and for the success of our AVID program.
- Local media has noted that we are the only school system in the area that has an advisory board of students meeting monthly with the Superintendent and that we are the only school system in the area to create a scholarship program to encourage our students to become teachers.

People are watching us locally, nationally, and internationally. They are wondering how we continue to excel, especially in light of the external variables that are beyond our control. We do not control politics. We do not control the economy. We do not control social issues. We do not control state and federal laws. We do not control state and federal budgets. We do not control the health care system or law enforcement, and we do not control the judicial system. But we are expected to *manage* the impact of these variables on our schools.

Non-believers assume that the variables are barriers to our success, but I submit to you that this assumption is a pitfall – a trap – that can cloud our focus and overcomplicate our work.

*The quality of our work has been and will continue to be in its simplicity.*

Our message and our mission are simple and *simply make sense*: we know that all students can learn, and we are committed to teaching all children.

We achieve by being:

- Consistent with our mission
- Consistent with our focus
- Consistent with our values
- Consistent in behavior and expectations
- Consistent in the leadership we model throughout the school system

This consistency creates stability. It creates sustainability. What we need to do now is to be consistent to a higher degree of quality, and we can do this by applying more common sense and practicality to our work.

Let's be specific about this. We know that jobs in the future will demand higher skill levels, especially in math and science. Our common sense approach is to increase academic rigor for all students, to prepare all students for college, and to eliminate low-level courses.

Our common sense leads us to develop engaging work that will stimulate student interest in math and science and develop their creativity to analyze and innovate. Our common sense leads us to take advantage of the skills students gain from their participation in the arts.

We know that the future is all about a global economy and a global culture. Our common sense response is to embrace the diversity of our students and to recognize it as a strength and to develop and enrich our international partnerships.

We know that we are educating our students for the future in school systems based on outdated concepts. In his book *The Death of Common Sense in Our Schools*, Jim Grant writes that the basic time-bound structure of American education, for example, the school schedule and the grade divisions, has remained virtually unchanged since it was imported from Prussia in 1843. As common sense leaders, we must look for ways to modify this structure to meet the needs of our students. We will use differentiation in our instruction, as *The Death of Common Sense* urges us to do, to accommodate student diversity.

We know that accountability in public education is a reality and will continue to grow in significance. Common sense demands that we therefore work to ensure that the quality of instruction, the effectiveness of how we teach, be fully aligned with the written curriculum, and that the written curriculum be fully aligned with what will be assessed.

We know, and I have often said, that public education is driven by beliefs and values. Common sense demands that our work must be effective both for our students and the public. Our work must instill confidence in the public so that they will continue to support our schools.

Common sense leadership must drive us to minimize problems and maximize results. Common sense tells us to commit our attention and resources to strategic areas that will yield the greatest results.

The common sense and practicality that we model in our own work will influence our students to conduct their affairs in a similar manner.

The foundation for common sense leadership in our school system is our *Blueprint for Progress*. It describes the type of education that any responsible parent would want for his or her child. It reflects our shared vision, beliefs, goals, and strategies for excellence.

The concepts that we see today in the *Blueprint* have been around at least since the 1980s, when I was a young principal and the work that we were doing in our school caught the attention of then-President Ronald Reagan.

In fact, you will see echoes of the *Blueprint*, starting with the Charlottesville Educational Summit under President George H.W. Bush that produced the National Education Goals, then in President Bill Clinton's America 2000, and in *No Child Left Behind* under President George W. Bush, which is now scheduled for reauthorization.

Politics aside, the common sense concepts embedded in the bipartisan national effort to improve public education come down to one enduring idea: that we must improve academic achievement for *all* children using data-driven decision-making, legitimate, verifiable results, and planned indicators of progress.

Because of the *Blueprint*, we were far in front of *No Child Left Behind* even before the legislation became law.

Every year at this meeting, I talk about why our work is so important and why we need to continuously improve. As many of you know, I traveled to China this summer to meet with the Vice Minister of Education Zhang Boqing and learn more about the system there.

We are living in times when we are no longer separated by geographic, political, or language barriers. What happens in China, in Greece, in India, or in Nigeria impacts us in Baltimore County, and vice versa.

Throughout my trip, I witnessed the many ways that American industry is a part of daily life in China, including manufacturers and service providers based here in the Baltimore region. I could give you countless evidence of this, but here is a very small and concrete example.

When I was leaving China, I walked by an airport snack bar and noticed that the condiments being offered were made by American companies, including our own right up the road in Hunt Valley, McCormick Spice Company.

This was a perfect example for me as I was about to return to America about how much our lives are now intertwined. We are living in exponential times, with technology changing perhaps faster than ever. And where the very technology that has brought us together also threatens to leave us behind.

According to former Secretary of Education Richard Riley, the top ten in-demand jobs in 2010 will be jobs that did not exist in 2004. As he has said, “We are currently preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies that have not been invented, in order to solve problems we do not even know are problems yet.”

Earlier, we reviewed some of our achievements. But, as a matter of practicality, we are too wise to become complacent. We realize that to provide our students with what they need, we must continually improve and advance.

Setting priorities is essential. I would like to share with you our priorities for the 2007-2008 school year:

### **Student Achievement**

Regarding student achievement, noted educator Ron Edmonds once said, “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.”

What our *Blueprint* reinforces is that, in Baltimore County, the schooling of *all* children is of interest to us. This year, we must accelerate our efforts to provide each student with the quality of instruction and support he or she needs, and we must improve our ability to use data and tools like *assessTrax* to more quickly evaluate student progress and adjust instruction as needed.

### **Resource Management**

We must continue to work aggressively with fiscal authorities to secure funding so that all students will be educated in school environments that are safe and conducive to 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**

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 and to improve the quality of writing systemwide.

This is not the responsibility of one office in our school system. It is our shared responsibility. We need all 17,000 employees to be ambassadors for our school system and the work that we do. How we communicate with the public brands us, defines who we are.

Remember that 68% of the households in Baltimore County do not include children under the age of 18. But our success is important to this 68%. It determines the overall health of their communities.

The community has expressed great trust in us. We need to be sure, through the quality of our work and the quality of our communications about our work, that we do not betray their trust.

### **Fiscal Management**

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

### **Technology**

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

### **Other**

Finally, my last priority is about identifying and nurturing future leaders for assistant principal, principal, and central office administrative positions.

The focus of this year's priorities is to direct all our energy and resources toward supporting teachers and principals in the essential work of this school system.

We are honored to count 8,000 teachers among our 17,000 employees, and I would like to take a few minutes to directly address our teachers. First, I would like to ask our Teacher of the Year, Robin August, to stand. Now, will the past Teachers of the Year please stand?

I know that you, all of our teachers, are in your classrooms because of your dedication to influencing the next generation of leaders, innovators, and citizens. I know that, for you, teaching is more than a job; it is a tremendous responsibility you have accepted.

Your connection to students is at the heart of the educational process and the heart of this school system. It is essential that you continually engage your students, that you look for ways to increase their understanding and knowledge *and* to create the conditions for them to innovate and solve problems.

This must be done regardless of other factors – regardless of neighborhoods, incomes, family structures, or race. As long as they are under our care, they are *our* children. Let them know that they are a part of us and that we want the best for them.

As a teacher, you can demonstrate your high expectations for your students in countless ways – from more challenging assignments, to using your creativity in adapting the pace of your instructional delivery, to personal communications with students and their parents about their capacity to do more.

Now, I would like to return once again to the *Blueprint for Progress*. Take a moment. Open the book, and read the first thing you see. Now ask yourself, “Considering *my* role and responsibilities, what do I have to do, what behavior do I need to exhibit, what decisions do I need to make to achieve the quality of education described here?”

This is what I call unpacking the *Blueprint*. By unpacking the *Blueprint*, by making it a part of how we operate on a daily basis, we will harness the true power of this school system.

The *Blueprint* allows all 17,000 of us to literally start from the same page, focusing on the same clear standards and objectives.

I have said many times that the *Blueprint for Progress* is not a prescription. Its purpose is not to tell you what to do or how to get it done. The *Blueprint* is meant in the best way to

guide us, to cause us to think and reflect about what we are doing, and then to make decisions and take action to achieve results.

With the *Blueprint* as our guide and common sense as our approach, we can be *more* effective in educating students and raising student achievement. The power of us working together with one message and one mission will continue to propel this school system forward.

Throughout *The Death of Common Sense in Our Schools*, the author asks, “If not you, then who?” and he repeats a Native American saying, “*We are the ones we have been waiting for.*”

I would like for all of us this morning to leave here feeling *that* empowered to know that we – with *our* education, *our* experience, *our* skills, *our* commitment, and *our common sense* – are winners, are leaders, are the team that can move this school system forward.

Now take another moment, and look at the cover of the *Blueprint*. The words on its cover are the words printed virtually on every document we produce: *Focused on Quality, Committed to Excellence*. We stress these ideals because they have worked and will work in the future.

Our success is as simple as this. *This* is the purpose we need to demonstrate.

I’d like to ask some of our students to join me on stage now. *They* are the reason we are here. *They* are our purpose. For these and our other 105,000 students, *whatever* your responsibilities and function in this school system, you need to:

*Focus your effort on quality,*

*Commit your head to excellence, and*

*Dedicate your heart to all that is best for our students.*

Thank you.