

State of Our Schools
Oct. 29, 2010

Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the annual State of Our Schools event. Students come first at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, so I will begin today by thanking the talented students who performed for us this morning. The Northwest School of the Arts Jazz Combo and Percussion Ensemble, who played for us before the program started. The students from the Military and Global Leadership Academy at Marie G. Davis who presented the colors. The Northwest School of the Arts Chamber Singers, who did such a great job with our national anthem. And the Northwest students who helped you get your coffee and refreshments and find your seats this morning!

I'd like to recognize some other folks, too. The members of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education with us today are Eric Davis, the District 5 representative and the board chair, who spoke to you a few moments ago; Tom Tate, the vice chair who also represents District 4; at-large members Joe White, Trent Merchant and Kaye McGarry; Rhonda Lennon of District 1, Richard McElrath of District 2, Joyce Waddell of District 3 and Tim Morgan of District 6. Thank you all for being here today for this event.

This is the fifth year that I have spoken to you about the overall state of our schools. I am very pleased to say that 2010 has been the strongest academic year for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools since I arrived in 2006. We also face some of the largest challenges we've seen in a long time and I will talk about those too.

Some brief historical context for our academic progress last year: We began a program of reforms in 2006 with our first strategic plan. We continued and refined those reforms with the Strategic Plan 2014 that we launched last year, called *Teaching Our Way to the Top*.

After four years, the signs are everywhere in our district now: Those reforms are gaining traction. We're seeing results – results that we can measure and quantify. CMS is making broad, significant improvement as a district.

We see improvement by our students. We see improvement by our schools. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is making real, measurable progress – progress that we can see and that others are seeing as well.

Some proof points of our progress: Last year, student achievement grew in 25 of 25 areas. That was better than the year before, when achievement increased in 24 of 25 areas. Last year, our achievement increased in every single tested area.

The breadth of our progress was substantial. We raised the bar and narrowed the gaps: Proficiency rates increased. So did the number of schools that averaged at least one year's growth – 94.7 percent. Nearly all, of our schools made at least one year's growth last year! In 2009, that number was 89.6 percent. In 2006, it was 54.3. That's significant, measurable progress and we're very proud of it.

The state of North Carolina measures school progress against a yardstick called expected growth and high growth. Expected growth means students in a school make the progress we expect from them in a year's time, based on earlier years. High growth means a majority of the students in a school made at least a year's growth.

More than expected growth is important for our schools, because it's the path to closing the achievement gaps that we see between different populations of students. More than expected growth by a group of students who are trailing their peers is needed for them to catch up. Because they're chasing a moving target – as the trailing students are learning, so are the ones in front. So the trailing students need to learn more and learn faster to catch up with their classmates.

But we are pleased with the number of CMS schools making more than a year's growth. It has increased dramatically in four years. In 2010, 108 of the 169 schools eligible for ABC status made high growth – up from 16 – that's right, sixteen – schools in 2006, and 80 in 2009. With 94.7 percent of our schools making expected or high growth, we can see that CMS is exceeding the state's expectations for schools.

We have made strides in specific academic areas as well. Math proficiency in grades three through eight has grown to almost 75 percent for 2010, up from 64.3 percent four years ago.

Reading proficiency in grades three through eight has grown to 61.5 percent, up from 55.2 percent two years ago.

Proficiency in science has increased to 59.6 percent this year, up from 43.1 percent two years ago.

For our high school students, there is good news too. Performance improved on the End-of-Course tests, which measure student proficiency in secondary-level subjects such as biology, algebra and history. The performance composite – the average for all tests given – has increased to 79.1 percent, up from 66.2 percent four years ago.

While we're gaining proficiency, we're also narrowing some gaps in achievement between subgroups of students. The gap between African-American and white students closed by nine points in math between 2005-2006 and 2009-2010. The gap went from 39 points to 30 in grades three through eight. It also closed by nine points for economically disadvantaged students – the gap went from 34 points to 25 points.

We are not doing as well in closing gaps in reading for grades three through eight. The gap between black and white students closed by three points from 2007-2008 and 2009-2010. For economically disadvantaged students, the gap closed by only two points.

The gaps for high school students are closing but not fast enough.

In Algebra I, we've closed the gap between African-Americans and whites by 11 points in the three school years between 2006-2007 and 2009-2010, from 35 to 24 points. For Hispanic students, it's 12 points, from 27 to 15, and for economically disadvantaged students, it's six points, from 24 to 18.

In English I for the same period, the gap between African-American and white students closed 10 points – from 32 to 22, 14 points – from 36 to 22 – for Hispanics and nine points for economically disadvantaged students – 29 to 20.

We all are aware that Algebra I and English I are the gateways to high school graduation – that these courses are important because if our students pass them, they are more likely to graduate.

Our graduation rate has improved, rising to 69.9 percent in 2010, up from 66.4 percent last year. I should mention here that the rate is not the only thing that's improved – we have greater confidence in our graduation-rate numbers because we have improved our recordkeeping in this area over the past four years.

Let's look at a visual representation of that number, because it's such an important one. Suppose the children you see here are the class of 2020 – here they are in 2010, all of them with bright, hopeful faces!

If we take out the students who won't graduate – the 30 percent who will not make it all through high school – our class of 2020 looks a lot smaller.

We don't want to lose those students! We want everybody to graduate. And we are seeing signs of improvement in our graduation rate and also in how our students prepare for life after high school.

More than half – 51 percent – of students in CMS high schools who took the tests had a passing or higher score on the Advanced Placement exams. That’s nine percent more than four years ago. And we are making this progress the right way – we are increasing access to the tests while also raising our scores. In 2009-2010, 13,362 AP exams were given in CMS, up from 12,903 in 2005-2006. Advanced Placement courses are college-level work given in high school to help students get ready for post-secondary education. We’ve got more students taking the tests and earning higher scores.

We’ve seen improvement in our SAT scores, too. The CMS average scores trailed the state average by 12 points just four years ago. In 2010, CMS students led the state by 12 points. We had a 29-point increase. And, like our Advanced Placement scores, we’re making progress the right way. Two thirds – 66 percent – of CMS students take the SAT, compared to only 63 percent statewide. More students, more achievement on our SAT scores.

This progress is noteworthy for several reasons. First, we are moving in the right direction. Our reforms are showing results. Our students are achieving at higher rates – they’re learning more and learning faster. Not all of our students are doing this – not yet. But we’re moving the right way.

These accomplishments also took place in a time of uncertainty for our teachers, students and staff – and the uncertainty is far from over. The financial downturn has hit Mecklenburg County and Charlotte hard. A weak housing and real estate market, struggles at banks and financial institutions including layoffs – these things helped create a slowdown in our local economy that is severe and that is still happening now.

State and local tax revenues declined as a result, and those are the two main funding sources for CMS. As a result, we’ve had to cut or redirect almost \$150 million in our operating budget over the past two years. We’ve cut or redirected more than \$240 million since 2007. That’s a lot. We tried to minimize the impact to the classroom as much as we could by making changes in other areas – transportation, maintenance, facilities, central office. But we had to make a reduction in force two years in a row in order to stay within our budget.

So these changes were felt in our schools, which had fewer teachers in some cases, fewer custodians, fewer media specialists, counselors, teachers’ aides. Those cuts were felt, no question about it. We also have fewer district staff. Our communications staff, which put this great event together today, has been reduced. Our top staff has been reduced from 16 to 11. These cuts have been felt across the district.

Less money, fewer staff, a climate of anxiety in general – and that brings us to this year. Our Board is conducting a comprehensive review of CMS, and as all of you know, we are looking at closing some schools as an option. We must find more ways to reduce our operating expenses next year, because we expect to have to make more cuts – anywhere from \$50 million to \$100 million.

We won't know how much for a while, but we know it's coming – and we're trying to plan for it now. In more than a decade as a school superintendent, I have never faced a budget challenge like the one in front of CMS today. I am very concerned about next year's budget and how much funding we will receive. We are likely to have to make very large cuts for a third year in a row, and these cuts will be the hardest we've had to make.

Where will we make these cuts? We've already cut transportation, operating expenses, programs and staff. We've cut teachers. We've increased class sizes to save money. We have cut in every area of our operations. Now we must cut more – and making those decisions is going to be very hard.

If you've turned on your television or read the newspaper in the last month, you know that our Board is considering options for closing or consolidating schools. Nobody wants to do this and nobody wants their school closed or consolidated. Emotions are running high and there is a lot of anger and fear.

The hard truth is this: There are no easy cuts, no easy answers left. We're going to have to do some things we don't want to do. So we must find a way to talk to each other and to listen to each other on these issues. I hope that we can find a way to talk and to listen, so that we can reach agreement on a course that will minimize the hardship for our students and our schools.

Our financial future is uncertain at best. But what's happening at CMS isn't all discouraging. Despite a backdrop of anxiety, uncertainty and budget cuts – CMS has continued to improve. I want to emphasize how important that is. Our teachers, our principals, our administrative staff, our families and our students all stayed focused on what is the most important goal: academic achievement.

Will we be able to continue to make progress? I don't know. The cuts we expect to make this year are so severe that they could put our reforms – the changes we're making to improve academic performance – in jeopardy. We will try to protect this work, which is helping move our district forward. But with cuts as large as these, I am very concerned that we won't be able to continue the work that has helped to raise student achievement.

Let me give you an example of the kind of budget cuts and financial uncertainty we face. The city of Charlotte notified us earlier this year that it change the arrangement we've had with the city for school resource officers for CMS. That will increase our annual expense for these services by about a million dollars at a time when our resources are shrinking. We're feeling budget pressure in a variety of ways, not just reduced funding.

It's a tough financial time. I'm very proud of the work we've done in such a difficult environment. We're going to continue our great work, whatever the economy throws our way, because all of us are committed to educating our students well.

I said a few minutes ago that our progress was both measurable and visible to us and to others. Let me give you a few examples of the others - those outside Mecklenburg County - who have been taking note of our progress.

We were a finalist this year for the Broad Prize, the largest prize given in urban education. One hundred districts are eligible for this prize each year, and we placed in the top five because of the academic progress we made from 2006 to 2009. That's right, it didn't include the 2010 results - they will get counted for next year's prize. (And we have high hopes for next year!)

We didn't win the top prize this year, which was \$1 million in scholarships. But we won \$250,000 in scholarships for the class of 2011. That's a great consolation prize, I must say - and our 2011 graduates will benefit from a quarter-million dollars in scholarship money - money that will make it possible for some of our students to attend college.

At the presentation ceremony in New York, a young woman who had graduated from high school in New York the year it won the Broad Prize spoke to us about how the scholarship money had changed her life. She will graduate in 2011 from the University of Vermont and is planning to attend graduate school. She said that she was the first person in her family to attend college, and that without the Broad scholarship, none of it would have been possible. Scholarship money changes lives for the better, and CMS will have a quarter of a million dollars available for the class of 2011, thanks to the farsighted philanthropy of Eli and Edythe Broad.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is watching us too. Secretary Duncan came to visit CMS in September because he wanted to see the results of our Strategic Staffing Initiative, which is putting strong leadership teams of principals and teachers into struggling schools. This initiative, by the way, has also been the topic of a story in the Oct. 18 issue of *Newsweek* magazine.

We've put this initiative in place at 20 of our schools and the results have been outstanding – gains of 20 and 25 points in test scores, visibly improved culture in the halls and classrooms. We began it three years ago and we've continued to use it each year, modifying it as we find ways to improve it.

Strategic Staffing works, and Secretary Duncan wanted to observe the results. So he came to Sterling Elementary, where Strategic Staffing Principal Nancy Guzman is leading the school to double-digit gains in academic growth.

Before he visited a classroom at Sterling, Secretary Duncan met with folks from CMS and state officials and talked about what he thought CMS is doing right. He said that what he saw here was alignment – an entire community making an effort to improve CMS. And he told us, "If this district can systematically turn around schools, I can't tell you how important that is for schools around the country."

That was nice to hear. But what was even more meaningful was something he told the students in the fifth-grade classroom he visited. One of them wanted to know why Duncan had come to CMS. He answered, "We're going to give every child in the country a chance to go to a great school like you guys."

Isn't that what we're all working for here in Charlotte-Mecklenburg – trying to give every student the chance to go to a great school? Not just my child. Not just your child. But *every* child. Great public education means an equal opportunity in the classroom. It's democracy at work – giving everyone an equal chance to succeed.

Because ultimately, everything we do is about children. Not about adults. About children. I've given you a lot of numbers – percentages of improvement on test scores, school growth. Those numbers are important and I wanted to share them with you. But even more important is what they represent – the children behind those numbers, the students who are learning more and learning faster.

When a child has a great teacher, it can be like having extra days in the school year. A great teacher can move a student ahead more than the 180 days of the school year. A great teacher can move a student ahead so that it's as if the student had been in class 270 days or three hundred days. Or more.

We have teachers like that in CMS. We have some terrific teachers and they're moving students ahead, helping them to catch up to their classmates. These students are benefiting from great teaching.

Students like El'Rika Fowler. El'Rika was a student at Devonshire Elementary and she was trailing her classmates there in math. She's gone on to attend J.T. Williams and Whitewater middle schools. Our data shows that El'Rika got four great teachers in a row. Four years of great classroom teaching. And those great teachers – I'll talk about some of them later on today – those great teachers moved El'Rika ahead so that she was learning more than a year's worth every year.

In four years – from the 2006-2007 school year to the 2009-2010 school year -- her teachers moved El'Rika forward so much that it was as if she'd had 358 extra days in the classroom – almost two full years! El'Rika is doing well in math this year – she is an eighth-grader at Whitewater Middle School.

Jocelyn Silva is another one of our students who has had multiple years of great teachers. She attended University Park Creative Arts Academy, Wilson and Whitewater middle schools – she's an eighth-grader at Whitewater this year. Jocelyn also was struggling in math in the 2006-2007 school year. But she had four years of great math teachers, and they helped her make so much progress that it's as if Jocelyn has had 352 extra school days over the past four years. She's doing well in math this year at Whitewater.

Kyle Segal was another one of our students fortunate enough to get great teachers four years in a row. Kyle went to McKee Road Elementary and then on to J.M. Robinson. His math teachers from 2007 to 2010 were so good that it's as if Kyle has had 318 extra days in the classroom. Kyle's a ninth-grader at Ardrey Kell this year and he's doing well.

Taylor Mungo has had some great math teachers too. Taylor started at Albemarle Elementary, and then moved on to Mint Hill Middle, where she is a seventh-grader now. Along the way, she had four years of great teaching in math – and it's as if Taylor got 268 extra days of school.

Likewise, Rachel Freeman – she started at Olde Providence Elementary and is now in the eighth grade at South Charlotte. She's had great math teachers at both schools, and it's as if she's had 248 extra days of school.

Demetria Jant has benefited from great math teaching, too. She started at Statesville Road Elementary, then moved to Druid Hills Elementary before going to Ranson Middle last year, where's she's a seventh-grader now. Demetria had such great math instruction that it's as if she has had 232 extra days of school.

How do we know these students had great teachers? Because these are some of the students in CMS who have shown the most academic improvement in math. Our Accountability folks have found a way – we borrowed the methodology, actually, from Erskine Bowles’ folks over at the University of North Carolina – to measure student progress using the idea of extra days in school.

Here’s how it works: There are 180 days in the average school year. If a student has a competent teacher, we expect that student to advance 180 days – one school year – each year. If a student has a great teacher, they’ll advance more than 180 days that year. Like El’Rika and Rachel and Kyle, they’ll advance extra days. We are learning how much our students depend on our teachers.

Each dot on the graph beside me represents a student. The students in the upper right box started the year ahead and the student whose dot has the green circle was the farthest ahead – 360 days or two academic years. That student got a teacher who was able to move her students ahead another 40 days, so that student finished the year 400 days ahead – two years and a quarter ahead.

Now look at the red dot in the lower left box. That student came in 360 days, or two years, behind grade level and got a teacher who didn’t move her students ahead. In fact, her students fell even further behind – so our student with the red circle finished the year two years and a quarter – 400 days – behind.

So teaching makes a huge difference. And let me tell you this: This is a real example. All those dots represent real students in CMS.

Here’s a visual depiction of what great teaching does for our kids. It brings them closer to the front of the class, as these slides show. Great teaching brings a student forward. Poor teaching pushes a student back, and for some students, it can be the start of a trip out of the classroom altogether – the path to dropping out.

Over several years, if they have great teachers every year the way El’Rika and Rachel and Kyle did, they’ll advance an extra year or two, the way those students did – and the way the girl at the front of the photo does. We express that growth in the number of days added to a school year. So El’Rika got 358 extra days – that’s only two days short of two whole years – over the course of four school years. That’s almost six years of progress in four years. Rachel got 248 extra days, not quite an extra year and a half. Kyle got 318 extra days, more than an extra year and a half.

We want this kind of great teaching for every student in CMS. Every student deserves a great teacher. That’s why we have put improving teaching and

managing performance as the two key goals of our Strategic Plan 2014. We want to help every student to learn more than expected – to in effect have extra days in the school year so they move ahead academically. High fliers can fly higher, average students can achieve more and struggling students can catch up. But it all depends on great teaching.

We know great teaching is possible and we know it's going on in many classrooms at CMS. How do we get a great teacher into *every* classroom?

First, we have to be able to recognize and measure great teaching. We are developing ways to do that. When we can measure effectiveness – and we are going to be able to do that in a couple of years – we can base salaries on it and reward our best teachers accordingly.

We must begin evaluating ourselves, and our teachers, using accurate, nuanced data on student outcomes. Do we do that now? Yes, in a limited – very limited – way. We use state tests as one measure of our effectiveness. We use the National Assessment of Educational Progress as another measure. But we're not using student outcome data enough, and we're not using it as effectively as possible.

We need to measure our effectiveness by measuring how much students are learning – and state tests don't give us enough information about that. State tests are a low bar, and they're also autopsy data: By the time we get the results, we're almost in another school year with no way to go back, to reteach, to help the students who need it. The National Assessment of Educational Progress tests tell us a little more about student learning – and they set a higher bar than the state tests. But there's too much of a delay between the testing and the results for these tests to help students or their teachers in the short term.

We need better, more nuanced, more real-time data that will help students learn throughout the year. We need better ways to evaluate teacher performance than state testing. We need to create and use evaluation tools that are multi-dimensional and that will show us which teachers are moving students to make more than a year's growth in a year's time. That's the kind of growth that will close the achievement gap. We need to focus on what we're calling the "value added" – what a teacher brings to the classroom that helps students learn more and learn faster. We need to base our compensation system on results, not on credentials or certifications that may or may not bring results.

We need this comparison in part because our teacher-evaluation system is broken. To date, our principals' evaluations of teachers have been lacking. As of the end of the 2009-2010 school year, 96 percent of our teachers were evaluated as

satisfactory or above. It's even worse nationally: 99 percent of teachers are deemed satisfactory by their districts.

These overwhelmingly positive evaluations do not reflect what is really going on in our classrooms. Our teachers differ dramatically in their impact on student achievement – but we're not capturing that variation in our evaluations yet.

This is not an anti-teacher strategy. We can't make getting rid of bad teachers our entire plan for improving classroom education. What we want to do is develop measures of teaching that will tell us who's great, who's good and who needs help. We want to provide support as well as pressure for change because we want to help our teachers get better.

To do that, we've built teacher portals that are giving our teachers access to data about their students. The data shows how students are doing on summative tests, such as the end-of-year state tests, as well as the formative tests given to measure student learning throughout the year. Access to this kind of student data can help teachers identify who needs more help and who's ready to move ahead. We are also training teachers in how to maximize the use of such data analysis.

We will continue to help our teachers. But what we will not continue to do is pretend that all teachers are the same, that differences in performance do not exist. That pretense is effectively lying to our kids. We're telling them that we're giving them a competent teacher and an equal opportunity to learn in every course every year – but we're not.

This is not an anti-teacher stance. It is a pro-student stance.

These differences in teaching are real and they affect student performance. Remember I said a moment ago that an average teacher provides 180 days of instruction and the teacher's students gain one year of growth in a subject area. The students of a highly effective teacher gain more than one year's worth of growth – that's what happened for El'Rika, Taylor, Demetria, Kyle and the other students who made such great progress in math. And that's what we are measuring. It's as if the highly effective teacher is teaching more days than the average teacher.

So it's better than average on the good side. On the low-performing side, it's worse. The students of low-performing teachers are not gaining a year's worth of growth -- as if their teachers are teaching less than a full year. Over a couple of years, those students can fall behind at an alarming rate – and they do. They fall

back the way the boy in the picture did. Some of them just fade away, out of the classroom.

The differences measured this way are tremendous and their effect on students is also huge.

Value-added measures of teacher effectiveness have strengths and weaknesses. We can compare teachers across years and across schools, the same way standardized test scores allow us to compare the academic proficiency and growth of students across years and schools. That's a strength.

But only 40 percent of our teachers instruct students in at least one state-tested subject. And the use of standardized tests is itself limited. They provide good information on how much students are learning but they are only one barometer of learning. As such, they provide only a single measure of teacher effectiveness.

Good teaching is more complex than a single measure. So we are working to develop measures of teaching effectiveness that take into account other dimensions of learning. We will not place more emphasis on standardized tests than they can bear. But our measures will use the value-added concept – measuring differences in days of instruction.

What will result from emphasizing performance by using value-added, rather than proxies of performance such as length of tenure and credentials?

We will be focusing on results rather than mere effort – we will focus on student outcomes.

We will be changing the incentives that help to shape teacher behavior. Both teachers and students will gain.

If all of this sounds complicated, it is and it isn't. The statistical work – what our accountability folks are working on – is complex and nuanced, just as great teaching is. But the net results – what we are trying to get to – is very simple, and something that every parent with a child in school knows: Not all teachers are the same.

Good teaching is very complex. But it is not impossibly so. We know we have great teachers in CMS now, because we can see the progress of students such as Kyle, Rachel and El'Rika. Let's look for a moment at some of the great teachers these students have had.

El'Rika had Patricia Songao [SONG- GOW] as a math teacher at J. T. Williams in the sixth grade, her first year in middle school.

Patricia Songao is a veteran teacher and a masterful one. Her principal at Williams says that Songao drills down with students "in a laserlike manner." He also told me that a lot of kids don't come to her math class on grade level, but they leave on grade level after a year in her classroom. El'Rika was one of those students.

El'Rika also had Molly Whelan [WAY lund] as a teacher. So did one of the other students I mentioned earlier, Jocelyn Silva. Whelan is one of our Teach For America recruits.

Her principal tells me that Whelan takes ownership of her students' success - she believes it's her responsibility to get them on grade level and keep them moving forward. She uses a lot of data to chart her students' progress throughout the school year. Jocelyn and El'Rika both benefited from Whelan's ownership of her students' success.

Songao and Whelan are great teachers. So is Bryan Vanderhill, who taught Kyle Segal math in the sixth grade at Jay M. Robinson. He's a veteran teacher who is involved in many aspects of his school - he coaches softball and takes other leadership roles at Robinson. He's been there since the school opened nine years ago and his principal told me that he obviously loves what he's doing. It shows in his students' results!

Marc Woods is another great teacher - he taught Taylor Mungo math at Albemarle Road. His principal says that Woods is great at building relationships with students, and he's been known to visit a student's house when parents couldn't make it into school for a conference. He teaches a lot of Exceptional Children in his classroom, and his principal says that his kids don't want to disappoint him, so they meet his high expectations for them.

Shelly Creque [CREE GEE] is another great teacher - she taught Rachel Freeman math at South Charlotte Middle. Creque is relatively new to teaching - she teaches math and science -- and she taught an all-girls math class last year. She knows her students well, and she uses a lot of data to monitor their progress in her classroom. Her principal said that Creque is always at school after most other people have gone home.

Amory [AM uh REE] Brown is another great teacher in CMS. He taught math to Demetria Jant at Druid Hills. His principal says that Brown is one of her best value-added teachers because he has such high expectations. He builds

relationships with his students and gets them involved in his classes – his principal says, “He’s right on top of them, with constant engagement.” His expectations and engagement helped Demetria catch up in math.

All of the teachers I’ve described are great teachers. But they’re all different and they all approach their classrooms in a different way. Some are very skilled at building relationships. Others are very skilled at setting the bar high and coaching students over it. Some use data to monitor student progress. Great teaching can come in many different forms.

The fact is, education is a human-capital business – and historically educators have not been very good at managing our human capital. But there is pressure now for reform coming from the federal, state and local levels – and we believe that now is the time for CMS to change the way we recruit, retain, evaluate and compensate our teachers. We are building the tools that will allow us to identify great teaching.

But we can’t operate as a human-capital business by identifying great teachers and not helping the rest. We can’t expect to improve our schools by just getting rid of ineffective teachers – we have to build our human capital. We have a lot of good teachers who can be great with the right kind of support and training – and we’re also working on ways to identify teaching weaknesses as well as strengths, so that we can help our average teachers get better. Every child deserves a great teacher, and I believe that we can make that happen with the right kind of human-capital management.

Another key part of that management is putting a strong leadership team – principals, assistant principals and staff – into every schools. We’ve had great success with our Strategic Staffing Initiative and we’ll continue to expand that. We will also work with our principals and other administrators to build leadership capacity. Great teachers want great leadership – you can’t have one without the other in a school. Providing great leadership is a critical way to support teachers and help them develop their teaching skills.

We have made progress and we have a road map to make more in CMS. These are not easy times for any school district, including us. Right now it seems particularly difficult for CMS as our Board looks at some very tough decisions.

But I continue to be optimistic about the present and the future of CMS. We are fortunate as a district to have a community -- all of you – who care about our students and our schools. We value you as a partner and we will continue to work with you to make every school a great school in CMS.

I believe we can do this, because all of us understand how important education is to the future of our community and our children. I'd like to close today with a story that illustrates how important education is, and how it can close even big divides within a community when everyone puts children first.

Last week in the New York Times, the Sunday magazine had a fascinating story about some young entrepreneurs and visionaries who are changing the world for the better. One of them was a 23-year-old woman from New Jersey, who built a school in the remotest part of Nepal.

Maggie Doyne [DOIN, rhymes with groin] was not ready for college when she finished high school – she had been a top student, varsity athlete and editor of the yearbook, but she didn't feel ready to start college. So she took a gap year and ended up working with needy children in northern India. The area was poor and flooded with refugees from nearby Nepal. What kind of area were they coming from that northern India looked better, Doyne wondered. So she took a two-day bus ride with one of the refugee girls, then they hiked for another three days to get to the girl's home village.

It was beautiful, a Himalayan village with a river running through it. But it had been ravaged by Maoist insurgents Children couldn't afford school and they broke rocks with hammers to make gravel to sell – six-, seven-, eight-year-old children. Doyne met a girl of six or seven named Hema – and she had a sudden inspiration.

"I knew I couldn't do anything with a million orphans, but what if I started with this girl?" she thought. She took Hema to school and paid the \$7 for her school fees and the \$8 for a school uniform.

"I thought, if I can help one girl, why not five? Why not 10?" Doyne told the Times. So she called her parents. Wire me all the money I made babysitting, she said. They did -- five thousand dollars. And Doyne bought some land and made plans to build a shelter for orphans. Then she went back to New Jersey and raised another \$25,000 in a few months. She went back to Nepal to oversee the construction of the Kopila Valley Children's Home. The first resident was a girl named Nisha, who was seven or eight – children in very poor areas like Nepal don't always know exactly how old they are – and she turned out to be a child prodigy. She learned English and is now the school's translator. She skipped three grades and today Nisha is a bilingual sixth grader with a future.

Last year Doyne started a school for her orphans. The school has classes from kindergarten through sixth grade, a library, a cafeteria and an auditorium. Doyne plans to expand it a year at a time until it provides K-12 education.

Doyne has recruited the best, most creative teachers she can find. She was determined to build a school that was academically outstanding – and she has. Today, every parent in the region wants their child in that school. Five hundred children and their families are begging to get into a school that can accommodate 40 students. You may know that India and Nepal have something called a caste system that is pretty rigid. People of lower castes aren't allowed to even touch those of a higher caste. Well, some upper-caste parents in the region decided that they could live with lower-caste mothers fixing meals for their upper-caste children if it meant their children would be educated.

That's right. A New Jersey high school graduate has built a mini-educational system in Nepal that has shattered the caste system in the region. It happened because Maggie Doyne is an extraordinary young woman, and because parents everywhere from Charlotte to Nepal all want the same thing for their children: a good education.

When you put children first, amazing things can happen. Not just in Nepal but anywhere. If a good school can overcome the caste system in Nepal, surely there are no limits to the future for us. We can work together. We can close the gaps in education and we can close the gaps that divide us as a community.

Yes, budgets are tight and times are hard and there are tough decisions ahead of us here in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. But I know that as a community, we have the resources we need to meet those challenges and succeed. We need to use our resources as wisely as possible to meet these challenges, and I believe we can do that.

When Arne Duncan visited us in September, he said something very true about public education. It's something we all need to keep in mind.

He said: "Half of this battle is intellectual and resources. The other half comes from the heart. It's a fundamental belief that we have an extraordinary opportunity as adults... at the end of the day, it's about relationships."

He's right.

We all care about our children. We all want our children to be well educated. We all want great teachers in our classrooms and great leaders in our schools. And we have an extraordinary opportunity as adults to help our children succeed in school.

We have some tough decisions ahead of us, but they have to be made. Let's work together so that the progress we are seeing in CMS can continue. That's what's best for our kids and it's what's best for our community.

Thank you.