

## **Text as Prepared for Delivery of Chancellor Kaya Henderson’s Address on the State of the DC Public Schools**

### **REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

#### **DCPS: Progress and Possibility**

**October 17, 2013**

Thank you, Principal Roane for that kind introduction.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am so excited to welcome you to the State of DC Public Schools, here at the brand new Cardozo Education Campus. Isn't this a gorgeous building? It is absolutely one of the best school modernizations that we've completed so far. If you haven't taken a tour yet, I encourage you to do so later this evening. This building is so beautiful, that it literally left one of the Cardozo students speechless. But it's not just an external makeover. I can tell you first-hand, that what's even more beautiful than the building is the learning that's happening between these new walls. Cardozo is in the midst of a breathtaking transformation. It's a new beginning that signals a turning tide, not just for Cardozo, but for DC Public Schools.

We are finally giving our children, the environments and resources that support and nurture student learning. I am both inspired and humbled when I think about schools like Cardozo and Dunbar, Ludlow-Taylor and Hendley, and other recently modernized buildings – inspired as I see the great work our students are doing in these new environments, and humbled because I know that we still have so much work to do to ensure we are giving our students everything that they deserve.

For years, people would describe DCPS as a place where the buildings were crumbling, where there were more kids outside the buildings than inside, where both student expectations and educator morale were low, where parental involvement was non-existent at best, and combative at worst, and where it just seemed like nobody really cared what was happening.

But I'm going to ask you to imagine something different with me. People ask me all the time, "Chancellor Henderson, what's your vision for DCPS?" I usually tell them, "I want the same thing for all kids in DCPS as I want for my kids." And usually, that's enough. But I want to take a minute tonight to show you what I really mean. I want you to see what I see in my head when I think about where DCPS is going.

So close your eyes and imagine with me a different DCPS – a place where every building is not just new, but top of the line, with state of the art classroom designs, professional arts and athletic facilities, and technology to enable students to thrive in the digital age. Imagine schools where the educators in the building truly believe that their students, regardless of their background or circumstance, can outperform not just other kids in DC, or in the country, but in the world.... and imagine that those educators feel trained, supported, and valued enough to actually deliver world-class outcomes for their students. Heck, the National Teacher of the Year program has called us and asked us to withdraw from the competition because each year, our teachers are head and shoulders above the other states' candidates!

I can see classrooms filled with students reading, writing, and debating the critical problems of the day, because we've taught them to be activists for the things they believe in. Walk into the cafeteria with me

and check out how full it is, because the food is actually really good, and really nutritious. Can you hear the noise in the building? There's laughter, because kids are having fun, there are multiple languages spoken, because we've developed them as global citizens, there are robots shooting hoops and picking up trash, because students have designed them, and there is music, because so many have mastered instruments. I see award-winning art-work on the walls, and screens and speakers broadcasting student-developed television and radio shows. Imagine a Model UN symposium in the library, where students just back from international trips are representing their country's perspective not just from what they've read, but from a first-hand experience abroad.

Imagine the parents of those students, who aren't just proud of what their children are accomplishing, but who know exactly what their children are working on at any given time, and have the tools and resources to help them excel. Imagine families, educators, and district officials with such a shared investment in the students that they consistently work together, as partners, to ensure that they are delivering the very best education possible. Imagine families who decide to move into Washington, DC because no matter what neighborhood you live in, you can be guaranteed that your student will receive an education that will prepare them for the college or career of their choice, and you don't have to win the lottery for that to happen. Imagine that.

That's my vision for DC Public Schools. I could go on for hours, but the long and short of it, is that I don't think of our work as trying to fix a broken school system. I think about trying to create the best school system in the country, where everyone in this room would be proud to send their child to any school in the system. It's real to me, because I'm a DCPS parent. I want our two boys, a graduating senior, and a second grader, to be prepared for anything they choose to be. I want them to have educators who love them enough hold them to high expectations and give them the very best. I want them to have a solid academic foundation, but I also want them to explore and develop their talents and interests. I want them to love school. And, I want our family to be part of their educational success. That's my vision for our boys. And that's my vision for every student and family in DCPS.

So tonight, I'd like to give you a sense of where we are and how we get to where we are going. My hope is that by the end of the evening, you will be clear about how we're going to achieve our vision.

I recently read, Amanda Ripley's new book, *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*. It's the best book I've read in a long time. I won't give you all the details, because you should buy it and read it yourself. But I will give you the big takeaway. Amanda Ripley says the rest of the world takes education way more seriously than we do in America. Period. Other countries expect much more from their students than we do. They demand that their students demonstrate and apply knowledge through complex and rigorous assessments. When their students fail, they tell them the truth - and they help them develop the persistence to try again until they succeed. And other countries recognize that education is not just important but critical to their national success, that they invest in it, support it, and constantly press to be the very best in the world. It's very compelling, and totally in line with what we've been thinking at DCPS. We need to hold ourselves accountable to a much higher standard, if we are indeed going to provide our students with a world class education. How do we do that? We have to move the bar. Our five year plan, *A Capital Commitment* is the first step in holding ourselves to a different level of expectation, and getting us on the road to the DCPS we just visualized.

We have five big goals over the first five years. Improve achievement rates. Invest in struggling schools. Increase graduation. Make sure kids like their schools. And make the schools so good that more and more parents want to enroll their children.

Some people think these goals are ambitious. I guess when you look at where we've been and where we're trying to go, they are. But I honestly see these goals as just the beginning – the necessary first steps on the road to the ideal DCPS. But I also believe they are attainable. We've chosen a five-year horizon because we know we have a lot of work to do to get here, but we actually believe we can go way beyond this. If we are going to ask our children to aim for new heights, we should do the same. We're reaching for the stars, and A Capital Commitment is our blast off.

The plan actually includes commitments to you—each and every one of you. We are striving to become a close-knit community – an extended family, really– of dedicated educators, achieving students, and supportive parents and community members, who believe in working together, as One City, to improve the quality of education in the District of Columbia.

These are our commitments to you.

If you're a student, we commit that you'll have the opportunity to attend a great school—one that you love and that prepares you to succeed in life.

If you're a parent: we commit to partner with you in your child's success.

If you're a member of the community: we commit to provide opportunities for you to contribute to the success of our schools and this district.

To our DCPS employees, educators, and staff: we commit to respect you as professionals and to invest in you and your students with the environment, resources, and tools you need.

To potential employers: we commit to supply you with well-educated and well-prepared young adults who will make positive contributions to your organizations.

And to the city we call home, Washington DC, we commit to make our school system one that all citizens are proud of—a school system that can be the anchor for thriving, productive, and growing communities.

This is what we believe. These are the commitments we've made to you. They are in our bones and inform every single thing we do. Now, I know you're thinking, wow, Kaya, that's great. Sounds fantastic. But how are you going to do this?

I'm glad you asked.

We've found that there are three key elements in reaching this set of goals.

- First, we need the very best educators.
- Second, we have to provide our students with rigorous academic content, with a special focus on growing a love for reading, writing and thinking.
- Third, we need motivated students and engaged families.

This is our theory of action. It sounds simple, but don't let the simplicity fool you. If we can ensure the dynamic interaction between great educators, rigorous academics, motivated students and engaged families, there is nothing that can stop us from achieving our goals.

Here's what it looks like. It's school leaders and educators who have a laser-like focus on providing the best instruction to their students – they love their students and push them to be their best, they use

data to analyze their students' strengths and weaknesses, they work together to plan and execute the most engaging lessons possible, they create a culture at the school where families and educators alike feel part of something special, and they push themselves to consistently improve their practice.

It's when I walk into a classroom and see a student hunched over a book, or a book on a Nook; they're absorbed in the story and the world has basically stopped. Whether it's learning about friendship and bravery in Kindergarten, or analyzing texts about justice through the ages in high school—we're aiming to foster a love of the written word that goes beyond Twitter or texting. We want our students to think critically, to express themselves on paper or other mediums, to jump into the past to find the future through the best way possible—through books.

And it's when I see families who take pride in helping their students succeed. Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago, Natina Kiah, a parent at Stanton Elementary School who has been participating in our family engagement pilot, came to share her experience with central office staff. She told us that she had had a very difficult experience with various schools and educators. In fact, she called herself, "Hurricane Natina" because when the teachers saw her coming, they knew she was a force of nature! But as a result of the relationships she built with the teachers at Stanton, through home visits, and the academic parent teacher team meetings, she has a completely different outlook. She now knows exactly what her kids are working on and has strategies to help them with their homework. She used to be skeptical about the teachers, and felt a distance between them and herself. But you should have seen her face beaming when she talked about how important she felt when the teachers LISTENED to HER priorities for her students, and how empowered she felt to be part of her children's success. Hurricane Natina is still a force of nature, but now she's a force of nature for getting other parents involved. She shared, "This hasn't just changed my family, this is changing our entire community."

I share that example for two reasons. First, if we are able to ensure great teachers, rigorous academics, and engaged students and families, we won't just change schools or the district, we'll change the entire community. But it's also important to recognize that we're no longer imagining something what we want. This is actually happening, right now, across DCPS.

Parents, educators, partners, and other folks in our schools every day, say to me all the time, "Things are so different in DCPS. I wish more people knew what was happening." I've come to realize that, we've been so focused on doing the hard work, that we don't always help others understand exactly how much progress we've made. So let me take a minute to share with you how we're doing so far.

Now, not so long ago, as all of us know, DCPS was in need of a big change. Schools were in disrepair. Enrollment rates were falling and there was a lack of confidence and some say competence in our schools. But over the past few years, there has been renewed commitment, investment and excitement that is changing the face of education in DC Public Schools.

Everyone in this room knows that it has been a challenging process at times. But today, I'm here to report what some of us already know. Things are working. Things are getting better. DCPS is on the move. In the last few years, we have made enormous strides. Let's look at the obvious measure, and just one of many, mind you—the DC CAS.

Last year, DCPS showed the highest growth in proficiency since 2008 in reading and since 2009 in math on the DC-CAS. Students in every ward in the city made gains in math performance. Students in all but one ward improved reading performance from the year before. Students in every ward have shown

steady reading progress since 2007. And students in middle grades saw the largest gains. No matter how you count it or cut it, the gains and progress are unequivocal.

Take Tubman Elementary School, as an example. Since 2007, Tubman has grown by 54 percentage points in math and nearly 30 percentage points in reading, under the leadership of Principal Harry Hughes. Tubman invested in its teachers and allowed them to focus on their strengths, which ultimately better supported students. Tubman's talented educators volunteered their time before and after school, as well as during their lunch hours to help tutor and support their students. In addition, Tubman holds their students accountable for their own learning. Students know their reading and math scores, where they are excelling, and where they need to make progress. They know how to shop for independent reading books that are appropriate to their reading levels inside their own classrooms. Tubman also rewards its students regularly at rallies and assemblies and celebrates their success. They're fostering a culture and love of learning. And most people in the city would not believe that a school filled with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and who for many, English is a second language, actually scores higher on the DC-CAS than schools that other families are clamoring to get into.

Now, I want to plainly acknowledge there have been questions and concerns raised about the tests and the way results are measured and ultimately reported. We want you to know that we're working to ensure that we continue to accurately measure our children's specific progress. At the same time, we're focusing on other assessments that are more closely aligned with the curriculum.

But it's not just about CAS scores. As a district, we have a number of many ways to measure how our students are performing. Obviously, we use standardized test scores. In fact, in just a few weeks, we'll know the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the NAEP, also known as the nation's report card. If our students are performing as well as we think they are, we expect to see progress on the NAEP, which will be another indication that we're on the right track.

But even beyond test scores, other indicators tell us that we're making progress. I'm proud to report that enrollment is up at DCPS this year. When we made the very tough decision to consolidate schools last year, everyone predicted that families would flee DCPS. I'm proud to report that we have a higher number of students in our October 5 membership count this year than we had last year at this time. Our graduation rate is up slightly and we haven't really gotten started on our high school redesign work. More students are passing classes than before, the truancy rate has dropped from 12% to 9%, student satisfaction is better than ever before, and we are seeing higher levels of family participation.

These measures are important indicators. We know we have a very long way to go, but these indicators tell us we're headed in the right direction. These indicators also help us to understand where to spend our energy and resources. They led us to a heavier focus on students engaging with literature at our schools, offering 9<sup>th</sup> grade academies at high schools, investing in strategies to make sure our kids are coming to school.

But there's so much more. If you'll allow me, I'll take you on a short journey through some of the other things we've been doing at DCPS. They're centered around three essential ingredients for success: great educators, rigorous academic content, and engaged students and families.

I am so proud of the investment that DCPS has made in getting, growing, and keeping the best educators. In fact, other people are recognizing how far we've come on this front. Just today, an independent study out of UVA and Stanford validates that though our educator evaluation system, and

performance pay plan, we are retaining our highest performers, helping teachers improve their practice through targeted support and professional development, and hiring teachers who are better than the ones we're losing. This is a huge deal.

We've also developed programs to help our best principals get better, and to grow our own future principals. In December, 25 DCPS leaders will graduate from the Georgetown Executive Master's in Leadership program after a rigorous year of studying best leadership practices. We're already seeing tremendous results. And, we have 12 people currently enrolled in the Mary Jane Patterson Fellowship. These are outstanding teachers, coaches, master educators, and others, who are learning how to lead schools under the very best DCPS principals. We're growing our own talent so we don't always have to rely on other district to produce the leaders we know we need for our schools. In fact, all of this work has been recognized by the US Department of Education, in that DCPS was awarded the largest Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant in the country, over \$62 million dollars, to support or work to get, grow and keep the very best talent.

We have been relentlessly focused on making sure that there's a highly effective teacher in every single classroom, and a highly effective school leader in every single building. And we'll support them well – through subject-specific coaching and training, collaborative planning, instructional rounds where they observe other teachers, norming of student work, and tons of other developmental activities. Our hope is to help teachers be the best they can be, so that they can help their students be the best they can be. It's worth every penny.

Watching a teacher do his or her thing is like watching a world-class musician or athlete. They're just on. All you can do is watch and be inspired. There are countless of them in DCPS—but here are a few.

There's Dowan McNair-Lee at Stuart Hobson Middle School. She calls herself a "teacher-mama" because she loves her students so much. She says, "I believe that teaching is both an art and a science. The artist in me sees the classroom as a stage where I use my own life and experiences as guides to help my students acquire knowledge. The scientist in me uses data to track students' progress and make adjustments to my instruction."

There's Christine Willis-Bennett, at Capitol Hill Montessori. She says of her students: "I love to meet them with a daily smile, a handshake or a hug to set the tone for the day."

There's Nakia Espinal, dance teacher at Sousa Middle School, who grew up in DCPS schools, so she fully understands where her students come from. "I often remind them that I was once them, I share their background," she explains. "I always tell them that we come from the same neighborhood, therefore I take no excuses."

There's Amador Jomuad, who has taught at Anacostia High and now teaches at Banneker. Mr. Jomuad's class achieved 100 percent math proficiency on the 2013 DC-CAS, the second time he has reached that milestone during his time at Banneker. Mr. Jomuad shares, "I love the thought that, as a teacher, I am an instrument to help students to reach their dreams and goals."

And on November 4, we'll salute these and other amazing educators at A Standing Ovation for DC Public Schools, our teacher recognition event at the Kennedy Center. If you haven't gotten your ticket, go to [www.standingovationfordcteachers.org](http://www.standingovationfordcteachers.org). If you've never been, it will give you a front row view of the talented educators in DCPS. I think you'll also be excited by the celebrities we have lined up to celebrate our awardees.

We are also very proud of the significant investment we've made in making sure that what students learn is rigorous—in other words, that the content will challenge them to grow and will prepare them for the future. One way we're doing this is by implementing the Common Core standards across the district.

Simply put, the Common Core is a road map that guides our students to a successful future. It is a set of standards that makes sure that our students are preparing for a bright future from an early age. By pegging our curriculum to these new standards, we make sure that students can read complicated, real life texts; can analyze and evaluate the things that they read; and can solve practical, challenging math problems. They gain the academic knowledge needed to solve the challenges they will face as they move forward in their education and careers, without remediation.

As I mentioned before, we've developed our district-wide curriculum with a focus on literacy. We're committed to building a deep, lifelong love of reading. This may not seem revolutionary to you, but when you see what our students, at every level, are doing, I think you will have a very different opinion.

We are now challenging students from an early age to engage deeply in texts that are worth their time and attention. We have first graders who are reading *The Wizard of Oz*. Our teachers help six year olds to engage with a complicated, magical, and fascinating book.

We are challenging all of our students to read beyond their grade level. We have provided students at 45 schools with the Junior Great Books series on tablets. They get the opportunity to read diverse, authentic, difficult stories – stories that help them develop not just their reading skills, but also their critical thinking skills. I encourage you to visit that booth on the gallery walk after my speech.

So we have a strong focus on helping our students gain the critical thinking skills needed to be great readers. We are taking a similar approach to our math instruction.

First, our teachers are making sure students understand the math concepts-- teaching and re-teaching different ways to do math. Our teachers are also focused on applying school math to real world situations. And, we've given them new and different resources, including classroom technology and blended learning programs, proven to meet students no matter where they are in math, and move them ahead.

When we say blended learning, what we really mean is incorporating technology into the curriculum in a smart way. It's not just putting kids on computers—it's helping kids learn better through a blend of computer exercises and face-to-face teaching.

You can see some of this up close at the gallery walk this evening.

We believe technology has the ability to do incredible things—if it's used strategically and carefully. It can never replace an excellent teacher, but it can help motivate students who may have had trouble being excited about school before. It also allows teachers to cater to different levels in one classroom – differentiation, the hardest part of teaching. It can also allow for learning to be individualized so kids can go as fast as they need to, or as slow as they need to.

Three schools have embraced blended learning for ALL content areas: Kramer Middle School, and Ketcham and Randle-Highlands Elementary Schools. Many other schools are using a blended model for a

significant portion of their instruction, such as math at Hart Middle School and the 9th grade academy at Anacostia High School.

At Hart, for example, math classes are taught in a state-of-the-art learning lab featuring laptops—one for each student—and a specialized math program. At the beginning of the math period, students enter the learning lab and check monitors to see which stations they will rotate through for the day. Time in the lab is spent in three ways: kids working with a teacher in whole group instruction, small groups of students working together, and individual students practicing by themselves on the computer. Each day's sessions are determined by a short test taken the previous day on the computer. That way, each student receives the personalized instruction that she needs. A student that's fallen behind will receive extra help, and students that are zipping through the units can accelerate their progress.

We'll be exploring more ways to incorporate technology into the classroom, but we also recognize that we have to master the basics.

You'll see we've devoted a substantial amount of resources to mastering the basics—from new assistant principals and specialists focused on reading, to beginning the complete modernization of classroom and school libraries. And you'll see that we will stay the course with this until all of our students are up to speed, and beyond.

That leads to some more exciting things we're doing for our third ingredient: engaged families, students and communities.

I feel truly blessed to work in a school district where so many parents are so passionate and committed to their children and to their schools. We know that parents care deeply about their child's academic achievement. That's why we're working more closely with families—we know their involvement is critical to the success of our children and schools.

That means that we must provide better information to our families. We are currently working on improving student report cards so that parents can quickly get a clear idea of how their child is progressing. We are also working to expand opportunities for parents to work with their children on lessons that fit with what's happening in school. If we can help you understand what your child is reading and what reading level that should be on, you are better equipped at home when it comes to buying or borrowing books from the library to be read at home.

We're also making home visits. Remember Hurricane Natina? She's taking part in an initiative that Office of Family and Public Engagement developed in partnership with the Flamboyant Foundation to ensure that parents and teachers are partners from the very beginning of the school year.

Teachers serving students of all ages in every ward of the city are going on home visits to build relationships with families. We recognize that parents know their children best, so we will work with them in a more explicit way—listening to them to find out how we can work together to reinforce learning and ensure their success. We plan to build on the success of this initiative by expanding this work across the entire district.

We want our students to be engaged and excited too—we've purchased new music instruments, computers, books for libraries, and athletic equipment, because we want our students to have the tools they need to thrive inside and outside of the classroom. And we've improved cafeteria food—you can try it for yourself today at the food services booth!



I could stand here all night and tell you about the great things we're doing. New buildings! Early childhood education! A new common lottery! But I implore you to visit our gallery walk and see, or touch, or feel it for yourselves. Our chiefs and superintendents are on hand and extremely excited to talk to you.

So, as you can see, we are making a ton of progress. And I hope tonight, you understand it, and see it, better than before. Let me get to where we're headed quickly so you can get home to watch Scandal, after the Gallery Walk.

If we're going to get to the DCPS that we envisioned earlier, we have to do some things very differently. We've already changed how we approach people, academics, and engagement, and we'll continue innovating on those fronts. But let me be more specific about big changes coming down the pike.

You've heard me say before that we have to rethink our approach to high schools. High schools as they are aren't engaging and succeeding with all of our students. So we're working on plans to rethink high schools. We also have to develop a strong system for students who are more interested in developing career and technical skills that will prepare them for high-wage jobs, so we are recreating our approach to career and technical education.

We have to do even more than we already have to ensure that all students have access to the arts, music, foreign languages, and advanced academics. So beyond ensuring that those subjects are available in our schools, we are looking at creating city-wide academies, where students can access a number of AP courses in one building, or multiple foreign languages, or leadership and service experiences, or advanced music and art classes. And we are challenging ourselves to think outside the time box that has held us hostage. Schools in other parts of the world are able to work more deeply on more interesting things with students because the school days and year are longer.

We recognize that we have to pay better attention to ensuring that our students for whom English is not their primary language are achieving at the same levels as our other students, so you will see more attention to that. And we are bound and determined to prepare our students to compete globally by providing study abroad experiences for all of our middle and high school students who meet certain benchmarks.

These are just a few of the ideas in development at DCPS, and that we'll be talking more about in the coming months. If we're going to pull all of this off, meet the goals of A Capital Commitment and push even further to the DCPS that we envision, it's going to take all of us together!

Let me make one more commitment, before I close. I've shown you this evening that we are on the right track, according to a number of different indicators. I want you to know, that we are going to stay the course. We're going to dig in and keep working hard-- extremely hard. And I ask that you stay with us. This isn't going to happen overnight, and we have challenges ahead. But we can get through them together. We got through consolidations together, and we'll get through the boundary and feeder pattern process together. The only way we can do this work is together. And the investments we make together today will yield so much wonderful fruit, tomorrow.

I look forward to working with all of you, to deliver on A Capital Commitment, and to push even further to being the best urban school system in the country. We have a LONG way to go, but we're on the right track.

We are DCPS and we can do this.