

State of the Rockford Public Schools Address

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Once again this year please accept my sincere appreciation to all of you for being here today. I am delighted to have this opportunity again to speak with you about the Rockford School District.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, 2006 has been a memorable year for Rockford Public Schools. Let me review some of the highlights:

- Under the magnificent leadership of Terry Ingrassia, Ted Biondo, Dr. Cyrus Oates, and Patricia Gomez, the community came together and passed the school district referendum by one of the widest margins in Rockford School District history, thus ensuring the progress of our current initiatives and the stability of educational opportunities for our children.
- Mayor Morrissey & The City Council; Chairman Christensen and the County Board showed the tenacity and perseverance that is the stuff of real leaders by passing a city and county wide ordinance to further fight truancy. Students who are consistently absent from school

cannot develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful in today's global workplace. They have no future and no hope.

- The educational initiatives introduced at elementary and middle schools by our esteemed Chief Instructional Officer, Martha Hayes, supported with additional resources from the Regional Office of Education and implemented by a fantastic corps of principals and teachers, have taken firm root, and produced the most dramatic increase in Rockford student performance in years with an additional 15 schools making Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by No Child Left Behind standards and all elementary and middle schools making Adequate Yearly Progress in Math. That is an incredible achievement.
- The Rockford School Board has emulated Admiral Farragut's famous directive of "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" and consistently demonstrated the resolve and determination to ensure our resources are used efficiently and effectively to educate all children in the School District. I am proud to serve with them.
- And finally, while cleaning my house in October, I found \$21 million dollars under our sofa cushions, and decided to use that money to eliminate the accumulated deficit in our Educational Fund, and establish the first surplus in this fund in 15 years.

In all seriousness, ladies and gentlemen, it has been an exceptional year in the Rockford School District...and therein lies one of our most significant challenges. We must not become complacent about what we have achieved or what it has taken to get us where we are. Our mission of student achievement and development and financial stability to maintain consistent educational opportunities for all our children will continue to be the focus of this School Board and this administration.

Over the next year we will continue to implement and improve upon our previous initiatives, as well as prudently use our resources to expand

educational related arts programs for middle school students and undertake an initiative focused on improving the academic performance of high school freshmen.

Now before I focus on the major theme of this year's address let me review a concept about successful organizations and communities that I discussed with you last year.

As I stated last year, every community and organization faces problems which have no easy or correct solutions. These are known as adaptive challenges, and confronting them creates conflict and instability...because addressing the issues that underlie these challenges often involves upending deep and entrenched norms, beliefs, practices and attitudes. Successfully confronting adaptive challenges requires transformational leadership at all levels of an organization or within a community...and transformational leadership requires disturbing people so they will face their adaptive challenges. It is my intent again today to challenge the Rockford community...in order that it may face a significant adaptive challenge.

Ladies and gentlemen the time has arrived in Rockford ... no ... that's incorrect...the time is long past due for us to have a real and meaningful discussion about our most important challenge. Some have called this challenge the most important civil rights issue of this century, and I would say I must agree with that.

The issue I'm speaking of ...is of course...the educational achievement gap. Quite simply the achievement gap concerns those students who are acquiring the knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful in the workplace and productive as a citizen, and those who are not.

Why is the achievement gap important? The simple economic reality is that 50 years ago an 8th grade dropout in Rockford could get a secure & well-paying job in the manufacturing sector. That same person today could not qualify for most minimum wage jobs. The simple political reality is that an effective democracy depends upon having an educated citizenry.

The starting point for any discussion is an understanding of the problem. We now have 40 years of research in the area, so I will draw upon that vast body of information to outline the issue at the macro-level.

Forty years of research has identified 3 major areas which influence and contribute to student achievement. Those areas are schools, life experiences and sociological factors. Let's examine each of these areas in greater detail.

Let's examine schools first. The question that we usually ask about schools is "How effective are schools in improving student achievement?" The better question to begin the discussion might be "How much do schools contribute to student achievement?" The consensus of the research in this area is that the most effective schools can account for 40-45% of total student achievement. That statistic may surprise some people, but it really is an enormous contribution considering that students in Rockford, for example, spend only 11.8% of a calendar year in school, and that's only if they attend all day, every day.

The challenge for schools of course is to make sure they are working effectively so they do contribute 40-45% of student achievement. How does a school district do this? Generally three ways.

- First and foremost, an effective school district recruits, develops and retains outstanding administrators, teachers and support staff.
- Secondly, it implements a standards-based curriculum that clearly describes what we want students to know and be able to do, and aligns assessment with that curriculum.
- And finally, an effective school district works with parents, businesses and outside agencies to leverage and expand educational opportunities for students.

There is no doubt that the federal law, No Child Left Behind, put a huge focus on the role of schools in improving student achievement, and

schools certainly vary in quality across the nation as a result of differences in leadership, focus and resources.

One of the most significant challenges in any urban school district, and Rockford is listed as one of the 175 largest urban districts in the United States, is recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Many students in large urban school districts will have uncertified teachers in some subject area, but an especially disproportionate share in mathematics.

The good news is that this is not the case in the Rockford School District. All teachers in the Rockford School District are certified to teach in the area they are currently working, and all but about 30 are highly qualified by No Child Left Behind Standards. These are mostly teachers in secondary special or bilingual education. This is a huge positive for students in our district.

We are keenly aware however; that we must do more than just recruit qualified teachers. We must train and develop them in their specific content area knowledge, pedagogy, and in developing effective relationships with students. Over the last few years, our Chief Instructional Officer Martha Hayes has assembled perhaps the finest group of curriculum specialists in the nation. Together with our school principals, and some lead teachers, they have developed power standards in our critical subject areas; conducted extensive training for teachers in instructional strategies; developed common assessments for subject areas and presented over 400 professional development classes each of the last two summers. They are making awesome progress in improving student achievement and development in each of our schools.

We have also committed to helping our students make the connections between what they are learning and the world of work. This past year we have partnered with two major manufacturing companies in the Rockford area to offer internship programs to high school students who are interested in engineering and manufacturing careers, and we have acquired a house for rehabilitation for our expanded building trades program at East High School. These initiatives have been a hugely positive experience for students and we

hope to expand these opportunities for more students in the future as we further develop our career education programs.

I am very pleased with the progress the Rockford School District is making in each of these areas, and we will endeavor to improve upon that progress in the coming year.

Now if schools contribute up to 40-45% of total student achievement, the obvious question becomes who and/or what accounts for the other 55-60% of it.

Research indicates that life experiences contribute about one-third of that remaining 55-60% of student achievement or about 20% of overall achievement. Life experiences are closely related to a child's socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is generally defined as a function of where you live, your family's income and the education of your parents. Of these three factors, many studies have shown the level of parental education to be the most important. In general, children who come from low socioeconomic or poverty backgrounds are less likely to have the types and numbers of educational experiences, such as trips to libraries, museums, stores, etc., as compared to children who come from middle class or higher socioeconomic backgrounds. That is certainly a concern in our school district, which has a poverty rate of 72%.

The solutions to poverty are varied and complex, so in the interest of time I'll address it by simply discussing prevention. A professor I had during my doctoral studies cited the following research that I think is worth sharing with you. He said there was a simple 3-step procedure for staying out of poverty.

- 1) Graduate from high school
- 2) Get a job
- 3) Don't have children before you get married

The research shows if a person fails to do any one of these three things, they more than triple chances of going into poverty.

The last major area identified by research as influencing or contributing to student achievement is sociological factors. In general, sociological factors include those environmental or cultural factors which influence cognitive development. This is an area which receives occasional, but limited public attention, however the research shows that its cumulative influence on student achievement is about 40% of total student achievement, approximately the same magnitude as that of schools. Let's take a brief look at some of its' major components and correlational findings.

- 1) Low-birth weight babies (Those weighing 5 lbs or less) tend to lag behind others in intellectual development.
- 2) Children born to a very young mother (age 18 or less) is also a risk factor associated with a strong negative impact on cognitive development.
- 3) Social scientists are practically unanimous in their agreement that one of the most important risk factors for children today is growing up in a single-parent, female-headed household. This single factor is almost always associated with lower educational attainment and more behavioral and psychological problems. Those problems are manifested by students getting into trouble both in school and with the law, dropping out of school, early pregnancy and depressed academic performance. In general, the larger the family of single-parent household the more acute the problems.
- 4) In their authoritative work on the achievement gap, Christopher Jencks and Meredith Philips stated that "changing the way parents deal with their children may be the single most important thing we can do to improve a child's cognitive skills." Researchers have looked at parenting practices in two major areas.

The first area is cognitive stimulation which was measured by noting such things as, how much parents talk to their children, number of children's books in the home, the frequency with which a parent read to a child, how

much effort was made to teach the alphabet, numbers, and colors & visits to educational environments. It's worth noting here that children from poverty backgrounds generally hear 30 million less words from birth to age 5 than those children who come from a more middle class background. This has a highly detrimental effect on their readiness to learn to read by the time they enter kindergarten.

In early 2004, prior to my arrival in Rockford, I brought a national expert on raising student ACT and SAT College Board scores to Nashville to conduct a seminar with a large number of our high school teachers. Dr. Jack Tierney, an educator from California, related to us that in 2003 the College Board released a study on sociological factors of high school students who were National Merit finalists or semi-finalists. In the several years that the study was conducted, it was found that all of the students in the study only shared one common sociological factor...discussion of current events with their families around the dinner table.

The second major area pertaining to parenting practices was emotional support. This was measured by physical expressions of affection for a child, parental attention to a child's questions, how parents reacted when their child learned or failed to learn something and discipline by means other than physical punishment.

- 5) Peer group. It suffices to say that a student's peer group can have a substantial impact on a student's pattern of behavior and subsequently their academic performance. This influence is most significant for middle and high school students.
- 6) The last of the major sociological factors is electronic media. The proliferation of electronic equipment, while beneficial in many ways, can also be detrimental. A variety of sociological studies have concluded that American students spend an appalling amount of time watching television or playing video games; in many cases 5 or more hours a day, on a typical school day, almost as much time as they spend in school. If weekend viewing is added in, it could easily be argued the TV is the "main education" for many children. The amount of their

watching television and/or playing video games is clearly associated with lower academic performance, and studies of children who have TV's located in their bedroom is also associated with sleepiness or inattention in class.

150 years ago, in one of his most famous poems, Henry David Thoreau commented on the human condition by noting that “most men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Some modern day philosophers have noted that many of our young people today “lead lives of aimless distraction.”

I hope this information I've presented today is a basis for beginning a productive discussion of the educational achievement gap and how we can improve it.

The research is really unequivocal. Education achievement gaps for various racial and social classes are clearly established before children enter school and are further exacerbated by poverty and a variety of other sociological factors.

And yes, you bet that schools are an important part of overcoming that gap. That's why every educational, financial and resource initiative I have proposed to the School Board since my arrival has been done with only one outcome in mind ...setting the conditions for successfully maximizing student achievement and development. And I pledge to the community to continue working to ensure the Rockford School District becomes “Rockford Strong” (I just love the new Army slogan “Army Strong”). But in the end, we will ultimately be most successful if we achieve the synergy that comes from successfully addressing all the factors that influence student achievement and development.

Now, to be honest ladies and gentlemen, I don't know the best way to have this discussion. Do we have it at schools, churches, community centers, college campuses, on TV – I certainly welcome ideas and inputs. I do know this ...we have to have it to move Rockford forward...and we have to reach some kind of consensus before we talk about solutions.

I'll conclude my remarks today by relating a short personal experience with you. Several years ago I had the opportunity to listen to a man named Charles Faulkner, who is considered to be the founder of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. In simple terms Neuro-Linguistic Programming is concerned with thoughts and actions. In essence if you want to change your life – change the way you think.

(Relate his experience as an orderly in a retirement home.)

“I had the opportunity to speak with people who were at the end of their lives. Our discussions were about many things but mostly about what they cherished and what they regretted. To my surprise virtually all regrets were about things they had not done, but wanted to do.” Not the things they had done.

I would say to each of you here today, as political, business, educational and community leaders, as parents, as citizens of the community... That this is “OUR WATCH” in the history of The City of Rockford. Let's not look back years from now, possibly near the end of our lives, and long after we have passed the torch of leadership to a new generation, regretting the fact that we did not address one of the most significant issues of our time, and one that occurred on “OUR WATCH.”

There is no doubt this will be a difficult issue to discuss...but in all great endeavors it is enough to have tried. Let's make sure we do that.

Thank you so much for being here today and may you and your families have the most joyous of holiday seasons.