



**2008 New York State Superintendent of the Year
Remarks Presented by**

**Judith Johnson, Superintendent
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Thank you Bill Johnson and the members of the Selection Committee, thank you NYSCOSS for this award. I am truly humbled. Nothing is more powerful than being recognized and honored by your peers.

I am a peacetime warrior from the 60s who was transformed by the energy of those times. *I did not get to pick cotton but I did ride in the back of the ferry and, I drank from the colored (and when I thought no one was looking) the white water fountains.*

Raised each summer by grandparents who lived in Virginia, and educated each school year in the “one” classes in NYC –I was sometimes the only child of color, and sometimes one of just two minority children, in the classroom. I realized

later in life that my New York City school experiences were preparing me to live a bi-cultural life.

In those socially turbulent days, when the promise of educational equity seemed imminent, choosing education as a career was a noble, courageous and respected choice. And that in part is why I re read some of Dr, King's speeches in preparing these remarks. I also reread JFK's "Profiles In Courage" and re discovered the common theme shared by those Kennedy chose to present. The meaning of courage is often misunderstood. The shared theme was each one's need to maintain his own respect for himself, which was more important than popularity with others; the desire to maintain a reputation for integrity and courage that was stronger than the desire to maintain the office; a sense of morality or integrity that was stronger than the pressures of public disapproval, accompanied by a belief that the course of action chosen would be viewed as the correct one.

We sixties warriors were inspired by Jack and Robert and Martin and Malcolm—all of whom led careers of moral courage; our actions were intended to convey an affirmation of their courage. Our country was transformed by the energy and dedication of that generation—that generation is represented by many of the people in this room this morning.

It appears only a crisis galvanizes Americans into action. During those times, education was the path to revolution, and a revolution it was to be. Despite differences in skin color, ethnicity, and wealth, the peacetime warriors of the 60s shared a common belief —. We could influence the social fiber of a nation.

This is the scary lesson for the beneficiaries of the civil rights movement. Today we are facing a historical unprecedented challenge-the loss of hope by millions of Americans. After decades of what history may characterize as quick fixes-civil rights, women's rights, environmental reform and educational reform- things still are not fixed. There is clear evidence that we cannot sustain the American Standard of life for all Americans

When I think about us in our finest hours as superintendents, I see colleagues with deep seated beliefs in the righteousness of our cause-and our cause is the survival of a nation built upon a premise that all men and women are created equal.

As my colleagues know all too well, the superintendency is often described as the most difficult job in America. I choose as a metaphor for our mission, working one's way through a labyrinth, full of unmarked landmines, in order to improve the lives of children.

Now, it is up to us to redefine that commitment for these historical times. We are patriots and educators, the intellectual leaders of our community. Our energies and talents are still needed to meet the challenges present in our cities, suburbs and in our rural communities if we are to be successful in the battles against illiteracy and complacency. Pleasantries and self satisfied mediocrity will not serve us well. What happens to this country in this decade depends on what we

decide to do with what has been given to us as a challenge. Our work is far from finished.

To be courageous requires no exceptional qualifications, no magic formula; it is an opportunity that sooner or later is presented to us all. The stories of past courage can teach, can offer hope and can provide inspiration, but they cannot supply courage itself. Each one of us must find that energy from a sense of purpose-in the final analysis what kind of schools we get depends on how courageous we are in taking a stand on the strongly contested issues of what it is we want students to know and be able to do well in this 21st century of life. And why will you do all this?" – Whether your children attend homogenous or diverse schools, they will live as adults in a diverse society. We have become a nation that spends more on waging war than on educating students to live and work in peace with all the other inhabitants of our planet.

So, where do we go from here? Can we recapture that revolutionary spirit and boldly challenge policies that may not work for our very diverse populations? As we review the unfolding data about other nations that are investing in the education of their citizens, we are faced with the fact that tomorrow is in reality, today. In this unfolding conundrum of history and economic parity, there is such a thing as being too late. Now as senior warriors, we must be no less determined to pick up the banners of revolt on behalf of the children in this nation who deserve the right to become enlightened, irreverent and educated citizens.

A New York Times editorial entitled, Psst! “Human Capital” asserted that if we want to keep up with the Chinese and Japanese we’ve got to develop our human capital. In admittedly a very controversial argument, David Brooks asserts that (perhaps) we cannot test for what students really need to learn. He acknowledges the challenges of poverty and concludes “that extraordinary schools, which create intense cultures of achievement, work. Extraordinary teachers, who inspire students to transform their lives, touch all the components of human capital.” I would extend that argument to recognize the role of courageous educational leaders.

In the knowledge-based economy that characterizes the 21st century, most post industrialized countries are making massive investments in education while we are not. While students are held to common standards—and increasingly experience serious sanctions if they fail to meet them— most states have not prioritized equity and access to the key educational resources needed for learning, as a basic principle for funding schools. The result of this collision of new standards with old inequities is less access to rigorous meaningful education for many students of color and poverty, rather than more.

While we bemoan the dramatically unequal educational outcomes announced each year in reports focused on the achievement gap, as a nation we often behave as though we were unaware of—or insensitive to—the equally substantial inequalities in access to educational opportunity that occur from preschool through elementary and secondary education.

The rhetoric of “standards-based” reforms is appealing. Yet students cannot succeed in meeting the demands of the new economy if they do not encounter much more challenging work in school, many argue, and schools cannot be stimulated to improve unless the real accomplishments—or deficits—of their students are raised to public attention. There is certainly some merit to these arguments. But standards and tests alone will not improve schools or create educational opportunities where they do not now exist. Evidence shows that the level of learning responds strongly to the quality of instruction: having and using enough time and covering a substantial amount of rich curricular material. In addition, factors such as class size and school size influence the personal attention students receive; the combination of teacher quality and curriculum quality accounts for much of the school-related contribution to achievement. The combination of these resources can strongly influence school outcomes. Furthermore, teachers increasingly report that our curriculum is distorted by tests and that they feel pressured to “teach to the test” in ways that contradict their ideas of sound instructional practice.

Interestingly, international assessments have shown that higher scoring countries in mathematics and science teach *fewer* concepts each year but teach them more deeply than tends to be true in the United States, so that students have a stronger foundation to support higher order learning in the upper grades (McKnight et al., 1987). Ironically, states that test large numbers of topics in a grade level may encourage more superficial coverage, leading to less solid learning.

Equally important is evidence that increases in test scores on rote-oriented tests do not stimulate increases on assessments that look for more analytic thinking (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000); and there is evidence that students are not learning in ways that will enable them to use information and apply it to real-world problems.

While we all want children to do better in math and reading it is imperative that we educate all our children in the broader curriculum which prepares them for the world. The top 2010 jobs in this nation do not yet exist. Employees, and entrepreneurs will be using technology that has not yet been invented for solving problems that we do not yet know are problems.

Our teens currently spend on the average, 6.5 hours after school engaged in technology related activities... 33% of that time is spent on the internet, where they are creating content through blogs, web sites and face pages. That is our competition and we have to ensure that the technology is a pervasive instructional resource across all curriculum areas.

Most high-achieving nations focus their curriculum on critical thinking and problem solving, using examinations that require students to conduct research and scientific investigations, solve complex real-world problems in mathematics, and defend their ideas orally and in writing. These assessments are not used to rank or punish schools or to deny promotion or diplomas to students. (In fact, several countries have explicit proscriptions against such practices.) They are

used to evaluate the curriculum and guide investments in professional learning—in short, to help schools improve. Finally, by asking students to show what they know through real-world applications of knowledge, these other nations’ assessment systems encourage serious intellectual activities that are being driven out of U.S. schools by the tests promoted by NCLB.

What if we focused on the education debt that has accumulated over time, as an indicator of the achievement gap?

This debt comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components. The education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low income kids. This deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment. This required investment diverts resources that could go to reducing the achievement gap. If we could pay out the education debt, we could narrow the achievement debt. . . . The message would be that you need to reduce one (the education debt, defined above) in order to close the other (the achievement gap). A parallel is trying to gain a growing and robust economy with a large national debt overhang.

(February 6, 2006, e-mail)

A final component of the education debt is what I term the “moral debt.” People in moral panics attempt to describe other people, groups of individuals, or events as threats throughout a society. However, in such a panic the magnitude of the supposed threat overshadows the real threat posed.

A moral debt reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do. Saint Thomas Aquinas saw the moral debt as what human beings owe to each other in the giving of, or failure to give, honor to another when honor is due. This honor comes as a result of people's excellence or because of what they have done for another. We have no trouble recognizing that we have a moral debt to Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Elie Wiesel, or Mahatma Gandhi. But how do we recognize the moral debt that we owe to entire groups of people? How do we calculate such a debt?

Most of us live in the world of the pragmatic and practical. So we must address the education debt because it has implications for the kinds of lives we can live and the kind of education the society can expect for most of its children.

In a recent book, Michael Apple and Kristen Buras (2006) suggest that the disenfranchised can and do speak. In this country they speak from the barrios of Los Angeles and the ghettos of New York. They speak from the reservations of New Mexico and the Chinatown of San Francisco. They speak from the levee breaks of New Orleans where they remind us, as educational leaders, that we do not merely have an achievement gap—we have an education debt. The images should remind us that the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind. The images should compel us to deploy our knowledge, skills, and expertise to alleviate the suffering of the least of these.

This is a time for action-what is needed is a real strategy for change that will prepare our children for the challenges of living in a diverse international community. Only we can lead this movement and our right to take up this call to action is vested in the moral authority that comes with our positions as educational leaders.

(From Public Schools for Tomorrow)

“The 21st Century will ask every American to be a contributor in our democracy and to act effectively in a world of imposing economic, political, social, and environmental challenges. To meet these challenges, all citizens must be well educated. Today, however, too many are not, especially children of color and of poverty. This is morally unacceptable and will have drastic consequences.

Although powerful currents call for fundamental, rapid change in our schools and school systems, current education policies too often aim narrowly at keeping the nation economically competitive by closing a test score gap. They are inadequate to the need.

Our success as individuals and as a nation depends on vigorous public schools that impart “skills plus” clear, critical and original thinking, insight into the human and natural worlds, a capacity and a commitment to make a positive difference”.

Actions we can take:

1. Inspire the entire school community, staff, students and parents, to embrace the notion of continuous learning, Model it, expect it and acknowledge it when it surfaces. In your capable hands lies our future.

2. Don't ever surrender to the critics. We will one day be asked to describe the legacy we have left, let it include a sense of responsibility for the education of our children.

Those children of today - untidy, perhaps, clamorous, exuberant - are the solid citizens of tomorrow. And we need them, if we are to make any progress toward a better world

3. Commit to creating that are exciting places-thoughtful, reflective and engaging. They must be places where meaning is made from abstract concepts. They must be places that resemble workshops, studios, laboratories and newsrooms. In these classrooms we replace "record and repeat" learning delivered from the front of the room with environments that offer high expectations for intellectual discoveries, and civic engagement. . The spirit is one of shared inquiry that produces disciplined minds and caring citizens.

4. There was a time when schools were seen as institutions that nurtured social reproduction, which translated means, educating students to perpetuate a cultural status quo. We must replace time honored traditions with new ways of preparing students to participate in a global marketplace. This is a new mission

for public education and it represents a national challenge with significant moral obligations.

5. **Endurance**- Jim Collins says this very simply in his newest monograph, “Good to Great and the Social Sectors.” “Great leaders build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.” I can’t top that analysis.

The physical and emotional stamina needed to stay the course, in the face of public criticism gets too little attention. If I know the decision is right for kids, and the critics fail to understand the intent, endure the dissent and work real hard to get folks to at least understand why an unpopular decision will be upheld.

6. You must take care of your physical well being. I cannot over emphasize the importance of caring for one self-take the time to relax, reflect and manage your time selfishly. We cannot win this battle with ailing bodies.

7. Treasure every frenetic moment –whether the newspapers chose to praise or criticize, neither of which is ever predictable.

Help us continue the pursuit of a world that honors, attitudes and beliefs that allow each of us to be exactly who we are -- that, in fact, *celebrates* our differences and our distinctiveness and which asks that we use those characteristics for the greater good -- a world that recognizes that we need- what

each of us possesses within ourselves in order to have the kind of society and the kind of planet we deserve. If you believe our children equal our destiny, then spread the gospel of achievement until it reaches every household, every organization, every pulpit, every publication and every broadcast program that we control or influence.

They are not so much children at risk, as they are children of promise.

VIDEO PLAYED

Every American must recognize that our schools, public and private, must be more than places where children learn to read, they must also learn to be good, contributing citizens.

Schools should be places where the conversations are dominated by civil discourse- Places where children learn to use words, not bullets to solve problems. We face the task in our schools of rebuilding a sense of community, hope, civility, caring and safety for all our children-- Their spirits, fragile and in formation, need to embrace hope and a sense of security; a belief in America's fairness and in their ability to dream about and work towards a future that is not characterized by a loss of spirit. Do not be afraid to be courageous leaders.

Linda Darling-Hammond - *The Flat Earth and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* (2007 Educational Researcher)

Gloria Ladson-Billings - *From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools* (2006 AERA Presidential Address)

John F. Kennedy - *Profiles In Courage*