

Address to Urban League of Chicago (10/24)

It is my privilege to appear today before members of the Chicago Urban League. Yours is an organization that has been in the forefront of the battle for economic empowerment and social justice in this city.

I want to particularly thank your President and CEO, Andrea Zopp. She is a dynamic leader and a person of great accomplishment. And I'd say that even if she weren't a member of the CPS Board of Education.

I'd also like to recognize another member of the board joining us today, Rodrigo Sierra. I have really enjoyed getting to know him and appreciate all the guidance and insight he has provided.

The mayor's deputy chief of staff for education, Beth Swanson, is also in the audience today. The mayor has an amazing advisor in Beth, who I also rely on, and thank her for continued support.

I have had the honor of serving as Chicago Public Schools CEO for the past five months. During that time, I have visited schools in nearly every ward and talked to literally hundreds of principals, teachers, parents, students, community and faith leaders and other stakeholders and sifted through hundreds of pages of student achievement data. It has been a hands-on education. And those school visits and discussions will continue as long as I am CEO.

After all that I have seen and heard, I can say with confidence that there are some wonderful schools in our system that are doing great work. I have met many effective and dedicated teachers, who truly deserve our respect and gratitude for the work they do on behalf of their students. I have met some very committed and innovative principals. I have met parents who are deeply involved in their children's education.

I wish that I could tell you that this picture is consistent across the city and its public school system. I wish I could, but I can't.

Our goal must be to provide all children in Chicago with access to a world-class education in every community, so they can graduate from high school ready for college and a good career. Unfortunately, we are failing to meet that goal. On the whole, CPS is not preparing its students for what comes after high school. In fact, only 7.9% of our 11th graders last year tested college ready. And that failure is falling disproportionately on our African-American students.

It's not the students' fault. It's our fault as adults. In order to turn things around, we must make sure that the students and their achievement always comes first. Not adults. Not politics. Not administrators. Not contracts.

Nothing is more important than providing each student with a school that works for him or her. Helping each student achieve success must be our guiding principle at CPS and as a city.

I spent nearly 25 years as a teacher, principal, administrator and district superintendent. I know our school leaders and staff today face an incredibly difficult task. And the challenges facing children are greater than ever. But, for many of our students, their teachers and principals are the only support system they have. As CEO of this district, it's my charge, and that of my staff, to provide all the support schools need to drive student success. And we have a laser-like focus on that mission.

I also know that for a student growing up in urban America, it is not easy. As a child, my parents fled Haiti in 1970 to escape political persecution. Six years later, I immigrated to New York City to join them. I didn't speak a word of English. I didn't know the culture. It was difficult to make friends. The odds were and still are stacked against young, black students growing up poor in a city like New York. In 1976, I was young, black, living in the housing projects of Brooklyn struggling to learn English. The odds were stacked against me. I was able to persevere and succeed and stand before you today refusing to accept the proposition that African-American students growing up in urban America aren't capable of superior achievement. I'm a testament to that. Andrea Zopp is a testament to that...and so are most of you in this room.

One only has to look at some of the schools in our system to see that excellence is achievable in all communities and among all students thanks to strong school leaders and dedicated teachers who work hard every day to help their students succeed.

In the year 2010, Frazier International Magnet School in North Lawndale was the only 90/90/90 school in the entire State of Illinois. What does that mean? It means that 90 percent of the students were minority; 90 percent received a free or reduced-price lunch; and yet 90 percent of the students met or exceeded state standards.

This was no fluke. Frazier did it again last school year, and was joined by Chopin School in West Town. In fact, there are 12 other schools in the CPS system whose student bodies are at least half minority and in which 30 percent of their students or more exceeded the ISAT standards. It's not a question of student ability. It's a question of will. One of our young principals recently said that "the railroad is no longer underground. It is public, tangible and is a high performing school".

Take a school like Burnham Elementary on Chicago's south side in the Jeffrey Manor neighborhood. It's one of the pockets of hope I've found throughout our city. In

2011, Burnham's students tested at 82.6% meeting or exceeding state standards on the ISAT and the school is on the cusp of joining the 90/90/90 club.

While other neighborhood schools around it are struggling, Burnham staff has been able to help their children achieve academic success. Their kids come from the same community and face the same socio-economic challenges. So why are the results so different? They are proving that neighborhood schools in the toughest and most challenging areas can thrive and give students a quality education when you have the right leadership, staff and vision to drive student achievement.

But, there aren't enough Fraziers, Burnhams and Chopins in our system and too many schools serving African-American students are falling far short of those standards – not just for one year, but year after year and sometimes decade after decade. The consequences for the students in those failing schools are devastating. After all, most of us get only one chance at an education.

Let me put this in perspective.

- Only 57% of our students graduated last year
- There are 123,000 students in our district who seat every day in lousy schools – so nearly one in three students attends a school that is not preparing them for college and career
- This year, only 31% of our 8th graders tested on the path for college readiness. I'm sure you, as do I, find that unacceptable.
- Another – Only one in seven African American high school students had an ACT score at 20 or above...and the college admission benchmark is 21. And, only 55% of these students graduated last year – so not only are they not enough graduating, but they're not graduating college ready or meeting the benchmark for college admissions.
- Additionally, the achievement gap for Latino high school students is 33% percentage points – and that gap has grown by more than 8 points over the last decade.
- So achievement and college readiness for the majority of our children in CPS are not getting better, but worse.

As a result of this poor performance, many African-American parents and children are voting with their feet. Since 2001, the African-American student population within CPS has dropped by more than 55,000 – a 24 percent decrease. Ten years ago, African-Americans made up 52 percent of the CPS population. Today, that figure has dropped to 42 percent. Chicago lost 200,000 people during that time, so it's no surprise that most were from this community.

Just last month, the Consortium on Chicago School Research completed an exhaustive review of Chicago's public schools during the post-1995 reform era. Here are some of its disturbing findings:

- Racial gaps in achievement have steadily increased, with white students making more progress than Latino students -- and African-American students falling behind all other groups.
- Elementary and high school test scores of African-American and Latino students were much further behind those of white students. And African-American students' scores improved the least during that era.
- While graduation rates improved considerably, they are lowest for African-American students and grew the least of all racial and ethnic groups.
- Schools that started off with the lowest levels of achievement – those that most needed to improve – were the least likely to show substantial improvements in either reading or math.
- Equity declined, so that schools serving African-American students, and those that started out with the lowest levels of performance, were less likely than most to improve their test scores.

As an educator, this growing achievement gap is unacceptable to me. As a black man, it is unacceptable to me. As a father, it is unacceptable to me. As a Chicagoan, it is unacceptable to me. And it should be unacceptable to you and everyone who cares about Chicago's future.

So how do we change these disheartening trends? How do we provide access to a world-class education – not just for some students, but for all students in every community across our city?

The answer, in short, is that kids must come first.

We cannot accept the status quo one day longer. We must be willing to challenge the way things have always been done. That means taking politics out of the classroom and putting educational achievement in.

Our push for a longer school day is an example of the problem. It's clear to everyone, especially teachers, that CPS students need more class time to meet their academic goals – and to allow for the restoration of music, art and recess.

And it's going to happen.

The education reform bill passed earlier this year in Springfield gives CPS the right to implement a longer school day – and we will. The future of our students demands it. They cannot compete against students from other cities – and other countries – who spend years longer in the classroom by the time they graduate from high school.

Yet, our effort to speed up that timetable and provide more instruction time this year has become bogged down in union politics. As too often happens, the interests of students and parents have taken a back seat.

It was interesting to me – and noted in a recent Chicago Tribune editorial – that the CTU's petition to the Illinois Education Labor Board regarding longer school days made no mention of the students in the classroom. Not one. But they are the ones who this struggle is all about.

We will continue working to make a longer school day available to schools and teachers who want to pursue it. We would much prefer to do it with the cooperation of the CTU but, either way, we think it is worth the fight.

While the dispute over a longer school day has grabbed most of the headlines, we are moving ahead with other initiatives to change the system and serve its students:

We stabilized the sinking ship of CPS finances by cutting \$400 million in management and streamlining the bureaucracy while taking the tough but necessary step of raising additional revenue.

Despite these huge budget pressures, we were able to invest in expanded kindergarten, enhanced school safety and preserving our current class sizes.

We are preparing to introduce a new curriculum that will focus on preparing students with the knowledge and skills they need to go on to college and careers.

We are working to set clear and transparent performance standards, school-by-school, so we can hold principals accountable for meeting and exceeding those goals.

We are building a talent pipeline to ensure that every Chicago school has a qualified, committed principal in charge. And we're giving each principal the freedom and responsibility to put together a team of highly effective teachers for their school.

Finally, we are working to build -- in every community -- a portfolio of high-performing schools. This will provide parents across Chicago with the choices they deserve to assure the academic success of their children.

Our vision is of a city of high-performing schools, so we can invest in those schools and make them perform even better. We want to encourage and reward success. We will not subsidize continued failure.

We cannot accept one more year of failing schools and flagging achievement. And we cannot accept a system that continues to allow African-American students to fall behind.

We must make the difficult but necessary decision to close consistently low-performing schools and move their students into schools of higher achievement. We must do this through an open process, which provides for community input and consultation. We must do it with sensitivity and respect -- but do it we must.

Just as with closing obsolete police stations, we are certain to meet resistance:

From unions concerned about the impact on their members, be they teachers or other school employees. From parents and grandparents who might have attended those schools in earlier generations. From aldermen and other elected officials who closely, and rightfully, guard over the communities they serve.

Yes, change can be uncomfortable. But continued failure is unconscionable.

As a school district and as a community, we must make sure that kids come first – no matter the interest groups that oppose us. It is the only way to ensure that we are doing right by Chicago's future.

The road ahead will be long. The choices before us are difficult. But the Urban League has a history of taking on the toughest fights for economic empowerment and social justice. Providing all our young people with high-performing schools is a part of that battle. It provides the strong foundation for their future -- and for ours as a city.

I appreciate the example you have set for nearly 100 years as an organization. The Urban League has blazed a trail of progress on the social and economic issues that really matter. You recognize that a good education is the foundation of economic opportunity for all of Chicago's residents. And your leadership and advocacy on behalf of education reform will be absolutely vital to its success.

That's why I need you to take this message and engage your family, your colleagues and your neighbors in a conversation about the quality of education we are providing our children and what they are willing to do to help change the system so that our kids come first. Ask yourself and ask them:

Do you accept that only half of African American students graduate from high school – or do you want to be part of the dialogue to help change that?

Are you willing to accept an achievement gap for African American high school students of 44%? – Or do you want to be part of the dialogue to help change that?

Are you willing to accept an achievement gap of nearly 30% for Latino children – or do you want to be part of the dialogue to help change that?

I plan to engage other stakeholders throughout Chicago in this conversation as I continue meeting with them to talk about the quality of education and doing everything within our power to ensure that children in every community can access a world-class education.

I could have no better ally than you as we climb this mountain together. I appreciate your invitation to speak today, and I humbly ask for your support.

Thank you.