



## **CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett Five-Year Action Plan Speech**

*\* Remarks as prepared \**

*George Westinghouse College Prep  
Monday, June 10, 2013*

Good afternoon!

I want to thank President Vitale for that kind introduction. I also appreciate all of you in the audience who have taken time out of your busy day because of your interest in public education in our city. I want to thank you for that on behalf of our school children.

I would like to particularly acknowledge our partners at the Chicago Public Education Fund for their inspirational and unwavering commitment to Chicago's next generation, and their critical support in the development of the District Action Plan.

It is truly a privilege to be back at Westinghouse College Prep today. Westinghouse is an example of what is best in Chicago Public Schools and what can work well when leadership, teachers, students, parents, and the community collaborate to ensure every child is learning, reaching their potential, and on the road to success in college, in a rewarding career, and in life.

As you know, it is graduation season in Chicago—a time of enormous pride for thousands of students and families across the city.

In hundreds of public schools young people who have worked hard are getting their day to shine. Friends and families are celebrating. Teachers and principals are beaming with pride.

It is a time of joy and hope; a time to look to the future.

There is a great sense of accomplishment. Every child who graduates is a victory for Chicago because we are a city with a shared belief in the power of education to transform lives.

When a child succeeds, we have all done something good together – something meaningful that makes us all stronger and better and holds so much promise for our city.

But even as our accomplished young graduates walk across that stage and receive a diploma, there is a question I ask myself:

Is Chicago ready to graduate?

Can we graduate from the school system of yesterday to the school system of tomorrow? Can we move beyond the battles of the past and come together to meet the challenges of the future?

Can we unite around a common set of beliefs and strategies—put our collective shoulders to the wheel and push forward with all of our strength so that more and more young people can make it across that stage?

Today, many of our schools are thriving. Some are among the very best in the state of Illinois.

But others are not meeting those standards. Some of them have failed their students, year after year.

As the CEO of this District, I cannot accept that. The taxpayers of Chicago should not accept that. And neither should the parents and children who rely on those schools.

Yes, Chicago Public Schools has made significant progress in recent years. This progress can be seen in rising high school graduation rates. It can be seen in increased rates of college enrollment. And our progress is apparent in the work underway in classrooms and schools across the District every day.

But no one can reasonably argue we have done enough. No one can say that our work is complete, that our challenges have been met, or that we have fulfilled our mission on behalf of every child in every community.

The progress we have seen has been too incremental; and the results have been distributed too unevenly. While there are pockets of excellence in every community, the achievement gap persists. In fact, it has widened. Decades of reforms, even those implemented with the best intentions, have not always gained traction or benefited large numbers of the students we serve.

As a District we have been through a challenging consolidation process. But now it is time to turn the page and look forward to a new school year and new opportunities for our children to succeed.

CPS is a complex, dynamic organization and I am conscious that there is no panacea—no silver bullet—that will solve all of the challenges we face.

But from a strong body of educational research here in Chicago and across the country we have an emerging understanding of what we must do in order to provide a high-quality education for every child in every community.

This rich evidence base, and the input of thousands of CPS families, principals, students, teachers, and community members, inform our District vision and Five Year Action Plan.

The vision—that every CPS student in every neighborhood will be engaged in a rigorous, well-rounded instructional program and will graduate prepared for success in college, a career, and life—is based on our core beliefs and values.

We believe that all of our children are capable of success, every child must have equitable access to a high-quality education, and our children's academic achievement and well-being come first.

At CPS, our work is driven by our core values that we hold high expectations for every student, we expect excellence in the adults who serve our students and hold them accountable, and we base every decision on what is best for our students.

In order to achieve the vision for Chicago's next generation there are numerous steps we need to take together as a school district, as a city, and as a community.

The Action Plan is supported by five pillars:

The first pillar is high standards, a strong curriculum, and powerful instruction that will prepare all students for a higher education, a career, and a life of good citizenship. This begins with ensuring that every child arrives in first grade ready to learn.

Nationally, only 65 percent of four year-olds from the lowest income backgrounds attend preschool. And this matters. Children from the highest socio-economic backgrounds start school with 60 percent higher achievement on average than children from poorer families.

CPS currently provides quality early childhood programs for 42,000 children from birth to age five, and we offer full-day kindergarten for 17,000 students. Thanks to support from the Mayor and the Board of Education, next school year we will have universal full-day kindergarten for the first time in the city's history.

Early intervention in the educational lives of our students is critical to ensuring their future academic and career success. We are revising our early childhood education curriculum and instruction with a strong, evidence-based emphasis on early language development and literacy.

We know that children who start with quality early-childhood learning have strong academic and social advantages in later grades. Full-day kindergarten gives the teachers of our five year-olds the time to develop the critical cognitive and social skills they will need in the future.

Further, we are moving aggressively to adopt the Common Core State Standards. These standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students must learn to be prepared for college and career in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We already have begun to implement the Common Core in schools across the District, and those standards will be fully implemented by the 2014-2015 school year. We will support our teachers in Common Core instruction through professional development and curriculum materials.

The second pillar of the Action Plan is ensuring a robust system of supports that meets the needs of all of our students. This grows from our philosophy that every student is unique, and all children need support and attention to develop personally and academically.

Just the other day, I found myself in a pre-kindergarten classroom. A little boy there, Jaden, was pointing out pictures of his classmates on the wall. When he got to one boy, he told me, "He's not happy." "Why not?" I asked. "He doesn't like him," Jaden said—meaning this beautiful, young boy smiling at me in his photo does not like himself for some reason.

Jaden's comment reminded me that, as we work to educate children who grow up in communities plagued by chaos and violence, we must incorporate strategies to protect their mental health and sense of self-worth.

As part of our Action Plan, we are implementing health, social, guidance, and co-curricular support services for all students and their families. And we are focusing especially on programs and practices to improve student attendance.

We all know that regular school attendance is critical for academic success. We cannot teach children who are not in school. And if they are not in school, we need to understand why.

Even as early as preschool, we have a truancy rate of 25 percent! That is unacceptable and destructive. We need to get these children in school where they belong.

That's why we will require each school to organize an attendance team comprised of appropriate staff and community partners to identify chronically absent students and provide intervention. These "lost children" are waiting for adults to find them. The District must create a system to find these children and re-engage them.

We have developed a plan to hold parents accountable for getting their children to school and keeping them there. This may require new ways of thinking about how we educate these students.

Already, we have opened three re-engagement centers, and our outreach workers are searching for dropouts, assisting in re-enrollment, and monitoring re-enrolled students to provide follow-up support.

One thing I can promise: We will never give up on any child.

This pillar of our plan also ensures that every student graduates high school with a concrete post-secondary plan. We will provide counselors and professional development strategies to keep students on track and guide them toward successful futures after graduation.

The third pillar is for the District to engage and empower families and communities. Parents, policymakers, local businesses and faith communities all have a role to play in supporting our schools and students. The work we do in the classroom can be strengthened greatly with help from community members and organizations.

This starts with giving parents a clear understanding of how to support their children's education. My vision is one of parents and teachers working together every day for the benefit of each child in every classroom.

We can engage parents and work with them by developing a Parent University—a place where parents can learn math and literacy, become more proficient in English, earn GED and college credits, learn skills to get a job, and take classes on parenting.

As a District, we can support principals to strengthen family and community engagement by encouraging parent attendance at report card pick-up days and creating a welcoming school environment.

We need to ensure that parents are offered meaningful ways to engage with schools, and that all of the District's work is transparent.

Public schools belong to the people and their communities. Only by working together can we ensure our collective vision of children with a joy for learning and school as engaging and meaningful.

To accomplish this, we are improving our collaborations with institutions of higher learning, the philanthropic community, and faith-based and community-based organizations. And we are developing school-to-career opportunities that connect students to apprenticeships, internships and mentorships that will lead to employment.

Everyone has a stake in the success of our next generation. So everyone shares responsibility in shaping and educating our children.

The fourth pillar supporting our plan is to ensure committed, effective teachers, leaders, and staff.

A positive learning environment does not just happen. Students achieve when school leaders support teachers and teachers have the tools, resources and time to teach effectively.

Research tells us that the quality of a teacher is the most important in-school factor in a student's education, and this is even truer for students in disadvantaged schools.

We need teachers who are collaborators—with each other and with their students' families. That's why we are creating a system of positive accountability to support effective teaching. We are doing this in close cooperation with our teachers, recognizing that teaching is a complex and dynamic profession.

Past approaches to evaluation and accountability have been scattered and disconnected. It's no wonder that some teachers have become suspicious and discouraged.

That's why we will assess our teachers and principals—and everyone in the system—with a single, coordinated, and rigorous accountability framework that is aligned with our academic goals and our strategic plan for the District.

We also are taking important steps to further empower our school principals, because we recognize that great schools do not exist without great leaders setting high standards. That's why CPS has launched a Principal Quality Initiative to provide new mechanisms for principal eligibility, professional development, accountability, and recognition.

The final pillar of our Action Plan is sound fiscal, operational, and accountability systems. We need to hold all schools—including charters and magnets—to a consistent set of measurable outcomes, including attendance and graduation rates.

By transitioning to a student-based budgeting system, we are implementing an equitable school funding process that ensures tax dollars are spent in the classroom—where they belong.

Better teaching and learning now is possible because every child in every school has access to a full school day and full school year. Our children and teachers finally have the time they need for core subjects like math, reading and science, as well as for enrichments like music, the arts, and recess.

Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our teachers, students, and principals, CPS is continuing to make meaningful and measurable progress on key metrics, such as attendance, graduation, and college enrollment.

I am happy to announce that our attendance rates at CPS are continuing to improve. Year-to-date attendance for all students in elementary and high school is 92.9 percent, which is an increase of .4 percent from last year and 1.2 percent from the year before that. These numbers may sound small, but consider that in the last two years alone, over 4,000 more children are attending school regularly in Chicago.

The District is continuing to make progress on graduation. Last year, we achieved a record graduation rate of 61.2 percent—surpassing the previous year's 58.3 percent and 55.8 percent in 2010. This year, we project that we are on-track to reach a record

graduation rate of 63 percent.

This is steady progress and something that every principal, teacher and student can be proud of.

But we cannot be satisfied. This still means that more than one out of three CPS students fails to graduate. That is not just their failure; it is ours as a city.

And the truth is that, in our new global economy, a high school diploma doesn't guarantee success. We need to make sure that CPS students are going on to college or a career.

CPS students' college enrollment has been increasing as well. This year, six out of ten graduating seniors are enrolling in college.

But it's simply not enough that more of our students are being accepted to college. We must make sure they can succeed once they arrive. We are working to ensure our graduates are prepared for the challenges of a higher education and equipped to take advantage of all the opportunities college offers.

That is why we have expanded access to high quality school options, such as International Baccalaureate or "IB" programs and Science, Technology, Education, and Math or "STEM" programs. STEM schools create learner-driven environments designed to point students toward success in college and careers.

A recent report by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that, when compared to similar students entering high school, International Baccalaureate students are 40 percent more likely to attend a four-year college and 50 percent more likely to attend a highly selective college.

Since 2011, CPS has added more than 18,000 high-quality opportunities for students across Chicago. This school year, five new Early College STEM Schools opened along with a new selective enrollment program at South Shore International College Prep High School.

Next fall, CPS will double the number of students who have access to the rigorous IB Program, with five new programs and six new wall-to-wall IB high schools.

Additionally, we are creating 11 new STEM and seven new IB programs in Welcoming Schools to provide high-quality programs in neighborhoods that previously lacked these options.

This is real progress in preparing our young people for the future. But I won't be satisfied until we offer high-quality school options in every neighborhood across Chicago.

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The five pillars I've outlined for you aren't just an abstraction. They are designed to support the core work of the Chicago Public Schools: ensuring effective teaching and learning across all of our classrooms, grades and schools.

And the only way we can achieve this goal is by working together as one city.

This goal is not too big for us. In fact, it is essential. We can only secure Chicago's future by securing the future of our kids.

To do so, we have to work together in a collaborative, citywide effort on behalf of our next generation.

The success of Chicago's young people is our shared responsibility. It cannot be left to teachers and principals, alone.

The community is a vital source of nourishment for a child's growth and development. We need to draw on all the resources of our city and its people.

It will take the contributions of all—nonprofits and community-based organizations, businesses, higher education institutions, religious leaders, elected officials, city agencies and the philanthropic community—to achieve our vision for all of Chicago's children.

Every Chicagoan has a stake in their success. The future of our city is inextricably bound to the success of our children.

I know for a fact that every single child in our District was born with the God-given ability to succeed. I see the proof every single day in schools and classrooms across Chicago.

I see it as our youngest learners in pre-kindergarten programs develop the fundamentals of literacy that will prepare them for success in the first grade. I see it in our high schools where, every day, students are mastering advanced concepts that will prepare them for success in college.

I see with my own eyes and know in my own heart that the children of Chicago are imbued with unlimited potential—but I also know they will only reach this potential if they have a team of adults supporting their success in their classrooms and their communities.

I see a lot of those adults here in this room today, and I know they exist in every neighborhood, on every block.

The passion and enthusiasm that Chicago's adults have for education has been evident to me in the community meetings I have attended, in our Local School Council meetings, and in the work of our Community Action Councils.

And while I am aware that not every member of every community will always agree with all of the decisions of the District, that is no excuse to sit on the sidelines when it comes to providing a high-quality education for every child.

Community involvement matters.

Extensive research has shown that school-community partnerships work best when a community organizes around the school's goal of educating children and the school embraces the partnership of the community.

You see, I believe that right now sitting in one of our classrooms is a Nobel Prize winner. A world renowned author. An Olympic Gold Medalist. The next Miles Davis. The next Jennifer Hudson. The next Barack Obama. Or maybe even the next Michelle!

But these children need us adults to get off the sidelines and get involved in meaningful and productive ways.

Our children need mentors and positive role models to support their success. That is why, beginning next school year, every adult employed by the District—including those in Central Office—will be responsible for mentoring a child.

We need an army of believers in Chicago! We need to incorporate all of the assets of this incredible city into our children's education. We need to leverage local organizations as links to learning for every child.

This is our shared responsibility. This is the covenant we must keep with our next generation.

Only together can we ensure a future in which every child, from every community, realizes their potential and has the tools they need to succeed in college, in a career, and in life.

If you share this vision and this commitment, then I hope you will join us. It's the best investment in Chicago's future that any one of us can ever make.

Thank you.