



**Superintendent Dr. Beverly L. Hall
Atlanta Public Schools (APS)
6th Annual State of the Schools in Atlanta
The Carter Center
August 18, 2009
7:30 a.m.**

REMARKS AS PREPARED

Open House: Take a New Look at APS

Great job, Sydney – and thank you for that introduction. Would everyone please join me in giving Sydney another round of applause?

Sydney's "school house," as she calls it, holds an impressive title. Last year, it received the U.S. Department of Education's highest honor for academic excellence. Out of the 97,000 public and private schools in the country, F.L. Stanton was one of only 325 recognized as a 2008 National Blue Ribbon School.

Congratulations to the community of F.L. Stanton, including its principal, Dr. Marlo Barber, staff, students and parents, for all of their hard work in earning such a distinction and for joining the ranks of the eight other National Blue Ribbon Schools in APS. F.L. Stanton is one of many schools that reflect the turnaround taking place across the district.

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for attending our 6th Annual State of the Schools Address.

Last year when we met, I shared a story about a local real estate agent who wasn't aware of the turnaround of the city's public schools. The story generated considerable interest because families looking to buy a home look closely at the schools in the neighborhood. So it didn't really matter if everyone from policymakers in Washington, D.C., to educators in China knew about Atlanta Public Schools' dramatic progress, when some key individuals right here in the city did not. Clearly, we had to get to work.

I believe it was former political reporter Bill Nigut who said last year, “We must do something to inform the real estate community about these great public schools.”

Well, we did do something.

During the 2008-09 school year, based on the results of a survey conducted by the Atlanta Education Fund and the Metro Atlanta Chamber, our school district initiated an outreach strategy. We targeted agents, land developers, corporate relocation specialists, and prospective parents.

As you can see this morning, we may have outdone ourselves a bit. The invitations, signs and staging – as well as the video presentation that you’ll see later – have all been inspired by Atlanta’s real estate industry.

Yes, today *is* an open house, and I am thrilled to invite every member of the community to take a new look at Atlanta Public Schools.

Our school district has been on an unprecedented 10-year journey of building, refining, growing and fulfilling.

After launching our comprehensive reform agenda in 1999, we’ve been building schools, refining instruction, growing and graduating scholars, and fulfilling our promises to students and to the citizens of Atlanta.

As a result, the state of our schools can be described in one sentence: Atlanta Public Schools is becoming a model urban school district.

This morning, I’m going to discuss what our school system currently offers and how we are building for the future.

Quality: A Decade of Academic Growth

Please allow me to indulge our real estate theme further. We know that after homebuyers narrow their search to a particular neighborhood, two key factors influence their purchasing decision: the quality of the house and the asking price.

Similarly, parents choose schools for their children based on the quality of the academic program and the value provided. When it comes to quality and value, Atlanta’s public schools have something special to offer.

In real estate lingo, Atlanta Public Schools is the right choice for the right price at the right time.

Let’s start with the academic highlights.

The New Schools at Carver

It was exactly two months and three weeks ago when we watched the legacy class of The New Schools at Carver march across the stage of the Atlanta Civic Center. Thursday, May 28th, 8:30 p.m. was a milestone moment for our city, as those graduates became Atlanta's first to have four full years of experience at a transformed, smaller, more academically challenging public high school.

In 2002, which is as far back as we can go to compare graduation data, the old Carver had a graduation rate of only 14.4 percent. However, this past May, according to data released by the state, the *new* Carver delivered a graduation rate of 94 percent.

When the graduates took their seats on stage, 40 percent of them had already completed coursework in Georgia colleges. A full 94 percent of them were accepted to two- or four-year colleges and universities. They had more than \$18 million in scholarship offers.

By the way, the Carver campus sits in postal code 30315. That ZIP code was declared one of the worst in metro Atlanta for home foreclosures this year.

It wasn't by accident that we chose Carver in 2005 as the first APS high school to be transformed into smaller learning environments. As a matter of fact, we were advised to start our high school transformation initiative with a school where there was some history of high achievement.

But we said no, and our thinking was that if transformation could be achieved at Carver, it could be done in any other urban school in America. It's being done in other high schools in Atlanta.

This year, Douglass and Washington opened officially as transformed schools – Douglass as a school of four small learning communities and Washington as a campus of four small schools. In all, we've transformed six high schools, with only three more to launch by the 2010-2011 school year.

We have shown that change is possible and good things happen to Atlanta's youth when the community comes together and provides a quality academic program and a value-added learning facility. The districtwide graduation rate has increased dramatically over the past few years, from 39 percent in 2002 to 71.7 percent in the 2007-2008 school year.

Steady progress on the CRCT

I have more good news to report about the academic quality of our schools.

In 2000, the state of Georgia began administering the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, or CRCT, to measure student achievement in the elementary and middle grades. Despite the increasing difficulty of the tests, APS has posted a ninth year of steady gains, significantly increasing the percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards from 2000 to 2009.

For example, in 2000, just 47 percent of APS eighth-graders met or exceeded standards in English/language arts. Fast forward to 2009, and the state's data show that 90 percent of APS eighth-graders met or exceeded standards. In grades and subjects across the board, we are seeing a similar trajectory of improvement.

We've actually reached the point today where larger numbers of our students are exceeding standards – when a decade ago, half of APS students weren't meeting them. Today, one in three elementary students exceeds the standards, and the rate of students exceeding standards in the higher grades is growing as well.

Nation's Report Card

While we won't have the results of the 2009 Nation's Report Card until later this school year, the data we do have on the nation's most rigorous test serve as validation of the state's test results. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the percentage of Atlanta's students scoring beyond the basic level – that is, at or above proficient and advanced – has risen in all NAEP subjects and grades from 2002 to 2007.

I've provided a great deal of information that may be difficult to absorb, so let me summarize it. The bottom line is this: By state and national standards, the students of Atlanta Public Schools are mastering the learning material, increasingly at high levels.

As an educator for more than 30 years, I know that strong test scores are the result of effective teaching and a solid instructional program. At this time, would the instructional leaders of Atlanta Public Schools, our principals, who represent more than 3,000 dedicated and talented teachers, please stand as we commend you?

Value: A Decade of Operational Progress

I've talked about quality as it relates to APS' academic side of the house. Now allow me to discuss our value – in other words the steps we've taken over the past decade to become a more lean, in some cases, "green" state-of-the-art operation.

On three separate occasions, citizens have voted to pay an extra penny in sales tax to create 21st century learning environments across the school district.

How many people have had the opportunity to visit the new Springdale Park Elementary School?

Or the young men's B.E.S.T. Academy at Benjamin S. Carson?

For those who haven't, I invite you to take a look.

Located in the Druid Hills community, Springdale Park is a beautiful, environmentally friendly campus that strikes just the right balance between historic character and modern design. The school has too many impressive features to name, but I will point out its rooftop garden, where students will be able to grow food as part of an exciting farm-to-school initiative.

The B.E.S.T. Academy now has a permanent new home on Donald L. Hollowell Parkway. Last week, the school opened in the first completed phase of its high-tech facility. Indeed, it's shaping up to be a modern marvel, four stories of inspiring architecture, including a media center full of majestic windows.

Again, thanks to taxpayers' support, in all, the district has built 15 new schools, completed 52 renovations and made systems upgrades at numerous facilities since 1999. At the same time, the board has passed fiscally prudent operating budgets that allowed the local property tax millage rate to be lowered no fewer than seven times.

Bear in mind that since 2003, the state allotment for Atlanta Public Schools has been cut by more than \$82 million. And we know difficult days lie ahead. Our school district could face a \$50 million budget gap in 2011 and \$100 million gap in 2012. Clearly, such a significant loss of funding would impact our schools and slow down the good progress we've made.

For the moment, however, it is remarkable that our district has found a way to fund every component of our comprehensive reform agenda without allowing cuts to touch the classroom or furlough teachers who need critical planning days. How have we done it?

- By closing more than 20 schools in response to shifting enrollment patterns in the city since 1999
- By cutting more than 1,300 positions from our workforce since 2002
- By reducing this year's budget by \$9 million compared to last year
- By leveraging funding from President Obama's stimulus package

Most of all, by being part of a broader community of partners – neighbors – who believe that Atlanta Public Schools is a system worthy of investment. Since 1999, we've benefitted from approximately \$156 million in private investment and philanthropic support. Those investments have translated into tangible results in student achievement.

Again, Atlanta Public Schools is the right choice for the right price at the right time.

Foreclosure or Failure: Not an Option

Recently, I learned a surprising fact. Foreclosures on Habitat for Humanity homes are rare across the nation. One reason may be that the homes are constructed with the help of private donations, volunteer builders and the sweat equity of the homeowners-to-be.

Truly, a community of individuals converges on one family, and puts in hours upon hours of work – even after the homes have been built – to ensure that foreclosure is not an option.

I believe that's exactly what has taken place for the last 10 years in Atlanta Public Schools. Because of the support of a community of builders, the district has been able to employ practices that experts say only a handful of big-city districts are undertaking.

For example, we've become a model for the nation in school-board governance. We learned just last week that our school board is one of only two finalists for the Council of Urban Boards of Education's national award for excellence in board governance, community engagement and student achievement. I can think of no board more deserving of this honor.

Congratulations and thank you to the members of the Atlanta Board of Education. Would you please stand, so we can recognize your hard work and commitment to the youth of our community.

Atlanta has also been described as "cutting edge" and "innovative" for our work ...

- Empowering school reform teams and transforming the central office into a service-driven operating unit
- Providing ongoing and intensive job-embedded professional development for teachers and principals
- Creating an aggressive accountability system with performance incentives for all employees in schools that meet their annual targets

Moreover, without the broader community's advocacy, we would never have had the wherewithal to bring the following strategies to Atlanta nearly 10 years ago:

- Our signature reform model Project GRAD, resulting in improved attendance, higher test scores and rising graduation rates at schools that were once the lowest performing in the district
- Teach for America teachers, 800 of whom have served in APS classrooms over the years, bringing with them academic credentials from top-tier colleges and universities. More than 300 TFA teachers are still with the district, half of them fulfilling their two-year commitment and the other half staying beyond their commitment.

- Principal for a Day, our annual flagship event with the Metro Atlanta Chamber, which has helped place two or more strategic business partners in 90 percent of our schools.
- Our SABLE leadership academy, which grooms internal aspiring leaders for an opportunity to serve as principals in our schools. Since 1999, 90 percent of our principals are new to the system, and 25 percent of them have been trained through SABLE.

These endeavors are among the many that have contributed to the culture of continuous improvement and high expectations that cut across our school system.

I hope it's clear to all that Atlanta Public Schools offers a quality academic program, value in the form of operational efficiencies, and supportive and committed partners who know that their success is tied to the success of their public schools.

Under Construction: Long-Term Strategies

So are Atlanta's public schools built to last? Is the turnaround guaranteed for the long term? Can we withstand any additional economic headwinds?

Well, we certainly hope so, but we are also clear that challenges remain, and the work continues.

Let me emphasize that Atlanta Public Schools is not a system that reacts hastily as challenges arise. Rather, we look at best practices, do our research, then choose a path and stay the course. That's how we've been able to sustain our improvement. That's how we've been able to close the achievement gap in the elementary grades and make steady incremental gains at the secondary level.

Bold interventions, from our high school transformation initiative to our Effective Teacher in Every Classroom strategy, will distinguish our school district for the long term and continue to place students on a path of progress.

Here's an update on our strategic initiatives, starting with our work to transform the middle grades experience.

Transforming middle schools

Sydney was right when she referred to my disastrous first year as a teacher in middle school, which is where I spent most of my career. I remember all too well the unique challenges of dealing with 13-year-olds:

- They're painfully self-conscious about their physical appearance.
- They avoid embarrassment and self-exposure at all costs.
- They – and their parents – tend to be terrified about their transition from elementary to middle school, and on to high school.

Our Middle School Transformation Initiative takes into account these issues that impact students' academic performance. Our two new single-gender academies, which opened with huge success two years ago, now have three grade levels, 6, 7 and 8. Both academies met adequate yearly progress for 2009, which indicates that the district's decision to restructure the failing and now-closed Carson Honors Preparatory has been successful. Both academies will grow to grades 9 through 12, with next year marking the first class of single-gender high school students.

Districtwide, 88.2 percent of our middle schools made adequate yearly progress in 2009 – more than in the previous year – and two schools came off the “needs improvement” list. This year, we've designated four pilot middle schools. We're calling them our “vanguard” schools: Coretta Scott King, Inman, Kennedy and Price. In each vanguard school, our sixth-graders will benefit from class schedules with fewer teachers, extended instructional periods in core subjects, units that are designed with an interdisciplinary approach, and teachers' effective use of common planning time.

We will take what we learn from the vanguard schools and make improvements to all 16 APS middle schools.

Preparing college-ready students

Our goal is uncompromising: to prepare middle school students for the academic rigor that awaits them in high school ... and to prepare graduates that leave our system poised for success in college and in life.

As I said earlier, we're completing our high school transformation. Though we have made great strides in improving our graduation rates, data and feedback from our graduates indicate that too many students are not adequately prepared for college-level coursework. Within their first semesters at college, many of our students are required to take remedial courses in reading, writing and mathematics.

The research is clear. If the students of Atlanta are going to be high performing, we will have to accelerate our efforts around recruiting, hiring, developing and retaining the most effective and highest quality teachers.

We know we have many talented and dedicated teachers in our classrooms currently. However, in order to continue increasing student achievement, we must have an effective teacher in every class every day.

That's the next frontier – transforming teaching. Our school district has launched an innovative teaching transformation strategy. We call it our Effective Teacher in Every Classroom approach. It includes a package of carefully designed initiatives – including a teacher residency program, career path opportunities and more job-embedded professional development – to build an adequate supply of effective teachers across our school system.

Through our urban teacher residency program, we intend to grow our own cadre of teachers with expertise in critical shortage areas, including middle and high school mathematics, science and foreign language. As an added incentive to teachers, we've already designed an innovative career ladder for high performers. We want our best teachers to remain connected to the classroom, but we respect the fact that they have aspirations. So we plan to offer several career path opportunities, with incentive pay, to put talented teachers in leadership roles inside the classroom.

We are doing what it takes for our school district to become a model in urban education reform.

Closing the Deal: Keeping Our Promises

So, thank you, Atlanta, for 10 years of building, refining and growing Atlanta Public Schools. Our time together has been well spent, but we still have unfinished business.

We will continue our focus on:

- Moving students from meeting standards to exceeding them
- Creating the framework for overall effective schools, as well as placing an effective teacher in every classroom every day
- Producing a blue ribbon district, not just blue ribbon schools
- Preparing high school graduates and college graduates

As we look toward total transformation, I ask that we be forever mindful of the two most important words in any relationship: promises kept.

We've made a promise to 50,000 children. When we keep our promise to them – to educate them at high levels – then we will have changed their destiny forever and for the better.

At this time, I want to close my remarks where I began, talking to our real-estate friends. I've taken the liberty of drafting a persuasive property ad that, I believe, would attract a serious buyer. A property ad that sells would say something along these lines:

Gorgeous renovated home in Atlanta ... with hardwood floors, granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances ... located on picturesque tree-lined street ... within walking distance from an award-winning school of excellence that's supported by corporate and civic neighbors who care ... teachers and principals who succeed ... parents who stay involved ... and students who achieve.

We continue our work so that soon – from north to south, east to west – that kind of ad will be written for every neighborhood in our great city.

Again, for every child, our school district is the right choice for the right price at the right time. I invite you to take a new look at Atlanta Public Schools.