



**Chicago Child Care Society Luncheon
November 13, 2014**

Good afternoon and thank you for that warm introduction.

Before I begin I would like to wish the Chicago Child Care Society a very special happy birthday. For 165 years you have held the city's most vulnerable children and families in your capable arms ... providing them with the kind of support and nurturing that can transform lives.

This is an incredible legacy, one we are building on today on behalf of Chicago's Next Generation.

I look across this room and I see so many friends and partners in this important work.

If I can leave you with just one message today, it is this: We are all in this together.

The children of Chicago need and deserve our collective strength to rise above the challenges they face. They need each and every one of us pulling in the same direction with all our might.

I make a commitment to Chicago's children ... if you work hard and stay focused on your education, you will graduate from Chicago Public Schools prepared for success in college, career and life.

Thanks to the generosity and support of wonderful community partners like the Chicago Child Care Society ... as well as the dedication of our parents, teachers and principals ... we are delivering on that promise.

**A record-high graduation rate. Record-high daily attendance.
Improved test scores. Fewer suspensions and expulsions.**

And more of our freshman on-track for graduation than ever before.

Gains like these do not happen by accident. They are a result of careful planning, strategic investments and establishing a common vision for CPS and what we stand for.

Now it is time for us to take the next step. To put more of our children on a path to success.

How? By focusing our resources where we know they will have the broadest possible impact – on early childhood education.

Research tells us that children who attend high-quality early childhood programs are 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school.

Just as important, the children in these programs are more likely to connect with wrap-around services, empowering parents and giving families regular access to social programs, as well as medical and dental providers.

By looking at our own numbers, we have seen that nearly two-thirds of kindergarten students who attended a CPS pre-K program this past year scored at or above proficiency on their literacy assessment.

The results are even more dramatic for our youngest English Language Learners ... almost 84 percent of these children score at or above proficiency in literacy.

This is why, under the leadership of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Board of Education, CPS has made unparalleled investments for our youngest learners.

These investments put children on the path to success, boosting their academic skills, fostering independence, and instilling a lifelong love of learning.

Today in CPS, all eligible kindergarten-aged children – more than 30,000 of them – have equitable access to Full Day Kindergarten. That had not existed in this District before.

Because of this change, as well as our commitment to a Full School Day and Full School Year, a child who enters a CPS kindergarten class this school year and persists through the 12th grade will receive an additional two and a half years of instructional time.

What a gift to be able to give a child.

Full Day Kindergarten works in partnership with *Chicago: Ready to Learn!* – our collaborative effort with the Department of Family and Support Services that is part of the Mayor’s broader, three-year, \$36 million investment in early childhood education.

By coordinating our efforts across sister agencies, we are able to deliver resources where they are needed most and expand learning opportunities to more corners of the city.

Under this mayor, we have also expanded options for pre-K, making it available for the first time – at no cost! – to all 4-year-olds from low-income families in Chicago.

Thanks to this program, more than 2,600 additional children will have the opportunity to reach their full academic potential.

These are the kinds of long-term investments that have the power to change lives, and change a city.

[PAUSE]

This work is personal for me, as I am sure it is for many of you.

I grew up in public housing in Harlem in New York City and looking back I know there were so many adults around me at that time who didn't believe I was going to make it. Me or my sister.

So when I walk into schools and I see our children, I get this feeling inside like I am looking back at myself at that age. I see in them, a reflection of myself as a child, with all my questions and insecurities and wonderment about the world me.

It is a powerful feeling.

So when the adults in their lives – teachers, parents, coaches and others – don't believe in their potential, it removes an opportunity for our greatest resource – the Next Generation of leaders, of Chicago and of the nation.

I know that many of the adults in my life did not believe in my potential.

So when I hear people talk about our children in negative ways in front of them, I am pretty tough in my response. I will not accept that.

All children have the God-given gray matter to succeed if we are willing to help them, to guide them, and to give them the tools for success.

I have worked in several large, urban school districts across this country – as a teacher, as a principal, as a consultant, and as a CEO – and I know that the majority of children in these districts start out with tremendous disadvantages.

They often live in communities with inadequate health care services, substandard housing, under-resourced schools and minimum supports and services available to their families.

They live in neighborhoods that have more than their share of violence.

But does that mean these children cannot learn? Of course not.

They may live in poverty, but they are not poor. They have the strength and fortitude to triumph over so many obstacles, as long as the adults in their lives do not give up on them.

My sister and I were those children growing up, so I know it is not easy. But we succeeded. We were two of the lucky ones.

Neither of my parents received a high school diploma, but they understood the value of an education.

I learned from them that the only way to have a dream, chase that dream, and capture that dream is by getting an education.

It is because of the values my parents instilled in me and because of our faith that I stand before you today. My values are at the core of how I approach this work and how I make decisions.

They are the reason why I devoted my life to education some 40 years ago and what inspires me to this day.

I look back on the encouragement of my parents and it makes me realize that parents are our first educators. Their support of and commitment to my sister and me helped us set our goals and achieve them.

I believe that effective schools and high-performing school districts need to encourage, support, guide and draw upon the talents of families.

As a parent and, yes, now as a grandparent, I know what that partnership should look like. I know what it should feel like.

I remember helping my daughter as a little girl, and now I watch her do the same with her twin boys. The times and the tools have changed, but the concepts are the same – parental support for children’s success.

When we launched our 5-year Action Plan for the District, we made parent engagement one of the central pillars of support. Not parent involvement, but parent engagement.

That is an important distinction. You can be involved and not be engaged.

I do not need parents sitting in the front office all day or only volunteering for yard duty.

I do not need parents simply agreeing with us all of the time, because that means they are drinking the Kool-Aid. And that is not productive or helpful.

To be most helpful, I need parents playing an active, engaged role in their child's education. I need them asking the right questions ... pushing back on us at times.

And I need our principals and teachers actively communicating with families to keep an open dialog about the issues and concerns that matter. That is how we engage with parents and make them active participants in their child's education.

I need everyone ... parents, educators, and community partners like the ones in this room ... coming together to build on the momentum we've created so that the future of Chicago's Next Generation remains full of possibility. It takes a team to do this work.

So that regardless of their backgrounds and in spite of their challenges, every child who attends CPS will graduate knowing that they are ready and able to achieve their dreams.

As you can see, I am passionate about my work, and I could talk endlessly about the children we educate in Chicago's public schools. But there are plenty of other people in this room who share my values. I know that, and I thank all of you for your dedication.

Community partnerships are important and they can help form the foundation. Parental engagement – early in a child's life -- is critical, and it can make or break a child's success.

Everyone here knows that. We need to spread the word, get more parents and community leaders involved and engaged in the education our future leaders.

Thank you.

