



**Fred Hess Lecture – The Future of CPS
December 3, 2014**

Thank you, Dr. Simpson, and good afternoon everyone. Thank you for being here.

It has been my privilege to serve as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools for the last two years. It has not been easy, but, as we all know, the most important things in life are seldom easy.

And in my mind, nothing could be more important than ensuring that our Next Generation ... the future leaders of this city, and of our country ... are given the tools to succeed in college, career and in life.

That they are given a foundation to chase their dreams, wherever those dreams may take them.

My professional life in education began some 40 years ago as a high school biology teacher in East Harlem, New York City. It has taken me from the classroom ... to the principal's office ... to the Superintendent's seat ... and now, the CEO's chair at Chicago Public Schools.

Some might call it the hot seat.

Through it all, my work has been guided by a singular principle – that all children ... regardless of where they come from, what their home life is like, or what their family situation is ... deserve an opportunity for a high-quality education.

What a gift to be able to give a child ... the gift of a brighter future.

So when I am asked to talk about what I see in the future for CPS, I start there.

I start with the premise that all children have the potential to achieve great things in life. Some need just a bit more encouraging, a bit more support.

I was one of those children who needed a bit more. I grew up in public housing in Harlem and I know there were many adults around me who didn't believe I was going to make it. Me or my sister.

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.

The future of Chicago Public Schools is being shaped by the investments and the decisions we make today.

Under the leadership of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Board of Education, we are making significant investments to better equip schools for the 21st Century ... to expand early childhood education ... to improve school safety ... to deliver the social-emotional supports that students need ... and to create for families more high-quality school choices than ever before.

We all understand the financial realities of this District.

One of the most challenging parts of this work is balancing what we know needs to be done with the financial constraints we face.

To address these challenges, we have reduced Central Office operational spending by nearly 740 million dollars since 2011, including 55 million dollars this year alone.

We have done everything possible to cut costs without jeopardizing the remarkable gains our students are making in the classroom. We are committed to protecting investments that we know drive student achievement.

But the long-term financial health of CPS remains very much in doubt without meaningful pension reform in Springfield and additional state funding to support public education.

If Illinois was somewhere in the middle of the pack among the 50 states in public school funding – instead of at the bottom – I can assure you our students and our schools would face a far easier path to success.

As the Chief Executive Officer of this District, our financial realities are never far from my mind. To be frank, this is an issue that keeps me up at night.

But I am not here today to dwell on our financial challenges.

I am with you today as Barbara the educator. I am here to talk about the tremendous progress our students are making and about the unlimited potential they possess.

This is a very different school district than the one I took over just two years ago.

Our graduation rate of nearly 70 percent is at a record high and among the best of any large school district in the country.

We finished last school year with record-high daily attendance. Improved test scores. Fewer suspensions and expulsions.

And more of our freshmen are on-track for graduation – some 84 percent – 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.

Last year, we established an action plan for the District called “The Next Generation: Chicago’s Children.” This plan is not only about the students we serve, it is about the future of this city.

In our plan, we guarantee and commit ourselves to:

- All students receiving a rigorous, well-rounded and powerful education
- All students having the social-emotional supports they need in order to be successful
- Ensuring that parents are engaged and play an active role in their child’s education
- Supporting and developing great teachers and administrators
- And committing ourselves to abide by sound fiscal, operational and accountable systems

These “5 pillars”, as we call them, drive every decision and every investment we make at CPS. And through this vision, we are laying the foundation for success in every corner of the city.

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.

That is why, CPS is making unparalleled investments for our youngest learners.

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

Thanks to our investments to lengthen the school day and year, a child who enters a CPS kindergarten class in 2014 and persists through the 12th grade will receive an additional two and a half years of instructional time.

That is a remarkable change for a District that once had one of the shortest school days and school years in the country.

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.

Because of this investment, more than 2,600 additional children in this city will have the opportunity to reach their full academic potential.

Because of this investment, we are putting children on the path to success ... boosting their academic skills ... fostering independence ... and instilling a lifelong love of learning.

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

[Pause]

Every day at CPS we are working purposefully to prepare our children for 21st Century careers. This is not wishful thinking or conjecture ... it is a reality.

We are doing it through rigorous instruction, strategic investments to expand IB and STEM programs, and by maintaining high expectations for each and every student, teacher and principal in our District.

Over the last three years, we have built the largest network of International Baccalaureate programs anywhere in the country.

More than 15,000 of our children are currently enrolled in CPS schools that offer an IB program, exposing them to the rigors of college-level work.

[Pause]

We all know that this generation of students is wired differently than past generations.

All you need to do is watch my grandchildren – Jalen and Khalil – operate an iPad to know this is true. They are so proficient with this technology you would think they designed the devices themselves.

Technology is at their fingertips everyday ... it is where they live.

But familiarity with technology does not make you an expert.

So when we talk about what we are doing today to put students in position to land the jobs of tomorrow, we are talking about the need for a high-quality curriculum built around science, technology, engineering and math.

That is why our mayor, our school Board and I have made increasing the quality and access to STEM education a priority.

More than 20 schools have adopted Early College STEM or added other STEM programs over the last three years.

We have built relationships with top companies such as Microsoft, Cisco, Verizon, Motorola and IBM to ensure that our Early College STEM schools are preparing our students for jobs in high-demand.

We created 11 STEM elementary schools among our Welcoming schools and have outfitted dozens of other schools with new computer labs, new engineering labs, and new science laboratories.

Last year alone, we invested in 4,000 new laptops and 16,000 new iPads for students in grades 3 thru 8 ... and we partnered with Code.org to launch a new K thru 12 Computer Science Curriculum that is the most ambitious of its kind anywhere in the country.

Tens of thousands of children across CPS will be better prepared with knowledge and skills for the jobs of tomorrow because of the investments we are making today.

These investments in neighborhood schools ... schools that are open to all children who apply ... are part of our comprehensive strategy to raise the quality of instruction so that every student in every part of the city has an opportunity for college and a great career.

That strategy not only includes evaluating the academic programs our neighborhood schools are offering, but also the social-emotional supports being provided to build students' non-cognitive skills and drive positive behaviors.

Investing in social-emotional programs that connect with children, especially at a young age, is critical to further reducing out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and keeping students engaged at school.

By establishing a more holistic approach to student misconduct ... by expanding quality mentoring and tutoring programs such as BAM and Match ... we are addressing the root-causes of poor behavior and promoting positive, safe learning environments.

[Pause]

So, how do we take CPS to the next level?

We have poured the foundation. How do we build the rest of the house?

By continuing to invest in the types of programs that we know make a difference – early childhood education, STEM, IB, social-emotional support – and by expanding the reach of our schools into the community.

After all, we are all in this together.

We have a shared responsibility to ensure that Chicago's Next Generation is getting the very best start in life. It cannot be left to the schools alone.

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.

That is why the District continues to build relationships with philanthropic organizations, colleges and universities, cultural institutions, community groups, parent committees, churches and synagogues.

It is why we encourage each of our schools to connect with their communities to enhance their academic offerings, to add enrichment programs, cultural experiences, or organize extracurricular activities.

It is why we are expanding our students' access to college, even before they graduate high school. Earlier this year, the mayor announced that more than 3,000 qualifying CPS high school students would be allowed to take courses free of charge at any of the seven City Colleges of Chicago. Those credits can be applied to a degree program at City Colleges or transferred to a four-year college or university upon graduation.

We have also tripled the number of District schools offering college-level courses taught by qualified CPS teachers on high school campuses. The Dual Credit program now serves more than 1,000 CPS students.

And for CPS graduates who need a boost to enroll in college, the mayor this year announced the Chicago STAR Scholarship, which will give students who graduated with at least a 3.0 grade-point average an opportunity to enroll in the City Colleges of Chicago with no out-of-pocket costs.

By opening the doors to a college education, more CPS graduates are applying to and enrolling in college than ever before. And they are doing it with more scholarships than almost anywhere else.

CPS' graduating senior class last year earned nearly \$800 million in scholarship offers for college, thanks to an increased focus on getting financial aid to those who need it at the Network and local school level.

And last school year, CPS set a District record with 44 Gates Millennium Scholars, a highly competitive and lucrative scholarship that can be worth more than \$250,000 toward achieving a Bachelor's, Master's or even a Doctoral degree.

CPS has had more Gates recipients than any other district in the nation five times in the last six years. A remarkable achievement.

[Pause]

Visit any large, urban school district in the country and you will see that the majority of children they serve start out with tremendous disadvantages. I know this because I have worked in several of them.

The children 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. Poverty is a temporary state, and unfortunately that is where many of our children exist today. But poor is a state of mind.

We must work to liberate the minds of our children, and the minds of their parents, so that they understand that the world can be an opportunity for them.

Our children 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.

I look back on my childhood and I understand that parents are our first educators. Their values becomes our values. We often see the world through their eyes.

So it is important that schools and school districts 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 look at the “5 Pillars” we see that parental engagement is one of the central columns 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 helping make copies in the front office all day or only volunteering for yard duty.

I need parents playing an active, engaged role in their child’s education. I need them asking the right questions ... even 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.

Parental engagement – especially early in a child's life – is critical, and it can make or break a child's success.

[Pause]

I had the wonderful opportunity once to meet and introduce the human rights activist Bishop Tutu at a conference, and it was incredible. You really did feel like you were in the presence of someone very special.

Before I introduced him, he said something that has stuck with me to this day.

He said, "God puts people on Earth with one wing. And they can never fly, and they can never really move in any direction unless they lock arms with someone else.

"And then you have two wings to fly. And that is what God calls Angels."

That is how I see the future of CPS.

I see a future where parents, teachers, principals, politicians, business leaders, community groups ... the entire city locks arms and lifts our children on high.

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.

That is how we teach the whole child.

Not just children who excel academically, but children who become leaders in their communities. Children who give back. Children who see a world beyond themselves.

As you can see, I am passionate about the work I do. And I could talk endlessly about our children at CPS and their potential.

We need others spreading the word about all that they are accomplishing.

We need others talking about how the investments we are making today are putting them on a path to success.

We need others getting involved and staying involved so that the future leaders of this city and of our nation know how important they are.

Thank you.