

Hello New Orleans! Welcome to the 2016 Teacher Leader Summit, the largest Teacher Leader summit yet.

Today I am looking forward. I am looking forward to these two days in New Orleans. I am looking forward to this summer. I am looking forward to the school year that follows.

For those of us in education, no matter how hard that day, how challenging that one student, when the bell rings, we always have tomorrow. We find strength in the future. This is why we chose to make shaping the future our life's work.

So I come here today looking forward, and with great anticipation. I am looking forward to being with you. I am looking forward to being with colleagues. I am looking forward to talking about our children.

When we look forward, we first take stock of where we have been together. The last several years have not been easy ones, but we have traveled a long way.

We have unified childcare, Head Start, and pre-Kindergarten into one system capable of preparing children for the challenges of kindergarten.

We have established expectations and curriculum as challenging as any in America.

We have professionalized what it means to be a teacher candidate, preparing the newest members of our profession as full year residents under mentor educators, not unlike nurses or doctors.

We have equipped tens of thousands of young people with the skills to succeed in Jump Start, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment courses.

And we have focused relentlessly on children attending struggling schools, doing everything in our power to change that unfortunate circumstance for them and their families.

These simple concepts make up our plan in Louisiana. Whatever role you have played, we have come a long way to get to this point.

Now, looking forward, we think not only of where we have been but also of what our students have achieved. And they have achieved quite a lot.

Four years ago our state ranked dead last in the nation in 4th grade reading. Today, on the National Assessment of Education Progress, we are the fastest improved state in America, vaulting in that short period to a ranking of 43rd with no plans to stop there.

Then consider that four years ago low income 4th graders in Louisiana read at a dramatically lower rate than even low-income students across the nation. Today, because of many of you, no such gap exists between our state and the rest of the nation.

The class of 2015 in Louisiana achieved record gains on the ACT, leading the nation in annual improvement, above all other states using the ACT as their high school test. Some people talk about Louisiana being at the bottom of the heap, but on the ACT in 2015 our state average placed third of six states in the South, outpacing Mississippi, outpacing North Carolina, and beating Alabama.

Today, 6,000 more graduates achieve a college going ACT score each year than did just four years ago, and the number of African American students achieving a college going ACT score has increased by 40 percent.

As you may have heard, the Class of 2015 also achieved an all-time record high school graduation rate.

And not only are more students than ever before going to college but also more are going with college credits in hand. In 2015, Louisiana was the 2nd most improved state in the nation for the number of students graduating an AP credit finishing second only to Massachusetts, the highest achieving state in the nation.

These statistics are just numbers on a page. But they represent individual lives, many of which you have fundamentally altered. So, sitting here today, looking forward, we have traveled a long road and we have accomplished much.

Looking forward also means a frank assessment of the challenges we have yet to overcome. No matter our successes, we educators walk into the classroom each day with great love of every student. But in Louisiana we remain far from the day when the path to a productive and prosperous life is clear for every child.

Today, even as we celebrate our success at graduating students and sending them to college, 61 percent of students entering community colleges after high school are required to complete remedial courses, repeating learning not completed in high school. This means more time, more debt, and more reason to walk away from a college degree.

That's all the more tragic in a state where only half of graduates qualify for TOPS, and where more half of those graduates not earning TOPS apply for no financial aid at all. This too can change.

Second, even as we raise expectations to prepare fully more students for college and for work, we must be conscious of those students with the greatest challenges. In 2015, as our expectations rose, we did not make a dent on state tests in the pernicious performance gaps that exist between students with disabilities and their peers, or students of color and their peers.

And we must be honest about the opportunities afforded all young people to live a rich life and to find that one thing that sparks lifelong interest. While 67 percent of our state's population, for example, qualifies as low income, among gifted students only 36 percent qualify as low income, meaning that low-income students are roughly half as likely to be identified as gifted as are middle income students. Yet it simply cannot be that those identified as gifted by birth are so disproportionately middle class.

Likewise, while 44 percent of our state's students are African American, only 25 percent of students taking an Advanced Placement course while in high school are African American. Looking forward, this too cannot be the case.

Finally, any plan for looking forward necessitates strengthening and celebrating the teaching profession. Too few young people, when considering their careers, consider ours. Too many new educators feel unsupported in the classroom. Too many veterans see a limited professional path ahead of them. We can change this.

In the spirit of looking forward, I will be spending my day today talking with all who care to join me about the Every Student Succeeds Act or "ESSA," passed by Congress at the end of 2015. In those sessions, I will urge that we continue what is working for our students, that we address those areas in which they struggle, and that we insist that every element of the ESSA plan Louisiana submits to the federal government next year keeps students' needs and interests front and center.

But as we look forward to the next school year, I make one other insistence as well.

It is no secret that you have achieved what you have achieved with our students amidst a period of some turbulence in public education. Our profession has been politicized, and the tools of our craft – curriculum, standards, assessment – have on occasion been used as the fodder for campaigns and agendas that have little to do with children.

In that time of turbulence, Louisiana educators insisted on consistency, clarity, and stability for our children and for our teachers. The Louisiana Student Standards, for example, created by Louisiana educators, give us a chance not just to look forward, but also to see a clear and stable path in front of us.

You deserve the assurance from every policy maker in this state that the road ahead, far uphill as it may climb, will be clear and smooth. It is time to give Louisiana's teachers the tools they need to succeed and to insist that any agenda other than teaching and learning be removed from the equation.

And so today, I hope that we celebrate looking forward not just with pride in what we have accomplished with our students, not just in the strength of our plan for them, not just in the honesty of our commitment to overcoming challenges, but also with the faith that politics will soon vacate the classrooms of Louisiana, that you will be free to aspire with your children to new heights, confident in the knowledge that while your students' skills may change over time, we will end the annual changes in standards, curricula, and assessments that have become too common in our state.

Our students deserve this. For our students in Louisiana – all of them, no matter race, family income, or disability – are as smart and capable as any in America. They have been given gifts as great as those given to any children on this earth. And we educators have the awesome opportunity to look forward with them into the rest of their lives.

Thank you for being here, thank you for being a Teacher Leader, God bless you, and have a wonderful rest of the week in New Orleans.