

Remarks to the Rotary Club of Baton Rouge

Superintendent John White

September 16, 2015

To all of my friends here today at the Rotary, thank you. In my four and a half years in Louisiana, this is my third time speaking with the Baton Rouge Rotary. Each time I am reminded of the warm, strong ties in this community and of its appreciation for the importance of a strong education system. I'm sure among us are represented many different views on issues of policy, but in that commitment to a better tomorrow we are unified.

We are at an important time in the evolution of our state and its education system. I'd like to use my time with you today to talk about the last several years, about what's been done in the schools of Louisiana, what the results have been, and what's to come.

I want you to know first that behind every step taken in my time here has been one simple idea: that Louisiana's children are just as smart and just as capable as any in this country, that they have been given gifts by God no lesser than those bestowed on any other children on this earth, and that they – no matter race nor class – deserve every opportunity to live out their dreams. That simple idea has guided everything that my team and I have done in the last 53 months.

Like you, I have encountered some who wish to distract our state from this simple principle, through squabbles or political theater. But any despondency I might have felt from seeing that kind of thing go on has been vastly outweighed by the evidence I see every day that a common sense plan backed by the conviction of doing what is right for children not only can produce great and immediate benefit for thousands of young lives but can also garner the support of thousands of people in our schools and communities.

And we in Louisiana have a plan. It is a professional plan, not a political plan. It is not a plan from Washington, DC. It is our plan for our kids in Louisiana. And it is working.

Our plan has five parts.

First, we start early. Before 2012, our youngest children went to Head Start centers, child care facilities, and pre-kindergartens with no consistent measurement of quality. Teachers did not even have to have a high school degree in some early learning centers. Today, all early childhood programs must perform up to ambitious standards. Today parents choose the program they like best based on a real evaluation of the program's quality, and every teacher is required to have at least an associate's degree.

Second, we hold Louisiana students to expectations as high as anywhere in America. It used to be that when our students took state math and English tests, we could compare the results from one parish to the next. This year, for the first time, we will be able to compare from one state to the next. It used to be that students just took locally developed course tests before graduating from high school. Now they take the ACT. It used to be you could take advanced classes in high school that didn't show whether you really were ready for college. Now you take Advanced Placement. It used to be any old career certificate could get you a high school diploma. Now our students earn NCCER construction credentials, community college degrees, and other certificates valued by industry before so they can compete for jobs with graduates in any state. We raised expectations so that our kids, at every level, would never be sold a false bill of goods again, deemed proficient as children only to realize they can't compete as adults.

Third, we are professionalizing teaching and school leadership. Every principal in our system now sets a hard, measurable goal to which they are accountable. We then trust those principals to evaluate their teachers using hard evidence of whether students learned. Teachers now are compensated and earn lifelong tenure based on those evaluations. But maybe most important: teacher candidates planning on entering the profession in Louisiana now spend a year as apprentices under the tutelage of master teachers before they even graduate from college, because we should never teach a teacher how to teach for four years in our universities only then to wonder later if they're effective. If they're ineffective after four years, shame on us.

Fourth, we have provided every young man and young woman graduating from high school a pathway to the American middle class. The great unspoken injustice of America education is that we celebrate

thousands of graduations each year all the while having no clue what those young people are going to do next with their lives. Yes, we need more students going to four-year universities. And now every student pursuing LSU or Southern must take the courses necessary to qualify for TOPS, so that college can be afforded. But just as important: in a state where only 20 percent of adults have a four-year university degree, we need a plan for all students. We need to end the stigma perpetrated against career education. Louisiana's groundbreaking Jump Start program does that by requiring that every student not on a path to a four-year university earns a career credential validated by industry so that they can go to work or continue their education after high school.

Finally we have launched and implemented the nation's most ambitious plans to eradicate the scourge of failing schools that plague low-income urban communities. New Orleans, once the lowest performing system in Louisiana, is now a beacon of innovation and opportunity. Nearly every school in that city is an autonomous charter school, where 98 cents on every dollar of public revenue goes right to the schoolhouse door. Parents can choose on one application from any public school or publicly-funded private school in the entire city, no matter where they live. Schools unable to make strides with students after several years are given to new management, without political interference. Perhaps most promising, this model is being adopted here in the Capital City, where educators from across the city, state, and country are flocking to North Baton Rouge to take on challenges that will be familiar to you: Capitol, Glen Oaks, Prescott, and of course Redemptorist, new home to the fabulous Cristo Rey High School. The schools of this "Baton Rouge Achievement Zone" also are schools of choice, they too are autonomous schools with principals empowered to budget and hire, and they too are held to the most stringent of accountability standards.

But I'm not here today just because we believe in kids and have a plan. I also want to tell you this: this Louisiana plan is working.

In the last three years, the rate at which students graduate from high school annually has increased by 4 percentage points.

The class of 2015 demonstrated greater gains on the ACT than any other senior class in any other state in the nation testing all students on the ACT, doubling the growth seen in any other state. Of 6 southern states

with which we compete on the ACT, our average score now comes in third, beating Mississippi, North Carolina, and Alabama.

In fact, relative to the class of 2012, the class of 2015 had 6,000 more students achieve a college-going ACT score.

The same is true on Advanced Placement tests, the nation's most challenging measure of college readiness. Since 2012, Louisiana has increased the number of college credits earned on AP tests by 87 percent, the highest rate of improvement in America.

Relative to three years ago, our schools have increased the number of young people going on to universities and community colleges by 16 percent.

Finally, in New Orleans, what was once the second lowest performing district in the state is nearing the state average. The high school graduation rate has gone from 54 percent prior to Katrina to 73 percent today. It used to be that New Orleans students were handpicked to take the ACT, and the average score was 17. Today the average is nearly 19, even though all students take the test, and Orleans Parish is tied with its neighbor to the west, Jefferson Parish. And while barely a third of seniors went to college after graduation in 2004, in 2015 nearly two thirds did, earning \$75 million in private scholarships.

I know that North Baton Rouge will experience similar progress if we commit ourselves to sustaining the effort.

As a state, we have so much further to go. But we have come so far. Our simple plan is working for children and families.

This fall is an important juncture in the story of our state's progress, for three reasons. First, of course, there are elections. But also this fall we release the results of state tests for elementary and middle school students that, for the first time, will measure their skills in comparison with those of students from across the country. No longer will we wake up and read in the paper just one school versus another or this parish as compared with that. We will see Louisiana, and Ohio, and Illinois, and Massachusetts, and Maryland, New Jersey, and so on.

The tests were hard, no doubt. Our students wrestled with complicated problems on expectations as challenging as expectations in any state in America. But our results – higher graduation rates, higher ACT and Advanced Placement results, more graduates going to college -- show that raising the bar has worked for

young people of Louisiana. It has been hard, but it has been worth it. And our kids – even if they struggle in the beginning – have shown that they can do it. They will rise to the occasion.

Finally, this fall and winter the much-discussed legislative compromise on academic standards will be put to work. This was a moment of true bipartisanship in our State Capitol. Legislators and BESE members long at odds found a middle ground in the simple idea that we all trust the teachers.

Now, one hundred top Louisiana educators are reviewing the English and math standards currently in place. They're strengthening them, clarifying them, and eliminating redundancies. We will come out of this process, I believe, with even higher expectations. We will show the country that Louisiana isn't done raising the bar and that in trusting the teachers we both set our expectations high and ensured that we as a state have full control of our classrooms. If we continue to trust the teachers, and let them do their jobs, they will lead us to resolution and strong Louisiana standards.

And, should our state choose to continue on the path of progress, we will not stop there. We can restore the drastic cuts made to child care, so that working families can go to work and trust that their child is being prepared for kindergarten.

We can make sure that every test that school districts administer is valuable to the child, the parent, and the teacher; and we can eliminate tests that are redundant or outdated.

Today not even half of seniors complete financial aid forms, when financial aid funds tuition at not only universities but also community colleges and technical training programs like Associated Builders and Contractors. Louisiana graduates leave more than \$50 million in just untapped federal aid on the table each year. We can change this.

And it is time we lower the cost of college tuition for high school graduates and their parents by expanding access to courses for college credit while students are still in high school. Four years is a long time and a lot of debt. Too many kids don't go to college or can't stay in college because of money issues. That's not what any of us wants for the next generation.

We have accomplished so much in Louisiana. There remains so much more to be done. We cannot afford to stop now.

Change has never been easy. It should never be easy.

Kids struggle with challenging assignments.

Graduates take challenging college courses.

Teachers navigate new ways of teaching.

BESE members and legislators make hard calls to change things under immense pressure to keep things the same.

Hard work is how you improve.

But if you truly believe that Louisiana's kids are as smart and as capable as any children in America, you have no choice but to keep on doing it. We owe it to them.

So let's keep doing the hard work.

Thank you so much.

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