

[STATE SUPERINTENDENT JOHN WHITE]

This morning we're here to reflect on a critical moment in the time of these schools and in the time of this school system and to make a critical announcement about the future of these schools and all of the children that we so are concerned with. I thank all of you who have contributed to the process and for being here.

I want to take us back a couple of years to when a number of advocates and community members and elected officials, in particular Rep. Pat Smith who has been a leader and champion for so many years for these particular schools and our children, when we began meeting about some of the challenges that were being observed in these schools and programs that service students with sensory disabilities and others across our state. Our state board of education, and I know we will be joined by board member Kathy Edmonston shortly, convened nationally recognized entities to review the schools in the Special School District. That process took several months of on-site, rigorous review and came away with an honest reflection on some serious challenges that we face in these settings. Subsequently, the state launched a national search for a candidate to lead the implementation of a strategic plan to resolve those issues, and that landed in the resolution of an interim superintendent until we were able to find an individual who was able to step up and lead in the direction that was called for by the review. Over the last year, the staff and faculty at these schools and in the programs statewide have done a great deal to go forward in implementing those resolutions, and I commend them for all that they've done. This year, we saw record-breaking graduation outcomes at these schools, for example. We saw the appointment of more individuals with expertise in serving deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired and otherwise students with disabilities. We saw the implementation of a career and technical education program here on site to ensure students are ready for post-secondary education and work. We saw the implementation of high-quality curriculum and the adaptation of supports needed to ensure that the teachers who teach those curricula are prepared to do so for students with sensory disabilities. But within that, we still lacked long-term leadership, and I believe that that cloud hung over much of the process, in spite of a lot of the good work represented by parents, teachers, administrators, support staff and others in this room.

And so, at the direction of the board of education and under my leadership, we launched a second national search. One piece of good news is I believe we came away with an extraordinary pool, a pool of people who had experience at the local level, at the state level and at the national level. Our search firm interviewed roughly 30 candidates for this job, and having whittled it down to three, they invited three, I believe outstanding, candidates, candidates who are diverse in their backgrounds, diverse in their experience, but unified by the commitment to the children of the school district and to the children of Louisiana. They came to this site for an interview with the public; I interviewed all of them; they interviewed with our team; with our BESE board members; and ultimately, we came to believe that, among them, as outstanding as the three were, one of them was particularly well-situated to service the students of Louisiana and their needs, not just now but I hope for many years to come, and that gentleman's name is Ernest Garrett.

[Applause]

I met Mr. Garrett throughout this process. He is a native of Missouri, and I had never met him before. But I came to be inspired by him, first by his personal story, but not just by his personal story, but by his views, his beliefs in children, his belief that our country and our state can do better by children with sensory disabilities and of all disability backgrounds, and not just that, but of all socioeconomic backgrounds, of all religious backgrounds, of all racial backgrounds, of all neighborhoods. This is an

individual who sees children for all of their potential, and I believe he sees all children as limitless. I believe we will be blessed to have him in our state.

Today's announcement is an announcement of the leadership of the Special School District. This is an investment in an individual and a welcoming of an individual. It is not just for today or next week, but I hope, as I said, for many years to come. I can tell you this is a person who is not taking the commitment lightly. This is a person who, within a day of receiving an offer from us, had already planned where he is going to live in our city. He is going to be close to our Capitol. He is going to be committed to our community and to our state. I could not be happier to welcome him to Louisiana.

Ladies and gentlemen, please honor and join me in welcoming Mr. Ernest Garrett.

[Applause]

[SSD SUPERINTENDENT ERNEST GARRETT VIA INTERPRETER]

Thank you very much. I want to start by thanking the State Superintendent, John White, for this opportunity; the state board members who are here; faculty; staff; also parents and community advocates; all of you, everyone, thank you for your warm welcome. It is truly an honor to be selected for this important role. It's a critical time, as Mr. White said. This is a special, unique situation at the Special School District. I want to provide services to students, to educators and staff that's near and dear to my heart. My first priority, what I hope to do, is I hope to understand this community, how it works, what's been done so far. I understand it's time to change. I've reviewed that, looked at the plan. This is an opportunity to engage all communities.

When I came into education, into school leadership, it was not through the traditional route. Most of you are aware you are a teacher, then you move up to principal, then move on to work at the Department, in the office, you become Superintendent. But not me, I started as a school social worker, working for the children with disabilities, working with businesses and industries ... and truly, I am thrilled, I am honored. And I hope you are thrilled, too.

This is not my first time, this is not my first rodeo. As the School Superintendent for the Deaf, there are three things I look to: 1) To have courage, courage to make a difference, a positive difference; to be productive. 2) To have passion; to communicate; to see the vision, to reach out and to see what they can achieve in their lives, and not just because they can think it, but because they live it, too. 3) To have a vision; to always see the bigger picture. But while focusing on the bigger picture, we don't want to miss the smaller things. ...

These are a few words I like to share with you: I'm excited to be here, I'm truly honored to serve, and I will communicate with you soon about opportunities for listening and getting together in community discussions, to hear concerns, issues. My personal mission is to represent all students, not one, so they can be successful, so they can achieve; to provide opportunities for leaders. We have an obligation, a responsibility, to make sure that when we work together for the kids, it starts with one and we give 100 percent. And when they graduate, 100 percent, we want to make sure that we are working. Thank you all very much for this opportunity.

[Applause]

[STATE SUPERINTENDENT JOHN WHITE]

I should mention to members of the media that myself and Mr. Garrett will take questions after we're done with our presentation.

Next, I want to invite two elected officials who have been statewide leaders on many issues related to education and on many issues related to the community here in our Capital City, but, in particular, related to students with disabilities and, in particular, related to this institution. The first is Rep. Patricia Smith. Representative, if you would please make a couple of comments. Thank you.

[REP. PATRICIA SMITH]

Thank you, Superintendent White, for the opportunity to speak to you. I, first of all, have to say welcome Mr. Garrett to the LSD and LSVI campus. Welcome to the journey I know you are going to take these students, these faculty and this school on to have exceptional educational opportunities for each and every one of them and to coalesce the two schools together to make this campus a great campus for students with sensory disabilities. I'm glad you are in a situation where students can relate to you. I think that is so, so very important that you have the opportunity to show them, by self, that they can be what you are and they can go where you've been. That's so very important in their lives. I thank you all as well. I hope that you, the faculty members who are here from LSDVI, that you will embrace this gentleman coming on to this campus, that you will help him, to acquiesce to the campus and the issues that you have. Work together on the issues and come up with viable solutions because the only people that suffer from non-solutions are the children who come here to school. It is your responsibility to ensure he has a great journey while he is here, and you can help him do that. We'll hold you responsible for doing that. Thank you very much for accepting this position. I know that there are a lot of people who are proud to have you here. I, for one, am very proud to know you've chosen to come and be on this campus for these students. Thank you so very much.

[Applause]

[STATE SUPERINTENDENT JOHN WHITE]

Thank you, Rep. Smith, and I should say I know you have taken time from a busy campaign schedule to be here. You're a champion for education. We wish you the most sincere luck and fortune.

Next is BESE Member Kathy Edmonston, who herself works with parents of children with disabilities in a local school system. She has, in her four years on BESE, a champion. She has been with the Special School District at every step of this process, and I'm so thrilled and honored. As her time on BESE comes to a close and she takes up another campaign season, alongside Rep. Smith, I appreciate so much you taking the time to be here, and I wish you the best of luck and express my deepest gratitude to you as well. Please welcome Kathy Edmonston.

[Applause]

[BESE MEMBER KATHY EDMONSTON]

Good morning. I'm so glad to see so many of you here. I'm sure alums and those who have taken an interest through the years starting back when, I believe, LSDVI was an example for this country and that has been my vision since I started on BESE was to make this place better, really, than what it used to be but certainly to be exemplary in our country. I know we can do it. This is a beautiful campus. We have a wonderful new SSD Superintendent. I'm just so excited and thankful for all that has happened. I want to say thank you to Superintendent White, who from the very beginning listened to those people who had issues and they were absolutely concrete issues, and we have, together with our board, worked to make

this day come to fruition. I, too, as Rep. Smith did, ask you to come alongside Ernest and make sure that you're doing everything that you can do to help him. This is not going to be an easy task but it's going to be a doable one. We are going to all be so excited when we stand here, months, years, from now. It's going to be great. Thank you, Ernest, and welcome. I look forward to working with all of you. Thank you.

[Applause]

[STATE SUPERINTENDENT JOHN WHITE]

Superintendent Garrett and I will now take questions, first from members of the media. I know we have some reporters who viewing from online, and we also have a couple of our local news stations here. We can also do that afterward if that's helpful. And as soon as members of the media have asked all the questions they have, we will open it to members of the audience to ask questions. I will say, after this, the Superintendent is going to go on a tour of the schools with a small number of faculty to get further acquainted. To our BESE member and legislator, please join us. If you're interested, members of the media, you're welcome to join us as well.

And then when the Superintendent starts in his role, Sept.3, the day after Labor Day, he will be conducting a series of meetings, as he noted, with parents and community members here in Baton Rouge, as well as elsewhere, that will help you get to know him further. As he gets up to speed, he will be able to answer more and more of your questions and engage you in more dialogue. Today is simply his introduction.

Superintendent, if you would join me here.

To members of the media, either online or in-person, are there questions we can answer for you at this time?

[REPORTER]

I've got to get closer to the mic.

[SUPERINTENDENT JOHN WHITE]

Do you want to do an interview afterward?

OK.

I'll open it to members of the audience. Do you have questions for us at this time?

[Pause for questions; there are none]

OK, great. The Superintendent and I will come over and speak with members of the media, and then we will start our tour.