



Lexington Public Schools

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OPENING-DAY ADDRESS

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Good morning and welcome back to our veteran teachers, new teachers, nurses, support staff, and administrators. I also want to welcome our Instructional Assistants who are joining our family of educators at this convocation for the very first time. Let us all give a large Lexington welcome to the pre-K through 12 Instructional Assistants.

I would like to begin my remarks this morning by reading a story by Taylor Mali.

The dinner guests were sitting around the table discussing life. One man, an obnoxious CEO, decided to explain the problem with education. He argued, "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?"

To stress his point he said to another guest, "You're a teacher, Bonnie. Be honest. What do you make?"

Bonnie, who had a reputation for honesty and frankness replied, "You want to know what I make?" She paused for a second, and then began...

"Well, I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I make a B+ feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor. I make kids sit through 40 minutes of class time when their parents can't make them sit for 5 without an iPod, Game Cube or movie rental... You want to know what I make?"

She paused again and looked at each and every person at the table.

"I make kids wonder. I make them question. I make them criticize. I make them apologize and mean it. I make them have respect and take responsibility for their actions. I teach them to write and then I make them write. I teach them to read and then make them read, read, read. I make them show all their work in math."

"I make my students from other countries learn everything they need to know in English while preserving their unique cultural identity. I make my classroom a place where all my students feel safe."

"Finally, I make them understand that if they use the gifts they were given, work hard, and follow their hearts, they can succeed in life."

Bonnie paused one last time and then continued, "Then, when people try to judge me by what I make, I can hold my head up high and pay no attention because they are ignorant."

"You want to know what I make? I MAKE A DIFFERENCE. What do you make?"

Although Bonnie is a fictional character, her story is not. In this room, we have hundreds and hundreds of real educators who work tirelessly, every day, to make a difference in their students' lives. As individuals, you display the intelligence, passion, persistence, and extraordinary teaching skills to improve the academic, social, and emotional lives of our students. However, as a school system, can we do better? Do we collectively work efficiently and effectively? Do we align our time, resources, and priorities in ways that best meet the needs of all students in all of our schools?

Two years ago, former LEA President Vito LaMura published a report that showed large performance gaps for our African-American students in grades 1 through 12. Last year, at this convocation, I shared with you the most recent data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for four sub-groups: African-American, English language learners, special needs, and Lexington low income students. The data showed a large achievement gap between these sub-groups and all other students.

While I am pleased to report that we are beginning to show small improvements in mathematics and literacy for these sub-groups, we have far to go. For example, 26 students, or 25% of last year's grade 12 special education students, did not graduate in four years. What happened? At area high schools with which we compare ourselves, the corresponding percent is 0 to 15%. Therefore, based on this information, I have asked the special education department to identify the names of the 26 students and find out what happened and to determine what we could do differently in the future.

At the high school, 47% of the METCO students are in special education compared with 15.2% for all other students. How did **this** happen? More importantly, what intervention strategies do we need to create in all schools so that special education does not become the only game in town for METCO and resident students who struggle academically?

Although we are just beginning to make progress in closing the achievement gap, I am very confident in our success over the next few years. Throughout the school system, Lexington educators have embraced in their hearts and minds the will and urgency to act. Eighteen months ago we established the Achievement Gap Task Force that met regularly and presented the multi-year plan that is posted on our web site. The plan, which includes 26 specific recommendations K through 12, is based on research from gap-closing schools. We also included the information gathered by an 18-member Lexington team comprised of teachers, administrators, and the LEA president. They visited the Montgomery County schools in Maryland to observe first-hand the only high performing school district in the country that has significantly closed the achievement gap. For example, one Montgomery County high school with a 30% African-American population had more students than Lexington High School scoring 3 or greater on Advanced Placement examinations.

In Lexington, we know that proficiency on the statewide MCAS tests are not enough. According to Mitchell Chester, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, a grade 10 score of proficient means the student has only attained grade 8 or 9 skills. Our job is to ensure that nearly all of our students are academically college ready when they graduate high school, socially competent, and prepared to participate actively in civic life. No longer can our goal be just closing the achievement gap for some

students; our goal must be equity and excellence for all students, challenging each and every one of our students to strive for continuous improvement no matter what their skill level may be.

The good news is that you are some of the best teachers in the United States who work incredibly hard every day. However, based on gap-closing research, excellent teaching and hard work are not enough to close the achievement gap. No school system is going to achieve that goal AND provide equity and excellence for all students until we change the way that we, as a team, deliver services to students.

President John F. Kennedy's vision was to commit our nation to put a man on the moon in ten years, and as a nation we succeeded. My vision is that we provide excellence and equity for all students within five to ten years, and take the steps needed to make that so.

In Karin Chenoweth's 2007 book, *It's Being Done*, she describes 15 schools throughout the United States that eliminated or nearly eliminated the achievement gap for children of color, ELL, special education, and low-income students.

In Chenoweth's latest book, *How It's Being Done*, she explicitly identifies the conditions necessary for equity and excellence for all students. She provides an in-depth analysis of nine additional schools and identifies six attributes of all gap-closing schools in the country. Chenoweth identifies six attributes that must be present to close the achievement gap in schools. They are:

1. Outstanding Teaching
2. Teacher collaboration
3. A laser-like focus on what we want students to learn
4. The use of individual and common student data to inform future instruction
5. The use of intervention strategies for students who did not master the material
6. Personal relationship building

She emphasizes that success requires that all six attributes exist at the same time. In other words, gap-closing schools cannot focus on some of the strategies and still succeed. All six attributes must be in place concurrently.

While the research is now compelling on the six attributes of gap-closing schools, each school system, including ours, will have to identify specific action-plans based on local teacher and student needs. For each of these six areas, I will now present a context for our school system and describe the initiatives that are on-going or will be initiated in the near future.

First — Outstanding Teaching

There is no question that Lexington hires and retains some of the most outstanding teachers anywhere. However, what we learned in college or at our last job is not enough. All outstanding educators must continuously improve by engaging in research-based, high quality professional development with a commitment that underscores the belief that learning about one's work is never truly finished. Every educator, each and every one of us, must be called upon to refine our skills, inquire into best practices, and construct knowledge while working collaboratively with peers.

To this end, in partnership with the LEA Executive Board, I have established a district-wide professional development committee whose charge it is to identify the short- and long-term ways in which, **together**,

we can create a self-sustaining, job-embedded professional development program that supports the ongoing needs of teachers **and** students.

Recent studies have emphatically proven that high quality professional development is the essential link to effective teaching and increased student learning. In recent years, in the face of fiscal constraints, funds to support this district's professional development efforts in the operating budget have dwindled to nearly nothing. During these times, we have had to rely heavily on the Lexington Education Foundation for their support and for this, we are most grateful. Many important professional programs and activities have taken place thanks to the LEF's generosity. This year, however, I am delighted to report that the Lexington Public Schools is fortunate to have received \$500,000 in federal stimulus money that I intend to dedicate to professional development over the next two years.

With the leadership of the Professional Development Committee, combined with your vision and hard work, we can significantly reduce the achievement gap and improve learning for **all** students. The Committee, comprised of teacher representatives and administrators, is currently hard at work developing a plan that they will be sharing with you at an upcoming staff meeting. They have met for three full days over the summer, developing the priorities and guidelines for staff development. As early as late September, we plan to have several **educational** technology trainings in place to enhance our ability to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Additional offerings will be added as the year ensues and will be posted on the district's professional development website. Our overall vision is to build a program that will sustain itself over the course of many years, one that will provide for the many identified and varied needs of our staff and one that will find its way into our operating budget. The program will be VITAL to our own professional growth **and** the educational growth of our students.

Second — Teacher collaboration

In the movies, we glorify real, individual teachers who changed the world, such as Jaime Esclante, in *Stand and Deliver*, Pierre Dulaine in *Take the Lead*, and Roberta Guapari in *Music of the Heart*. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any Hollywood movies that recognize groups of teachers who worked collaboratively and made a profound difference for a group of underachieving students. Nevertheless, Hollywood has produced numerous movies where people worked together to overcome enormous challenges. Their successes were largely attributable to a group's commitment to a collective vision and the power of a team effort.

For example, in the movie *Apollo 13*, the engineers on the ground discovered the astronauts would run out of air. The engineers realized they had a short amount of time to figure out how to connect a square filter to a round hole using only the materials on the spacecraft. It was essentially an impossible task, but failure was not an option, since it would mean death for the astronauts. The advice the engineers received was "work the problem." Work it together!

While our circumstances are not matters of immediate life or death, they do mean success or failure for our students. If our collaborative professional learning communities fail to improve student performance for some students, we are not doing our jobs. If, however, our professional learning communities embrace the urgency of the Apollo engineers and work the problems in your classrooms, **all** students will succeed.

In the book *How It's Being Done*, Chenoweth states that "When teachers advise each other, consult with experts, think deeply about new ways to teach the material, and examine existing research in systematic ways to help all of their students learn the material, they are working in sharp contrast to the way

teachers have traditionally been expected to work.” In other words, complete teacher autonomy is antithetical to bringing all students to high levels of achievement. Educators cannot do this most difficult work alone.

Third — A laser-like focus on what we want students to learn

Three years ago, we reinstated a formal, K-12 rigorous curriculum review process. We focused on three subject areas: mathematics, science, technology and engineering, and physical education and wellness. This fall, we will begin the process to review the K-12 literacy and English curriculum. This process is designed to be precisely clear about what we want students to know and be able to do.

In order to have both equity and excellence, we need clear standards for all students. Research from gap-closing schools shows that the lack of clear standards disproportionately hurts children of poverty, children of color, and children with disabilities.

Fourth — The use of individual and common student data to inform future instruction

When researcher Dr. Doug Reeves was here four years ago, he referred to the final, end-of-unit test as an autopsy. He made the point that the information learned might be accurate, but it’s too late to use. However, the regular use of individual and common informative student assessments, before the final unit test, provides teachers with information to modify instruction for those students who have mastered the material and for those who are struggling.

This year, in all of our schools, professional development time will be set aside for teachers to develop at least one common formative assessment within a department or grade level. On October 14, at the district-wide professional development day, Dr. Larry Ainsworth will be our keynote speaker. Dr. Ainsworth is a national expert on the identification of power standards and the use of formative assessments to inform instruction.

Fifth — The use of intervention strategies for students who did not master the material

When I was a sophomore in college, my physics teacher allowed his students to retake the end-of-unit test in order to get a higher grade by spending more time to master the material. The year was 1968 and I have never forgotten the impact of this intervention strategy, which allowed me to seek extra help, restudy the material, and learn the content that I needed for future work in the course. My professor was more interested in whether his students learned the principles of physics well, as opposed to measuring what his students learned in an arbitrary amount of time.

In the past two years, we have made significant progress establishing new intervention strategies for students who need more time or specialized instruction. At the K-5 level, we now have intervention time periods in all schools. During these time blocks, some students receive additional instruction in literacy and mathematics. For students who need more specialized instruction, we now have a four-tier model of **literacy** intervention that ranges from regular classroom interventions to individual/small group special instruction outside the regular classroom.

At the middle schools, we now offer up to five additional periods of math instruction for those students who scored at the warning or needs improvement level on the MCAS test. This program has already produced significant results. This fall, we will start two more programs. Grade 2 through 5 METCO students, who need support in literacy and/or math, will be asked to attend Thursday afternoon extended learning classes taught by highly qualified Lexington literacy and math teachers. Three weeks ago, we

launched the high school METCO scholars program that will provide additional support to promising scholars so that they can take more advanced courses at LHS.

In the years ahead, if we are to provide excellence and equity for all students, then we need to expand the number of intervention opportunities for our students. That professor who allowed me to re-take his college physics tests intervened in a way that allowed me to master the principles of physics. All of our students will benefit from appropriate and timely interventions.

Sixth — Personal relationship building

“The nature of relationships among the adults within a school,” says Roland Barth, “has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community.”

“A precondition for doing anything to strengthen our practice and improve a school,” Barth continues, “is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—is possible.”

Ultimately, if we are going to be successful, we need to decide how we will structure our vision, what we will preserve, what will we change, and what we will create. Here and now, at this convocation, join me in embracing what Martin Luther King Jr. called the “fierce urgency of now.” Without doubt, we can only sustain that urgency in a community of collaboration and mutual support committed to one overarching imperative—each and every student in the Lexington Public Schools must receive precisely and persistently what he or she needs to become that fully educated person we all envision.

In 1961, President Kennedy told the nation that before the end of the decade we would land a man on the moon and return him to earth safely. When President Kennedy made this pledge, he set our nation on a course that few thought could succeed, but we did. In the last decade, some schools in the United States said they would close the achievement gap for children of color, and they did. My vision is that we provide excellence and equity for all students in the next five to ten years, and we will.