

Philadelphia's Educational Promise

Sept. 11, 2008

I've invited you all here tonight to talk about education, about preparing our children – tomorrow's Philadelphians -- for the difficult and challenging world that awaits them in this century of change.

In the past week -- Education Week -- I've talked to students, former students, teachers and parents. I've visited a variety of new programs from a charter school that reconnects former students to their education to a center that prepares students for the rigors of college.

I've heard stories of failure and abandonment and I've seen young lives filled with the triumph of hope and perseverance. There was:

Suhayl Joshua Ward who dropped out of high school in the 11th grade because he preferred to party and was arrested for selling drugs. He did not know his father. His mother was often absent. After several detours, he entered YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School. It became his family and he became a student leader and graduated. Soon, he'll be entering college.

But also:

A young woman told me she'd been on her own since age 14. Her parents were drug addicts. And what was the lesson she learned? "I just gave up relying on other people to take care of me," she said. "I tried my best to find a regular job so I wouldn't need to sleep at friends' houses every night but nobody wanted to hire me."

We Philadelphians can take pride in our schools, in the progress on test scores, six straight years of improvement, and in our new buildings, but only if we also hang our heads in shame for what we've allowed to happen over the years.

If you talk to young people long enough and candidly enough, they'll open up and you'll hear things and wish they weren't true. But they are.

I believe kids drop out, give up, walk away and shut their minds only after adults have dropped out of their lives. I'm talking about: Parents who ignore their responsibilities; Teachers who set the bar too low; Elected officials who don't see education as THE critical investment; and A business community with only a mild interest in developing its future workforce.

Children don't start out as failures. They have to learn it the hard way from adults who have dropped out of their lives.

Now, as a Mayor, I can tell you that education tends to be one of those issues that big city mayors sidestep. In the last year, I've been warned more than once to stay focused on traditional municipal tasks - fill the potholes, pick up the trash but dodge the schools.

I can't do that and I won't do that because education is the linchpin for everything we hope to do in this city toward a future of personal safety, economic prosperity and sustainability supported by an efficient, ethical government.

So far this year:

Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey and Deputy Mayor Everett Gillison have implemented a crime fighting strategy that is driving down the crime rate, including a 22 percent reduction in homicides.

Our economic development plan under the stewardship of Deputy Mayor Andy Altman is lowering business taxes, attracting new business and helping our current businesses expand.

Managing Director Camille Barnett is leading our drive toward a leaner, more efficient government where budgets are based on real, measurable outcomes and where a 311 system will shortly become a reality.

Deputy Mayor Donald Schwarz is working on proposals to ensure that all children enter the educational system as prepared as possible using early year prevention strategies.

And Chief Integrity Officer Joan Markman and Inspector General Amy Kurland are restoring ethics to government and rooting out the culture of sleaze.

And yet, if we can't fix our education system so that it's producing young adults prepared for the world, then the rest of it won't matter. We won't succeed in any of our other goals.

On the other hand, if our children are educated for a knowledge driven-economy, then without doubt we'll have a safer city, a city able to attract more jobs because of its talented workforce, and consequently a workforce that will live in much healthier, sustainable communities.

And so tonight, I want to talk about Philadelphia's Educational Promise – the commitment we must all make to our children. I want to talk about adults, personal responsibility and public partnership, about the roles that we all must play in coming years to prepare our children for lives of learning in a global economy.

I want to talk about **THE WAY** to create a city that educates **ALL** of its children and how to create **THE WILL** to sustain that effort.

I may say some things tonight that haven't been said before. I may get up in somebody's grill, and I may advocate for some actions that have not been taken before.

But I want to make it very clear at the start that this city administration is going to be an active and supporting partner of the School District of Philadelphia. There is no "my side" and "your side." We are together. We are family.

We in the city and school district are going to find as many ways to cooperate on safety, planning, budgeting and back-office operations as we can. This administration has a statutory requirement to fund

the schools, a legal requirement to work closely with the schools and a moral obligation to advocate for each child in this city. And that's what we're going to do.

It's why I set out two very ambitious goals in my Inaugural Address last January:

- In five to seven years, to cut in half the high school dropout rate that now stands at a shocking 45 percent and
- Within five to 10 years, to double the college attainment rate of residents with four-year degrees from the current 18 percent, which places Philadelphia 92nd out of the top 100 cities in the country.

Achieving these goals will require focused and sustainable change at all stages of the education experience that we provide our children. What we need is a new play book that sets out our roles and duties.

We know what helps children learn. We know what works. I really do believe that this isn't rocket science.

Our problem is that we've been unable to replicate these best practices consistently across all schools, every day and all year long. To ensure better outcomes, we all must work together.

To start, let me pose a question. Who is a child's first, best and most consistent teacher? ... Parents. Children will succeed if parents take the time to work with them.

As parents we must very consciously develop a list of duties, a roster if you will, that informs children what is expected of them. That means the television is off and homework is done. It means getting children to bed at a respectable hour. A 10-year old should be in bed by 8 pm. Teenagers need to be in bed by 9:30, not 11:30

And in the morning, take your child to school. After school make sure you know where your child is and what he or she is doing.

It means that parents and guardians have to make sure children have a nutritious dinner and breakfast. It means as it always has, keeping children clean and dressed and loved. And praising children when they meet those expectations and hugging them even if they don't.

On one of my recent education visits, a young girl said to me: "Mayor, I would give anything just to have my father sit as close to me as you are right now and ask me how my day was." ... Surely, any child deserves this and more.

The new economy demands we do more. It means that parents must set aside time every night to sit with their young one and read for twenty minutes to a half hour. I mean read every night. If we did this as a city, we would not have two-thirds of our population with low literacy levels.

And the experience of reading together will bind parent and child in the educational process like no other activity. Here's why this reading time is so important.

In the 1990s, literacy researchers concluded that high school graduation could reasonably be predicted by a student's reading skill at the end of 3rd grade.

If you weren't reading with adequate facility in the 4th grade and on, you were set for disaster because you never could take in all the new information that teachers assumed you were absorbing through the textbooks in the upper grades.

As your child gets older and the homework gets more difficult, don't worry that you may have trouble keeping up. It's supposed to be that way. They're supposed to be smarter than we are. But your engagement is critical.

Parents also must help their children look to the future and plan. The city and School District can help parents with that increasingly complex task. In fact, parenting is so important and so much more complicated, we need to pursue the "Parent University" concept to help parents get the training they need to support their children.

And I'm pleased to report that Dr. Ackerman has agreed to hire 128 new full-time staff members who will be aggressive customer-service employees working in schools to help parents get the services that their children need.

My message is "Help us, help you, help them."

As we all know, Philadelphia is no village. It's a diverse, cosmopolitan city with a long history of greatness and a future no less grand.

But to raise a child in this century when the global economy is reaching into every city and town around the planet, we must marshal everyone -- parents, teachers, business leaders, neighborhood groups, labor and the non-profit world -- to help parents and children.

To teachers ... I say you entered the profession because you cared about children and their future. I know that your peers in other districts may earn more. I know that you often take money out of your own pocket to buy supplies.

We have to do a better job toward you, but we need you to set high standards. If you do, your students will knock themselves out trying to reach them. If you give up on them, they will fail.

Talking with students in the last week, I heard anger and disappointment about adults, including teachers, who didn't hold students' feet to the fire, who let them off the hook. The kids went AWOL and adults looked the other way. We need to demand more from children and we need to do a better job of keeping after them.

To the business community, I offer thanks for the recent effort to provide almost 1,500 summer internships, but we need vastly more participation in this program. The waiting list for internships is huge.

We need the business community to step up as it has never before to provide internships or the funding for them. Internships link in a direct way academics and the use of those skills in the real world. And, we need year-round opportunities, not just summer programs.

I'm also urging the business community to work with the city and School District to create new career pathways and strong career and technical education programs to help prepare our students for their futures.

And by all means, support your employees in their parental roles. If they need time to drop off a child at school or time to attend a parent-teacher conference or a school-related event, provide the time. It's an investment in our future workforce that benefits business leaders in a direct way.

Later, I'll have more to say to students and our college and university communities, but let me turn to what the city and School District are planning.

We are very fortunate to have Dr. Arlene Ackerman as our school superintendent. She is an experienced administrator and a national education expert. I want you to know that Dr. Ackerman and I see the issues before us in the same way and we're working very closely to fashion the best solutions.

In a very real sense the stars have aligned for us.

With the leadership of Gov. Rendell and the support of many local advocacy groups and elected officials, we were successful in gaining the support of the Pennsylvania General Assembly for a budget with substantially more dollars for Philadelphia and other school districts based on a formula that enhances equity.

The Accountability Review Council, an independent group created by the state legislature to monitor reform in the Philadelphia School District, noted in a letter to me last month,

- “The school children of Philadelphia are, perhaps for the first time in decades, benefiting from significant strategic initiatives such as core curriculum, improved early childhood education, smaller high schools, improvement of school safety and climate, improved teacher quality, a greater opportunity for school choice and a stronger City-District partnership.”

Let me balance that judgment with a reality check.

We are a city with almost 25 percent of the population living below the Federal poverty level.

About 45 percent of working age adults are not working nor are they looking for work. That, by the way, ranks us 96th out of the 100 largest cities in the rate of labor force participation.

And according to the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, more than 2 in 3 jobs in the city require higher literacy levels that match only 1 in 2 workers living in the city.

Now, as the old saying goes, “you can pay now or pay later.” We can invest in education and training and reap the rewards down the road, or we can fail to act together and see the level of school dropout, prison incarceration, poor health, joblessness and hopelessness grow.

Thanks to the Project U-Turn Collaborative and research from Johns Hopkins University, we know a great deal about the characteristics of our dropout population in Philadelphia.

We know that 80 percent of the students who left school had serious academic and attendance problems in 8th or 9th grade.

Further, the research demonstrated that at least 40 percent of the eventual dropouts can be identified as early as the 6th grade based on four factors: failing math or English language arts, attending school less than 80 percent of the time [and that means missing four days per month] and having a poor final grade on behavior.

Together, the city and School District need to explore the concept of what's known as "Student Success Plans." Each student would have a plan that sets out what they are doing in school and how their out-of-school time meshes with those activities.

The idea is that no child will be allowed to fall through the cracks.

As part of our strategy to dramatically reduce the incidence of dropping out, I'm announcing tonight that the School District, with the strong support of this administration, is preparing to implement an EARLY WARNING SYSTEM that will target for intervention 6th grade children who fall into this pre-dropout profile.

To provide the fiscal support for the programming targeted at these and older at-risk students, the city is going to realign more than \$200 million used for after-school, summer and prevention programs to help parents in their job of keeping kids safe and learning every day. We'll carefully monitor programs and keep parents well informed about how the programs are performing.

For example, the city will be opening an education center at the Department of Human Services to work with children in its care, children who are highly at risk for dropping out. Some children will have access to a new literacy program.

We're going to see to it that parents know what these red flags of impending academic failure are so that they can do something about it, early on when there's plenty of time to turn despairing children into aggressive learners.

But parents be assured, as you get more deeply involved in your child's education, you're not being asked to carry all the weight.

Dr. Ackerman has set a goal, one that this administration very strongly endorses, to make sure that every child can read on grade level by the end of 3rd grade so that each student has the smooth start they need to be successful in the upper grades And Dr. Ackerman needs your help with this laudable goal.

We in City Hall will be doing our part by working with one 3rd grade class every week through the Reaching Stars program and I encourage other employers to do the same.

And now let me turn to the young Philadelphians who have completely lost the concept of a prize at the end of the education process.

According to the Project U-Turn researchers, about 8,000 students in the middle grades and high school dropped out each year while another 5,000 were near-dropouts because they attended school less than half the time.

What are we doing for the 30,000 or more young Philadelphians who are out of school, more than half not promoted beyond the 9th or 10th grade?

Recently, the School District opened its first Re-Engagement Center. For students who want to come back to school, the center assesses their needs and finds the “right fit” program for them. In the future, we’re committed to having many more centers open in the neighborhoods.

Already, 800 students have contacted the center wanting to come back to school.

But if these young people have seen the light and are brave enough to return, what are we doing for them once we’ve assessed them at a center?

We must prepare a place for them -- multiple pathways to graduation, each as rigorous as the others, but pathways to success that are tailored to their academic, social and employment needs.

How we do that – schools within schools, accelerated schools, charter schools, contract schools – those distinctions are less important. What matters is that caring adults create a learning environment and expect students to excel.

Clearly, we don’t have the system completely mapped out yet, but last year we had almost 3,500 slots in various programs, an incredible achievement!

We have accelerated high schools and the educational options program, the Gateway to College at Community College of Philadelphia, the “bridge” program to help prepare young people with serious literacy issues to enter other educational programs and the E 3 centers that offer skill-building experiences.

We’re now expanding the network of programs by almost 1,500 slots over the next two years, and that’s real progress. But with roughly 8,000 dropouts per year we have a long way to go before we have the array of options and sufficient funding to make a profound impact on the thousands of young people who have fallen away from the education system and need to return.

As we all know, keeping our children in school and fully engaged in learning requires a safe environment. You can’t do your work if you’re worried about what might be waiting out in the hall, at the playground or on the way home.

Dr. Ackerman tells me the No. 1 issue that parents are raising with her is safety. Many students have told her that the lack of it keeps them away from school.

A month ago, top Police Commanders, the School District, representatives from Town Watch and my Office of Education met and discussed how to keep every school safe. As a result, they decided to

establish Safe Corridor programs at 27 additional schools and we are committed to have them in operation this year, bringing to 90 the number of Safe Corridor schools.

Superintendent Ackerman will have more to say about an expansion of the Safe Corridors program and a safety plan for the schools in the near future but the planning process is open and inclusive.

In the meantime, every school will be posting a simple, two-page explanation of its safety plan on the school district's website so that every parent can know what their school is doing to keep children safe.

The School District and the City police department are working very hard to provide accurate data on all incidents and doing all we can to reduce the number of incidents, but parents and concerned adults can truly make a difference if they volunteer to participate in programs like Safe Corridors.

Now, I'd like to shift to the other end of the educational pipeline – going to college. Our goal of doubling the college attainment rate is vital to the city's economic growth.

A recent report by Graduate! Philadelphia noted that 70 percent of all occupations, and in particular those paying better wages and benefits, now require a post-secondary degree. As it now stands, far too many Philadelphians are not equipped to hold the better jobs available in our city.

We need to strongly encourage our children to go to college, but that's not an easy task for students whose parents never went to college. Navigating the college entrance system has become a nightmare.

And in that context, I applaud Dr. Ackerman's new transition plan for 8th and 9th grade students who will have access to more instruction and services to help them graduate from high school. There'll be high school and college readiness programs, career counseling and vouchers for college testing.

Also, the city now has eight staffed and fully funded Student Success Centers playing a valuable role, and I'm happy to say that the City and School District are committed to increasing the number of Centers to 11 within the next year.

We are asking that each Center have a college or university partner to make that college campus more real for our students. So far, Community College of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University have signed on to work with individual centers. And we have interest from other colleges and universities as well.

To date, we know that the current Centers have played a very positive role in two ways: students are getting critical information about the college entrance process, testing, financial assistance and college visits.

And, the Centers also seem to be raising expectations and may have an impact on student performance. If you learn about college and get to visit one in your junior year, it can be an eye-opening incentive. You start thinking, "I can do this. I can make it."

Student Success Centers are not the only college readiness and preparation programs in the city. My chief education officer, Lori Shorr, has been in contact with at least 10 other programs.

After surveying them, we've decided to launch CollegeReady Philadelphia, a collaborative effort that will help us develop a unified message, coordinate policy and bring the college preparation services to more Philadelphia students. We're in the process of seeking foundation and other funding for the new clearinghouse.

CollegeReady will develop a strong media campaign in support of high school students taking advantage of college preparation programs.

In the Philadelphia region we're blessed with more than 80 colleges and universities. It makes us one of the biggest higher education centers in the country. That we have such a low college attainment rate in the midst of this rich institutional environment is disturbing.

The reasons for this are complicated, but certainly one is financial. And so in the true spirit of partnership, I'm proposing that the institutions of higher learning in the Philadelphia region commit to providing 1,000 new scholarships each year to graduating Philadelphia high school students. These new scholarships coupled with existing ones will offer Philadelphia students tangible rewards for work hard.

Outside the education pipeline, we have roughly 80,000 Philadelphians now between the ages of 25 and 45 who started college, earned a number of credits and then stopped.

The Graduate! Philadelphia report painted a stark picture of Philadelphians whose college experiences were sidetracked by financial, childcare, transportation and other issues.

In the future, our economy will require many more workers with college degrees and Graduate! Philadelphia is hard at work with the business community, the academic sector and government to help the so-called "Comebackers" get their degrees.

Community College has heard the call and is showing the kind of leadership we're going to need. The College's new "My Degree Now" program enables Philadelphia residents with 30 or more transferable college credits to earn an associate's degree with no out-of-pocket costs for tuition and fees.

If we can encourage Comebackers to become college graduates, the benefits are enormous: the graduates will move up the income ladder, earning more, buying more, paying more taxes and setting a sterling example to their children who will see the direct benefits of a college degree.

In support of this effort, it's time for the City of Philadelphia to lead by example. City government has more than 24,000 employees and we have an obligation to help each employee fully develop her or his skill-set. Getting a college degree tops the list.

We are now in the process of developing the systems and incentives to help the Comebackers in city government earn their degrees.

But we want to do much more than that. Our city employees collectively are a tremendous repository of skill and institutional knowledge. We need to cultivate them and provide them with value. If an

employee's child drops out of school, we need to be there with the support they need to help get their children back onto the right path.

One of the best things we can do is provide on-site adult literacy programs for our employees. On the issue of adult literacy let me speak to a misconception: becoming literate doesn't take a decade. Regardless of your age or the challenges you face, you can learn to read, it can happen quickly and the payoff is great.

Connecting literacy, workforce development and career placement is a key strategy to increase the number of successes:

The Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board recently reported positive results in connection with an adult literacy program that taught literacy through job-seeking workshops. For students who completed 50 hours or more of classes, there was an average 2.5 grade level increase in reading.

For people who have spent a lifetime with few opportunities to succeed, this is a chance for a new start. And for those with families, it's a way to inspire their children to see school as an opportunity, not a boring obligation.

Two quick stories: Odell Callicut was unemployed after working for many years. He participated in the program, run by the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, and on his last day in the program was hired.

Another woman, a recent widow and unemployed, progressed through the program and is now employed and working toward her high school diploma.

With stories like that in mind, we're going to act quickly to reinvigorate the Mayor's Commission on Literacy and charge it with developing a new citywide system to meet the needs of both adults and young people who want to gear up for the knowledge-based economy.

I know that I've covered a lot of ground tonight.

We're all committed to build on what we now have in place. We see the problems very clearly and many of the solutions are at hand. We need to target resources to programs that really work and we'll know that because we're committed to carefully measuring our results.

But the most important truth is that we all must work together. I can assure you that the City of Philadelphia, the School Reform Commission and Superintendent Ackerman are as closely aligned as a city administration, school board and superintendent have ever been.

Together, we must agree on the way to create a city that is successful at educating all of its children. Together, we must create the will to sustain us through this challenging but essential work.

And I want to make my own personal commitment to you. I stand here this evening as mayor ready to work with all of you. I do not take on battles that can't be won. And I promise you, this is one that we can and must win.

So let me conclude by laying out the fundamentals of Philadelphia's Educational Promise by saying:

To young Philadelphians – our students:

Go to school, make sure your friends go with you and together take control of your futures.

Read! It's a complicated world out there. Take charge of your own literacy and get help as soon as you need it.

Plan for high school graduation, your options after graduating and your life's work.

To Parents:

Be a role model and finish high school or college.

Read to your children and be fully engaged in their education. Ask questions.

Know the red flags of dropout: failure in math or reading, poor discipline and missing one day of school per week.

And make a Student Success Plan for your students, linking home and school duties.

To the business community:

Provide summer and year-long internships or the funding for it.

Encourage your employees to complete their college degrees with new resources and programs.

Support your employees in their parental responsibilities, from taking children to school to attending school meetings.

And collaborate with the School District to create job readiness programs for students while still in school.

And to colleges and universities:

Partner with Student Success Centers in targeted high schools to help prepare more students for college.

Provide more scholarships and dual enrollment opportunities for Philadelphia public school students.

And work with business to provide low-cost, innovative degree completion programs.

| We will get it all together,

Work on our respective tasks,

and a decade from now, people will be talking about the Philadelphia Educational Promise and how we kept our promise to our kids.

Thank You.