



Mayor Warren's Plenary Address  
at the University of Rochester  
Presidential Symposium:  
Revitalizing K-12 Education in Rochester

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Delivered by  
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*Good Morning Friends; and thank you Dr. Seligman and Dean Borasi for inviting me to speak to you this morning. We are here today because we share a common concern – the future of our children and the future of our schools. And even if we might not agree on how to define reform, I suspect we do agree that the status quo is unacceptable.*

*As you know, it's not unheard of for so-called "reform mayors" to proclaim that poverty doesn't matter. Mayor Bloomberg did it. So did Mayor Emanuel and Mayor Booker, and they've all been fairly criticized for it. But unlike those mayors, I do not speak theoretically about poverty.*

I want to tell you a story about a young girl that I know who grew up in the city's Northeast side. She was in foster care by the age of 3. She ran away from home and was in and out of juvenile detention centers. She was placed on probation by family court. At one point she stood in a room with shackles on her hands and feet because the authorities thought she was a flight risk. She had a baby at the age of 17. But ultimately, this young lady ended up going to college, and followed that up by attending law school and attaining her Juris Doctorate. She got a good job as a prosecutor. Many people might have written this young lady off, not only because she was poor, but also because of where she came from. Her zip code was 14609.

I want to tell you a story about a young man that I know who grew up in the projects in the heart of the Crescent. At that time, it was the poorest neighborhood in the entire city. He attended East High School, but he wasn't an exceptional student. He grew up in a single parent household with a mother who struggled with her own demons, and he ultimately participated in many of the activities that so many urban youth become involved in. This young man ultimately found a way to work his way to college and earn a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and then a doctorate degree. But many people would have written him off because he was poor, and growing up, his zip code was 14605.

I want to tell you a story about another young lady who grew up on the city's southwest side. Her mother had to become the breadwinner in the family when her father became addicted to crack cocaine and was in and out of her life. She started having trouble in school because of her

anger, and she would fight constantly. She was suspended repeatedly. This young lady ultimately overcame her circumstances and went on to college and then to law school. But many people would have written her off because she was poor, and growing up, her zip code was 14619.

Today in this city, for many young people, their zip code determines their future. Many people believe that poverty is why young people are not successful in life – and for some reason we think being poor means that standards have to be lowered -- but I've just given you three examples of people who grew up in impoverished circumstances in our city, but still made it. Was poverty a factor that these young people had to overcome? Absolutely. Do we have to find a way to help our children who are growing up in poverty? Absolutely. But poverty cannot become an acceptable excuse for failure.

You see, the three people that I just talked to you about today are Judge Caroline Morrison, Doctor Leonard Brock, and Mayor Lovely Warren.

If we are honest, the debate about education reform has largely been a debate about “other people’s children.” And let’s be clear, by “other people,” I mean poor parents. The policymakers and pundits, community leaders--and yes, the politicians too-- are quick to ask those “other parents” to be patient while they fix their failing schools. Schools that are more likely to be dangerous... more likely to be staffed by inexperienced and ineffective people... less likely to have the enrichment and extracurricular activities that we know children need to thrive. They’re quick to ask “other parents” to be patient with schools that many would never in a million years send their own children to.

Ladies and gentlemen, I’m here today on behalf of those “other parents.”

If today’s symposium is to be any different than the countless other conferences, task forces and Blue Ribbon Panels that Rochester has convened over the years, then we must be honest about this double standard. It has grounded all of our public education policies and frankly it’s, corrupting the process.

Like with any new mayor, there’s been a lot of speculation about my education philosophy, so let me be clear: I believe in a single standard of educational quality... A single standard of effective teaching... A single standard of student expectations and discipline. I believe in a single standard for all of our students, whether they are public, charter or private; rich or poor; black, brown or white.

I am not naïve. Chipping away at the double standard cemented in our public education system will be hard work. Thankless work. At times, bloody work. If it hasn’t dawned on you yet, I’m here today to hand you a chisel and ask you to join me in this work.

I announced my candidacy for mayor last spring by releasing my education plan. I believed – and still do – that education is at the heart of many of Rochester’s problems, and our solutions too. It is the lynchpin upon which everything else revolves – success for our children, the stability of our neighborhoods, public safety and our economic future. And when it comes to education in Rochester, there is universal agreement that we are in a crisis. And yes it is true, we have to work together, but in a crisis, the Mayor must lead which is why I am standing here today.

Many of my campaign stops were on my education agenda. I spoke with parents, employers, teachers, administrators, political representatives and educators about seven key strategies:

- Empowering parents with more choices so that all children can go to a school that helps them reach their potential regardless of their zip code.
- Expand access to high-quality early education for all children – in other words, Universal Pre-K.
- Launch a program to set up schools as neighborhood centers with expanded hours, services and community partnerships.
- Help RCSD recruit extraordinary urban teachers to Rochester through partnerships and incentives.
- Expand college access and attainment.
- Strengthen and expand the pathways to careers.
- Fight summer learning loss through re-tooled City rec programs focused on creative learning opportunities.

Today’s education landscape is ripe with lessons for those reformers who want to learn. A sense of urgency to fix a broken system is important, but it must be balanced by good process. Obviously we can’t do all of this overnight, but I am ready to dig in. I want you to know that I am a willing partner and am open to all options. We will only succeed if we set aside the old grievances and move ahead as one community with one goal – the best for our children today – which also happens to be the best thing for the economic future of our city tomorrow.

Let’s start right at the beginning, with something we know works – Universal Pre-K. When I released my education plan last year, my husband Tim and I had just started the process of shopping for a pre-K program for our first child, our daughter Taylor. We researched operators... We visited schools to see their teachers in action... We asked for referrals... We thought long and hard about what kind of learner our little Taylor was. In short, we did what choosy middle class parents do. In the end, we settled on the city school district’s Montessori program, which seemed

to be a good fit for Taylor’s love of hands-on learning. We’re enjoying meeting with her teachers and learning how we can be effective parents at home so she can be successful in the classroom.

For all the advantages that Tim and I have, navigating the pre-K choices was not an easy process. Information for parents is patchy. Quality varies wildly across operators. Throughout the process, I would imagine how overwhelming it would be if I was a single mother. Or busy working two jobs. Or without a car to do site visits. But this is the reality for those “other parents.” For them, the list of pre-K options that you and I have is decidedly shorter. Most of the high-quality, full-day programs simply aren’t affordable for those other parents. In fact, there are a limited number of UPK seats in Rochester, but many students are eligible.

The good news is that this year, policymakers are finally taking notice of the mountain of compelling research in support of Universal Pre-K. There’s a growing consensus that it’s more cost effective to provide high-quality early learning experiences than remediation later. The New York Education Reform Commission, a group of 20 of the nation’s leading thinkers in education, recently recommended that New York State significantly expand its Universal Pre-K program.

The Governor concurred and included the proposal in his executive budget that included allowing charter schools to offer UPK programs. The governor’s pre-K proposal was unanimously endorsed by the Big 5 mayors. And just last week in his State of the Union address, President Obama reiterated his commitment to Universal Pre-K, signaling federal funding is likely in the works too.

What’s still unclear is how much and when funding will actually come to Rochester’s pre-K providers. Or how we will measure and ensure quality as we scale up the sector.

What is clear, though—at least to this pre-K mother—is that Rochester has much work to do if we are to capitalize on this building momentum for early learning. To be sure, we have some outstanding operators who are well-positioned to expand their programs once Albany and D.C. settle on the details. But as city, we lack a comprehensive plan to increase pre-K seats, let alone address existing problems with delivery.

In the coming weeks and months, I hope to sit down with Rochester’s early childhood leaders, many of whom are here today, to ask for their help on behalf of Rochester’s youngest and most vulnerable children. But before we meet, let me give you a glimpse into what City Hall will be investing to address our early childhood needs:

This is preliminary, and the details are still being finalized, but today I would like to announce that we are working on creating an Early Learning Commission. The group, which is still in formation and yet to be announced will be tasked with:



- Engaging all stakeholders to help us convince leaders in Albany that our region needs its fair share of the new Universal Pre-K funding announced by Governor Cuomo in his State of the State and budget messages. I think the competition for these funds will be stiff, but I would argue that Rochester's children are very deserving.
- Seeking grant funds to conduct an enrollment study to quantify the total seats and enrollment projections, parental demand, and identify barriers to access. We'll make the data available to providers interested in expanding or starting up new programs.
- Working with community partners with pre-K experience, like Action for a Better Community, Baden Street Settlement, the city school district, charter schools and others to assess whether there is sufficient supply of pre-K teachers and quality professional development programming.
- Convening parent focus groups to collect feedback on our efforts.
- This effort will be led by Allen Williams my Director of Special Projects in conjunction with Marisol Lopez the Commissioner of the Department of Recreation and Youth Services.

How Rochester responds to this new pre-K policy shift will be our first test together, but not our last. My hope is that our city can come together, put aside old grievances and develop a shared vision of a strong start for all of Rochester's students. One grounded in a new single standard of educational quality for all children, regardless of a student's zip code, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity. My hope is that with our response to the pre-K challenge, we create a new template for community engagement, one that harnesses both the intellectual muscle of our many Schools of Education and the practical wisdom of our classroom teachers and parents.

Public service has taught me that it's not enough to say what policies you support. If there's any lesson we can agree on about Common Core implementation in New York State it's that how you execute your agenda matters too. So how will I execute? Simply put, *I intend to put the public back in public education.*

**To start, I will advocate for families.** Administrators have their advocates. Teachers have their advocates. School board members, social workers, janitors and bus drivers have their advocates. Even, universities and colleges do. It's time that Rochester parents and students do too.

**Second, I will champion shared-decision making.** In policy circles, the "broad-based coalition" is the platinum standard for community engagement. We aspire to it, but rarely do we achieve it in public education, where debate is dominated by the insiders and elites.

I believe that giving external stakeholders a real voice is vital to stopping the downward spiral our schools are caught in. Anything less is business-as-usual. During my campaign, I assembled

one of these elusive broad-based coalitions that included education experts, advocates, employers, parents and students. The result was an innovative agenda of evidence-based strategies, grounded in common sense. It responded to the public's concerns, rather than imposed it on them. This will be my template for all of my advisory groups moving forward, whether we are exploring improvement in early childhood, career-tech education, expanded learning, or college-readiness. The public deserves a seat at the table, and they will have one while I'm in office.

**Third, I will relentlessly ask the question not enough of us are asking: Why aren't we replicating success?** Average statistics mask a lot of variation, especially success. We tend to focus on the failures, but in fact, there are pockets of success in every sector of Rochester's schools—public, charter and private. Judge Morrison, Dr. Brock and I are proof that successful programs can and do overcome the effects of poverty. But each sector operates in its own silo and has no incentive to share their “secret sauce,” as Dr. Urbanski described Rochester Prep Charter School in the *Democrat and Chronicle*. Sometimes, even sharing the “secret sauce” within the same school can be difficult. Sadly, our funding programs only reinforce these silos.

But City Hall isn't housed in one of those silos or ivory towers. I am mayor to all of Rochester's children, regardless of their school enrollment. As I see it, my role is not unlike the now defunct Gates-District Charter Compact to foster collaboration across sector lines and to break down barriers to replicating successful programs. That is why I am one of a select few Mayors that have been invited to Washington, DC in March to attend an invitation only meeting to be held with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to talk about how we can collectively work to increase the achievement of students, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

All of our political leaders are talking about two distinct initiatives early childhood education and career technical education. President Obama and Governor Cuomo in recent addresses talked about work force training. They talked about the need to develop a skilled workforce in advanced manufacturing and new technology. Vice President Biden recently pointed out during his visit that as we move ahead into a different kind of manufacturing economy, there will not be the same kinds of living wage jobs for someone who has a high school education alone as there were for their parents in days past.

It is estimated that 16,000 jobs are going to come on-line in this region in the coming years, and as it stands now we will not have the workforce to fill the need. That is why I'm encouraged to see that our region is responding to the call. We are returning to the basics and moving back towards vocational-technical education. We are, and need to continue to support programs that close the middle skills gap and train tomorrow's workforce.

To return to where we started, every child deserves an opportunity to succeed no matter where they call home. My life was changed by a city school administrator, Mr. Bless Thomas he saw the potential in me and helped me not become a victim of my circumstance. I never forget this because I know that teachers have the power to change lives and choosing to teach in an urban setting requires a special kind of commitment and awareness. When I had the opportunity to talk to a group of young aspiring teachers at Towson University -- I remember telling them something that I keep at the forefront of my mind as I govern this city -- our children don't get to choose the color of their skin. They don't get to choose their sex. They don't get to choose what family they're born into. They don't get to choose their economic situation. And they don't get to choose their schools. They're powerless over their circumstances. So when you walk into a classroom in an urban environment or choose to run for office, you must be prepared to deal with the problems that come with that urban environment. The excuse "I didn't sign up for this" is NOT VALID.

There is another Judge Caroline Morrison growing up in our city right now. There's another Dr. Leonard Brock. There's another Mayor Lovely Warren. And it's up to everyone in this room to make sure that they reach their full potential. Like many of you and the parents I've met, I'm tired of the education turf wars. It's school quality, not school type that matters. It's time that our public policies reflect shared community values. This is only the beginning but I am optimistic that we will overcome these challenges and be a better community for it.

The discussion around education, and how best to educate our children shouldn't be a call to arms or a field upon which political battles are fought but a collective commitment to making sure Rochester's children have equal access to educational opportunities. We can't lose our focus. Too much is at stake. It can no longer be about public schools versus charter schools, or teachers unions versus parent groups. These are false choices. And we can no longer operate under a double standard that asks students, teachers, administrators, parents or citizens to be patient because change is coming. The time is now. I look forward to working with anyone who is committed to helping our children. My door is open, and I hope we can all work together to build a better future for all of our children, and know that every child has the potential to achieve greatness regardless of their zip code.