

Promises to Keep

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To my esteemed colleagues and partners in the endeavor to support the success and development of public schools in this great nation – to honored guests and officials: It is with honor I address you on this occasion of the annual conference for the Council of Urban Boards of Education – this organization with bold advocates for excellence and equity in public education – representing over 100 urban school districts serving this nations poorest children and the largest number of English-language learners. You, who represent many faces without voice primarily in districts with children of color, are to be commended for your dedication. Give yourselves a round of applause

I beg your brief indulgence if you would reflect with me on a familiar poem in American literature by Robert Frost – Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Some of you may wonder why I chose this particular literary work to serve as a framework for my exploration of the status of urban education in America. Mr. Frost's alliteration is the topic of considerable discussion in literary and philosophical circles. I am enticed by the metaphorical deliberation of Mr. Frost on, of all occasions, Christmas Eve. It has been speculated that Mr. Frost sat on the roadside on this particular Christmas Eve and remembered a time when life was simple – remembered a life without responsibility – remembered a life where his only concern was for himself and his well-being. Perhaps, Mr. Frost's mental journey took him back to a time when a parent or loved one took the responsibility for providing for his every need or desire. But, after reflection, he returns to the reality that he cannot sit by idly and watch the world transform in front of him – he has an obligation to keep his promises. Perhaps the promises are to his children – waiting on his arrival—for the familiar smell of his wool coat dusted with fresh New England snow. Perhaps, the promises are to aging parents who depend upon him to look after their estates. Perhaps, the promises are to his bride – to return in time for Christmas in spite of the threat of snow squalls and blistering cold. We are not privy to the details of his specific promises, but it is reasonable to deduce that they are, in fact, significant ones – promises that under no circumstance should be broken.

Just as Mr. Frost, I am sure we have all paused at some point along the way. We might have paused to question whether the work in which we are engaged is, in fact, our calling. We might have paused to question whether the work in which we are engaged is, in fact, making a difference in the collective lives of the hundreds, in the thousands, in

the millions of children participating the nation's public schools. We might have paused remembering from whence we came - remembered a time of separate water fountains, male-only professions and concrete, not glass – but, concrete ceilings. We might have even paused to revel in our accomplishments. And we do have accomplishments:

- While the gap between urban school districts and their suburban and rural counterparts remains, many urban school districts are making faster gains in Reading and Math proficiency than their respective state average gains. (Standard & Poor's, 2005)
- Between 1984 and 2000, the number of students per 1,000 12th graders taking Advanced Placement examinations increased. (CGCS, 2004)
- According to the Council of Great City Schools, their districts improved in Math achievement, with 85% of all grades tested showing gains; Reading – 72% showed gains (CGCS, 2004)
- Public schools students are not performing below their peers in charter schools. (US DOE, 2006)

With our accomplishments, we also have challenges – challenges associated with overcoming social inequities in our urban school districts – districts with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of ESL students. (CGCS, 2003):

- The 100 largest urban districts comprise less than 1% of the nation's school districts, yet they educate approximately 30% of all students in poverty. (MDRC, 2003)
- Seventy-three percent of all Black 4th-grade students were enrolled in schools with more than one-half of the students eligible to receive a free/reduced price lunch. (NCES, 2003)
- African American and Hispanic rates of drop-out are higher, 19 percent for African Americans and 35 percent for Hispanics. (NCES, 2003)
- Racial/ethnic differences also were evident in suspension and expulsion rates. In 1999, 35 percent of Black students in grades 7 through 12 had been suspended or expelled at some point in their school careers, as much as the percentages of White and Hispanic students combined. (NCES, 2003)

We could stop where we are and marvel at our accomplishments or hide from the challenges – But we made promises.

Somewhere I read – that we promised that all are given certain inalienable rights; and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those rights are but fleeting illusions in the face of staggering statistics:

- The poverty rate in 2000 for Blacks was 22 percent. While this was the lowest since 1959, this rate is more than twice the rate for Whites (8%). (NCES, 2003)
- Poverty among Black children is particularly pronounced: 31 percent of Black children lived in poverty in 2000. This percentage is almost equal to the percentage of White children and the percentage of Hispanic children combined. (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 2000)
- For children ages 5 to 14, the 1999 mortality rate among Black children was about 1.5 times the rates for Whites and Hispanics of the same ages. (NCES, 2003)

Somewhere I read – that we promised a “New Deal” – and in the words of President Roosevelt that we “... bring about a wiser, more equitable distribution of the national income...” Medical advances continue to stretch the life expectancy of Americans far beyond what was envisioned when Social Security set the retirement age at 65. Today, a 65-year-old man has a 50 percent chance of living to 85. A 65-year-old woman has a 50 percent chance of getting to 88. The implications of saving for retirement are enormous. With most families in urban areas living in poverty, the chance of moving above the poverty line with retirement is untenable.

And Somewhere I read – that we promised our children that separate educational institutions are inherently unequal and unconstitutional. **Somewhere I read** – that no individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of race, gender or national origin and that all shall be afforded equal protection of the laws of THIS United States.

- American schools are now in their 12th year of a trend towards racial re-segregation (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2006)
- In the 2000-01 school year, the levels of integration of black students was at its lowest in three decades. (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2005)
- Between 1991-2003, the number of black students attending majority nonwhite schools rose sharply across all regions
- this percentage increased from 61% to 71% in the south. (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2005)
- More than 75% of intensely segregated schools are also high poverty schools. (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2005)
- White students are the least likely to attend multiracial schools. (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2005)
- The legislature in the state of Nebraska voted to split one of its largest urban districts into three districts where the makeup was distinguishable by the ethnic groups – one black district – one white district and one Hispanic district. (NAACP LDF, 2006, CUBE, 2006, Omaha Herald, 2006)

These statistics are startling and have the potential to divide our communities. But we have to stick together and maintain unity. But what would amount to crabs at the bottom of a barrel struggling to get out is not the issue. It is not enough that a few of us manage to get out, the issue is that sum of us is at the bottom of the barrel. That is the issue. And the *idea, the idea*, of a tri-caucus meeting between the Black, Hispanic and Native American caucuses that occurred over the last few days here in Phoenix is a good start.

So, what else can we do at this point in history?!

First, we must arm ourselves with data and factual information. It is important that you know the truth – that you understand the external forces that impact our public education system. It has been said that “All bondage begins at the point which you believe a lie”. We have to fight not to be fooled by the “illusion of progress”. Where

some of our children meet goal on the standardized exams; where *some* of our children go on to play professional sports and enter the entertainment world; where *some* of our children go on to higher education; where *some* of our children have productive lives and stable family relationships – no, we cannot be satisfied until *all* of our children are pulled out of poverty; until *all* of our children have the skills they need to lead productive lives; and until *all* of our children feel valued and respected.

I can remember as if it were yesterday – a particular board meeting in New Haven several years ago. A woman approached me as I gathered my papers to go home. It was a board meeting where we had to make some difficult choices – a board meeting where the promises to our children were obviously in the minds and hearts of our board membership. The woman approached humbly and spoke to me in a soft voice and said simply – “Thank you so much for the passion you have for this work”. And without another word turned around and walked away.

In the days and weeks to follow, I reflected on her observation and thought about what she had said to me. What was it that we had done to make the passion so obvious to her and others in the audience? Had we, in some way, communicated that we understood that our every decision has implications for the child learning to read; every decision has implications for the child learning to add, subtract, multiply and divide; every decision has implications for the child in band with his first trombone lesson? For all of us - it is this passion we have that will transform our urban districts into pinnacles of success. With *this* passion, we will be able to work with our communities to create safe havens for children that feel more like home – not prison.

Oh, just like Mr. Frost we have miles to go before we sleep. Before we sleep we must provide every mother with adequate pre-natal care, and guarantee wellness care to every toddler before they enter school. Before we sleep--we must offer every child a pre-school experience that gives them the tools they need to be successful in primary and secondary school. Before we sleep —we must train for every school-- highly qualified teachers and put those teachers where they are needed most: in schools with the historically underserved and disadvantaged. Before we sleep – we must demand that government provide adequate educational funding for this nation’s children – full funding of IDEA; no unfunded mandate of NCLB; no use of public funds for private education. Oh - If had only \$87 Billion for education. My dear friends we have promises to keep—worth standing for. Will you stand for them?! Will you stand for them?! Warren Haymond – in Baltimore: You have promises to keep. Jill Wynns – in San Francisco: You have promises to keep. Tariq Butt – in Chicago: You have promises to keep. You have promises to keep. We have promises to keep – And miles to go before we sleep. Miles to go before we sleep.