

Orange County Public Schools 2014 State of the Schools Address

This address was delivered by School Board Chair Bill Sublette and Superintendent Barbara Jenkins at the Hilton DoubleTree Downtown Orlando May 22, 2014. The event was sponsored by AXA Financial Protection; CFE Federal Credit Union; Jostens; Valencia College; the Central Florida Chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc.; Central Florida Hotel and Lodging Association; Greater Orlando Builders Association; Orlando Inc.; and the Orlando Regional Realtors Association. Chairman Sublette was introduced by Rich Maladecki, President and CEO of CFHLA.

Sublette:
Good morning!

Six years ago you created my office, a unique, one-of-its kind, countywide elected School Board Chairman, through a voter referendum. Four years ago many of you helped elect me. Thank you!

During my campaign, I continually shared with you my vision of taking Orange County Public Schools from being a good Florida school district to becoming one of the truly great public school districts in America, to fulfilling our vision of becoming the “Top Producer of Successful Students in the Nation.”

Our School Board and administration are a team! A team of 13,000 teachers, 7,800 support staff, 60,000 community volunteers, and 2,400 business Partners in Education.

And after years of hard work, our team’s vision has become reality. Today, as you shall hear, our team has gained recognition as one of America’s great public school districts.

I reiterated time and again four years ago that the single most important task our Board had in front of it was hiring a new superintendent of schools. For 13 years Ronald Blocker had lead our district and he was retiring. I knew that if we made a mistake in who we hired to replace Ron we would lose momentum and it would take us years to recover.

Today, I like to jokingly claim that I am the most brilliant School Board Chair in the nation because, after involving our entire community in the search for a new superintendent and looking nationwide for candidates, our Board found the best

candidate right here in our backyard and hired Dr. Barbara Jenkins as our new Superintendent.

And what a find she has been. She knows our community, having grown up here and graduated from Orange County Public Schools and UCF. She learned her craft in OCPS, rising through our ranks from teacher, to Assistant Principal, to Principal, then an eight-year stint in Charlotte, before returning to OCPS as Chief of Staff, Deputy Superintendent, and now, Superintendent. And since we hired her two years ago she has earned recognition as one of the nations best superintendents, a reputation, which you are about to hear, is based on results, not rhetoric.

Ladies and gentlemen, my partner in education, our quarterback, Dr. Barbara Jenkins.

Jenkins:

Last month, OCPS was named a finalist for the \$1 million Broad Prize for Urban Education given annually by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. The Broad Prize celebrates improvement in America's urban public schools and is the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for public school districts in America.

Each year, the prize goes to one district in the country which demonstrates the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among low-income students and students of color. OCPS is one of only two school districts in the country nominated for the prize this year. And yes, you heard me right, it is the \$1 million Broad Prize for Urban Education! The winner receives \$750,000 in scholarship money and the runner up \$250,000.

For two of the past three years OCPS has also been named to the AP Honor Roll, a list of only 4 percent of all the public school districts in America which have increased participation in high rigor AP course work while maintaining the percentage of exams taken by minority students and improving the percentage of students passing the highly rigorous AP examination for college credit.

And today, I have some exciting news to announce. Two years ago when I was hired by the Board, they challenged me to have OCPS compete for and win the Governor's Sterling Award for Organizational Excellence. The award is based on the national Malcolm Baldrige Award and recognizes superior organizational leadership, customer focus, and, most importantly, results! We have just learned that OCPS has won the award, only the third public school district to win in the 21-year history of the award. We could not be more pleased.

Sublette:

Four years ago I ran on a platform I called the ABCs of education: "A" is

Accountability, “B” for Better Schools, and “C” for Community support. You just heard two of the accolades our better schools have received, now allow me to share with you how we've worked to be accountable to our constituents, the families who entrust us with their children's education.

Accountability begins with this address. I promised you this annual State of the Schools address and I want to thank the many of you in this room who have made this event a fixture on your community calendar.

We must be accountable to all our students. 35,000 of our students receive exceptional student education, or ESE. Whether students with physical disabilities, such as hearing or vision loss, cognitive issues, such as autism or Downs Syndrome, psychological or behavioral issues, or even gifted students with their own special needs, special education students make up 19 percent of our total student population and their success is important to our mission.

Students for whom English is a second language make up over 24,000 students of our population, or 13 percent. We have an obligation, not just a legal obligation, but a moral obligation, to ensure our English language learners receive a high quality education and graduate fluent in English.

I promised an audit of both our ESE and ELL programs when I was elected in 2010. In early 2013 we retained Evergreen Solutions, a nationally respected team of special education experts to conduct a review and evaluation of our ESE programs, and that same year we retained Metis Associates to perform a similar evaluation of our English Language Learner programs.

Jenkins:

As a result of the ESE program review 87 percent of our ESE students now receive instruction and services in general education classrooms, up from 76 percent two years ago. We have added seven new transition employment sites for special needs students. We will now screen every second grader in the district for gifted services. Over 11,000 of our administrators and teachers have participated in a new series of ESE training modules and we've added seven new parent advocates, created parent academies and a parent resource brochure.

As a result of these reforms, we have the highest ESE parent participation rate among Florida's urban districts, and we rank in the top three in graduation rates and in the percentage of special needs students receiving services in mainstream classrooms. Most importantly, 77 percent of parents of students with disabilities now consider themselves equal partners with their child's teacher and school in planning their child's education.

Take a look at this video, which shows what can happen when an entire school embraces its ESE students.

[Video]

The results of our English Language Learner program review was more recent, but we are in the process of increasing and improving our professional development for our ESOL teachers, standardizing our curriculum, expanding and improving our parent leadership councils in schools with high English language learner populations, and increasing our efforts to recruit more bilingual teachers, both Spanish and French Creole speakers.

Sublette:

For all too long the OCPS Facilities Department was troubled by a string of scandals of which led to frequent front-page headlines and harmed public confidence in our Facilities program. In 2010, the Board commissioned an audit of the Facilities Department, and in 2011 brought in John Morris to clean up the department. I like to joke that I measure success in our construction program by the number of days and weeks we go without a negative story in the Sentinel or on the evening news. We are now building elementary schools more than \$1 million cheaper than we were in 2007, and we project the renovation of an additional 3 schools on the sales tax list that we would not have been able to get to had it not been for the efficiencies Mr. Morris brought to the department.

One last point on accountability -- transparency in government is important, as is public confidence in the integrity of our government institutions. After getting elected I learned that our ethics policies had not been looked at or revised for years. Even though we are a \$2 billion operation, we had fewer than a half dozen registered lobbyists. Our Board spent 16 months revising our policies to make us more transparent and allow the public, and the Board, to see just who is angling for your tax dollars. Today, less than two years later, we now have a transparent registration system, 61 registered lobbyists, and a more competitive procurement system which has saved taxpayers \$69 million!

Jenkins:

By every objective measure we have better schools today than we had four years ago. We've shared with you the good news about the Broad Prize and being an AP Honor Roll District. While those public acknowledgments of our excellence are appreciated, they are just the tip of the iceberg.

We're most proud of our graduation rate, which is now 87 percent for our 19 traditional high schools, a number in stark contrast to our graduation rate of 49 percent a short 13 years ago.

While the entire state has struggled with constantly changing accountability system benchmarks, we continue to outperform the state in the number of A/B schools. 62 percent of our schools are A/B schools.

Unfortunately, because of new FCAT cut scores adopted by the state this year, 19 of our 187 traditional schools earned a D and we had three F schools.

This is the fourth significant change in the FCAT and in what constitutes a passing score in the past four years. Think of what happened to basketball players when the three-point line was moved in college and they made their transition to the NBA. On top of it all, a new Common Core assessment will replace FCAT in the school grade calculation next year. We make no excuses. Whatever the rules, we don't want any D or F schools.

Here's more great news, we are extremely excited about the fact that for the first time in OCPS history, 17 of our 19 high schools are A/B schools, and we do not have a single D or F high school, a remarkable achievement in a large urban district.

Not only that, but for the first time ever, all 19 of the districts traditional high schools made the Washington Post's list of America's Most Challenging High Schools, and 81 graduating seniors were accepted into US News and World Report's top-20-ranked universities, liberal-arts colleges, military academies or world universities. We call them our Super Scholars. Take a look.

[VIDEO]

We have started a campaign to convince our students that smart is cool, and that smart is not just something you are, but something you can become through hard work.

Sublette:

I have placed particular emphasis on the percentage of our 10th graders reading at grade level because it is a key component of our high school grades and is one final measure of how our students are doing. We are proud to report that this year 52 percent of our 10th graders read at grade level, up from 37 percent in 2010.

Reducing our minority and socio-economic achievement gaps continues to be our most stubborn problem. You heard of the recognition the Broad Foundation has given us for the progress we have made. Over the past three years the reading, math, and science, test scores of our high poverty children have risen, as have the test scores of our black and Hispanic students. However, so have the test scores of our white students, and while we are proud of the achievements of all our students, stubborn gaps exist between the test scores of our minority and high poverty populations and our white students.

Jenkins:

Our Career and Technical Education department is what we called vocational education in our day. Our high school CTE completion rate this year stands at 92 percent, up from 73 percent in 2009. However, only 2 percent of our students take high-level dual enrollment career programs at our technical schools.

So, we are working to increase awareness among our students of career pathways outside of college, and we are very excited about our initiative, led by a \$1 million grant from the Dr. P. Phillips Foundation, to push more career and technical education down to the high school grade levels, rather than delay skills training to the post-secondary school years.

Before I turn it back over to the Chairman, I want to be clear that we have better schools because of the hard work and dedication of our teachers, principals and all OCPS team members, the involvement of our parents and the support of our community. The Board works hard to recognize the incredible work of our teachers by offering them a fair compensation package.

Matters got off track this year, and while our teachers ultimately obtained the most generous raises in Central Florida, and one of the most generous raises in the State, we had an impasse in our negotiations with the union for the first time in years. We want to determine how we bargain collaboratively as we have in years past.

Sublette:

C is for community!

Many of you have heard me preach the message that we are in a competitive environment in public education today, that our neighborhood public school no longer has a monopoly on students. Today our neighborhood schools compete with charter schools, virtual education, home schooling, corporate-tax vouchers and McKay scholarship transfers to private schools. No less than 22,147 of our students, or 12 percent of our population, take advantage of these options.

Because of this in 2011 we initiated a major customer service initiative in our schools to better serve our number one customer, the parents who entrust us with their children's education. And it is working. Each year we poll parent satisfaction with our schools, and this year 89 percent of our parents reported that school personnel are friendly and helpful to students, parents and visitors.

Because of the competitive pressure we are under we are also in the midst of a comprehensive review and assessment of our magnet programs. Take a look at the screen. Those are the top-20 high schools in America according to U.S. News and World Report. You will note nearly every one of the 20 schools are specialty schools, whether for the academically gifted, those interested in STEM fields, international schools, and even a biotechnology high school.

I once heard Chief Judge Belvin Perry say, "Put the sidewalk where the people walk." If we are going to continue to compete for students in this competitive environment, we need more specialty schools, especially for our intellectually and artistically gifted students.

Jenkins:

One popular, proven education model is the Kindergarten to eighth-grade school. OCPS currently has three K-8's. All are popular and all are over enrolled. These schools have revitalized their neighborhoods, and not only are they popular, but a body of research indicates that children who attend K-8 schools have fewer absences and are less likely to drop out than middle schoolers and perform better on math and language arts standardized tests.

We have listened to our community and have adopted a K-8 school expansion plan to build more K-8 schools as small school and geographic solutions. One being built in Parramore will bring those children home from no less than 8 different elementary schools they have been bused to over the years, and will serve as a model for community partnerships, innovative education programs and urban school design. Mayor Dyer and the City of Orlando have been wonderful partners in this effort. Mayor Dyer, will you stand so we can thank you properly for all you do for Orange County Public Schools.

Sublette:

One last point on listening to our community. 35 percent of our students are Latino, and 29 percent are African-American. I formed the Chair's Hispanic Advisory Council and the Superintendent and I continued meetings of the African-American Advisory Council because minority students are such an important aspect of our success and we need to hear from those communities. Can I have all the members of our Hispanic and African-American Advisory Councils stand and be recognized. Thank you for your service to OCPS!

Jenkins:

We could not have achieved all that we've laid out for you today without the support of our entire community. Many have heard our vision statement, "To Be The Top Producer of Successful Students in the Nation." Our mission statement really directs our daily work. We are going to lead our students to success with the support and involvement of families and the community. We know we cannot continue to attain our vision without the support of our entire community!

Four years ago Chairman Sublette led the Board in creating a Philanthropic Strategic Plan for OCPS, a vehicle for engaging our business and philanthropic community in the support of proven, measurable strategic initiatives designed to improve student performance. I am proud to report to you today that over the past year and a half more than \$4.4 million has been raised or committed for

Philanthropic Strategic Plan initiatives. And we started to build our Orange Educational Partnership this year, an elite group of major donors committed to Orange County Public Schools. If you're here representing one of the companies on the screen, please rise and allow us to give you a hand for the hand up you are giving our children.

Sublette:

Notwithstanding our many successes these past few years, we do have some challenges in front of us. While some districts shrank during the recession, OCPS grew by 2,000 students per year. This year we added nearly 4,000 new students, enough to fill 4 new elementary schools. We currently have a need for no less than 15 new schools in the next ten years to relieve severe overcrowding at many schools. Our inability to resolve the dispute over where we build a new high school in west Orange County has been frustrating and has made clear to me that we must partner with the County to create a better site planning and acquisition process. I am joined here this morning by Mayor Theresa Jacobs and want to thank her for all her work on behalf of public education and her efforts at resolving our impasse. We have been friends for many years and we have a good working relationship with the County thanks in large part to Mayor Jacobs. Thank you, Theresa!

We also face the challenge of renewing two separate revenue streams which have contributed heavily to our success, the half penny sales tax passed by the voters in 2002 for the renovation of aging schools, and the one mill property tax passed by the voters in 2010 to preserve academic programs, retain teachers, and protect arts, athletics and student activities.

We've seen time and again the impact of a newly renovated, modern, clean, safe facility has on the quality of learning that goes on inside a school. Oak Ridge High School earned its first ever B grade this year, a year after opening its new facility. Evans High School has earned two consecutive Bs since moving into its new facility. Both schools struggled for years in antiquated, run down facilities. One Oak Ridge teacher explained the correlation between student performance and the quality of a facility best when she said to me, "Bill, a new school with modern technology sends the message to these kids that they are as important to our community as the kids living in wealthier suburbs with their new schools."

Take a look at the slide beside me. These 59 schools in need of renovation and the four relief schools listed on the screen will not get built if the half penny sales tax is not extended this fall. We need your financial help, your moral support, your vote, and the votes of your friends, family and neighbors, in support of extending the half-cent sales tax for another 10 years so we can finish the job we started in 2002. If you can help, please go to Change4Kids.net and sign up today. I also want to thank Dick Batchelor and our Honorary Chairs here with us today.

Jenkins:

Unfortunately, we also lose the one-mill property tax this year. Take a look at the chart on the screen. You will note that the per-student funding we receive from the state plummeted by 15 percent between 2007 and 2011 on an unadjusted level. When you factor in inflation, our funding has fallen by 21 percent, while our health care costs, overhead costs, and operating costs continued to grow. I realize many of your businesses were in the same boat. Fortunately, our community stepped up to the plate and voted for the one mill. Because of this we were able to preserve sports programs in our schools, we have a thriving arts program with an art teacher in all 187 OCPS schools, and no less than 710 teacher positions were protected.

We face a difficult challenge this year of asking voters to renew both these taxes. Neither are new taxes, and we are simply asking the electorate to preserve the status quo, to keep their taxes level with where they are today. I hope and pray that you will help us.

Sublette:

Broad Prize, AP Honor Roll District, 87 percent graduation rate, 251 Super Scholars in three years, K-8 school expansion, 17 A/B high schools, Governor's Sterling Award, a successful launch of the Philanthropic Strategic Plan, the list goes on and on. Our vision, "To Be The Top Producer of Successful Students in the Nation", has become reality thanks to the support and involvement of our families and the community. We've gotten here by focusing on accountability, better schools, and community engagement. Thank you for your support of public education in our community! God bless you, and God bless the children of Orange County Public Schools. Have a great day!