

State of the Schools – Dr. Sandra L. Husk
January 25, 2005

Welcome members of the School Board, the County Commission, other elected officials, school administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, community members and students to the 2005 State of the Schools Address.

Since last I addressed you in this room much has happened in our world, our community and our school system. There have been many achievements, and, sadly, there have been some significant losses both here and abroad. Above all, we are grateful for those persons who have served our schools, our community and our country, and we hope to honor all that they do with our commitment to setting and meeting high standards in education excellence for Clarksville and Montgomery County.

On the wall to your left and available in every school building and on our website is the School System's Strategic Plan and goals. Tonight I would like to share with you some highlights of the progress your school system is making toward these goals.

There are many ways to evaluate a school system's progress. Tonight, I want to share a few stories and some data which indicate that our schools are making inroads to success. We have not yet reached our destination, but we know from what we are seeing, that we are headed in the right direction to help our children learn and succeed.

IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Our School Board and System have made a commitment to help every child make academic improvement. This commitment was made because we know in our hearts that every child is deserving of this pledge. We also know that for communities to be viable, a quality education system that graduates successful students is a requirement. Beyond that, our school system, along with every other public school district across the nation, is held accountable by the federal No Child Left Behind law, which carries stiff penalties for failing to meet the required achievement gains in every subgroup of children. Those subgroups are identified in No Child Left Behind by race, socio-economic level, gender, non-English speaking and special needs.

With a literacy roadmap, teachers in Montgomery County are focusing on reading and writing – the basic building block for all learning. In all grades, and in courses such as math, science and social studies, reading and writing is being integrated. The result is that children in grades three through eight have made improvements in reading and language arts. The percentage of students scoring at the proficient and advanced levels in reading and language arts has improved in all subgroups. **In ALL subgroups.**

Writing scores in the high schools and elementary schools have improved significantly, but that same trend is not yet happening in our middle schools. Middle school students' writing scores have remained stable, but our goal is to see improvements. Our high

school students continue to score in the proficient and advanced levels at a rate higher than the state average. Further, we are experiencing higher math scores across the system for high school. We are working to identify and correct why that trend has not yet happened in third through eighth grade.

The data shows that our students outperformed the state average for the past two years in reading and math, showing that subgroups of children are showing the same pattern of achievement overall. That is evidence that after school programs, literacy coaches and focused initiatives paid for through grant funds are working. We do show an area of concern for our group of students who do not speak English as their primary language. In this group, our ELL students are not performing as well as their peers in reading and language arts, so we will continue to refine our approach in order to improve.

Our high school graduation rates improved slightly from 2003 to 2004 and we continue to be higher than the state average. Our students' ACT scores showed improvement in all areas.

We can look at other school systems with similar demographics – other counties where children come from poverty or low income – and when we compare our children's achievement results to theirs – here is what we see:

Currently, we have only one school on what No Child Left Behind identifies as a “high priority” – statistically, that is much better than other systems with similar demographics. When we look at children who come from poverty, we recognize that these are bright, talented children whose parents love and care for them. They may not, however, have the opportunities for learning which sets the stage for academic achievement. Meanwhile, our school system is also placed on high priority as a result of achievement with regard to our special needs students. We have put in place a number of focused efforts to help this population of children be successful.

Our community has reason to take pride in the progress we have made thus far. The results measured by federal and state standards show we have made significant gains in a number of areas. We know where we need to continue our focus and with appropriate and adequate resources, we will be able to accomplish our goals and meet the requirements of legal mandates.

All of these state and federal high stakes tests which measure the data I have shared with you are given to students only once a year. For that reason, our teachers and administrators took the initiative to develop benchmark tests. Teachers use these tests as a diagnostic tool with students – to identify children's learning needs throughout the year and make adjustments when necessary. Using computer software called Edusoft, our teachers can see every student's progress or learning needs throughout the year. An elementary school teacher tells me of how this technology helps teachers immediately address children's learning gaps. It individualizes teaching and learning to a whole new level.

We know that teachers are the driving force in making the difference for children. It is for that reason that recruiting and maintaining a quality staff is critical. About 13 percent of our certified teachers were replaced with new employees this school year. Turnover and growth in student population are attributable factors. To improve retention, we continue to look at competitive salary schedules, and are working in collaboration with the University of Memphis and the Santa Cruz Teachers Center to develop a teacher induction and mentoring program for our system. We also are moving forward with implementing a system which will improve the coverage of classrooms with substitute teachers. We continue to have a positive partnership with Austin Peay State University and we value that partnership for many reasons including the fact that the majority of our certified teachers are supplied by our local university.

Our implementation of Literacy Coaches, teachers who give classroom teachers additional support to help children achieve, has been so successful school leaders are asking for additional coaches to reach even more students and provide needed help. Support for students, after-school tutoring and at-risk programs are making a huge difference between success and failure.

The Bridges program which helps students struggling in middle school make a positive transition into high school has provided evidence of accomplishment. We have heard inspirational examples of gains that have been made by students through the support of this program. One student who had failing grades prior to Bridges is now making B's. She told us that Bridges gave her a second chance in school and that she won't mess that up.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

This is a school system committed to building leadership from within. We have made great strides in developing future leaders through a number of initiatives. Among them, are leadership academies which provide certified and classified staff with professional growth opportunities which translate into positive outcomes for our schools. We benefit greatly from the Stupski Foundation in providing us with national research and resources that our administrators and teachers identify as helpful in carrying out our mission to improve student achievement. And, we have teachers and school leaders engaged in professional learning communities, where they study research that will help teachers teach and students learn. These participants are taking the knowledge they gain and sharing it among their peers. They problem-solve how we can best focus our resources on helping students. Instead of just reading research, we are seeing the results of the research right here in Clarksville-Montgomery County. Consequently, this system is getting a lot of attention – not just in Tennessee, but all across the nation.

IMPROVING EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

We all know that it takes a village to raise a child. And it takes an effective system run by dedicated staff to manage our schools. As we share the status of our goal to improve our system's efficiency and effectiveness, please join me in watching a video which was produced to demonstrate what we have accomplished.

(Business of Education DVD played here)

The School Board and I believe we are good managers of taxpayer dollars and are focusing the resources where they belong: on children. As we prepare to present the schools' 2005-06 budget to the County Commission, we must take a realistic look at the needs of our schools and this community as it continues to grow by leaps and bounds.

In good faith, we must not only prepare for the 2005-06 budget, but we must continuously look to the future. That future will present some financial losses when grants from state, federal and private funding expire. That funding provides for after-school tutoring and other targeted programs for students in need. Those programs have proven successful in improving student achievement. It will be up to the community's leaders to determine the viability of continuing those programs.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Our fourth goal of engaging the public in support of student achievement has seen great progress. We have initiated several programs which have brought community volunteers and mentors into direct contact with our children. With Byrns Darden Elementary's Helping One Student to Succeed Project --- to --- Moore Magnet School's PRIDE program, our citizens are responding to children in need. One HOSTS volunteer told of her student's excitement at their first meeting. Jumping up and down, the second grader clapped her hands and exclaimed: "You're here! You're here!" This is just one example of the enthusiasm and excitement our children experience when adults share their time and attention. It's evidence of how important and appreciated our volunteers are.

Another HOSTS volunteer shared how her first grade student is expanding his vocabulary by using the words attractive and interesting in sentences. The volunteer was impressed by his grasp of the words' meaning and amused by the boy's relationship with his sibling. His first sentence was "I am more attractive than my sister." And his second was: "The dog is more interesting than my sister." It just goes to show that we can teach language lessons. Fortunately some things never change – like the loving relationship between brothers and sisters.

At Moore Magnet School, 17 African American men have volunteered their time to role model for Black elementary aged boys. Something as simple as sharing the loss of a baby tooth and the growth of a new one means much to these children. Having a PRIDE mentor show interest in the child's life makes a positive difference in how that child

experiences school. Enthusiastic adults making the time commitment to our students is a truly wonderful gift.

Meanwhile, partnerships on a larger scale with businesses and military units at Fort Campbell have expanded to provide additional one-on-one help to children.

And while these wonderful, caring adults are “reaching in” to help, our School Board has spent the past 12 months reaching out to solicit the community’s input in setting goals for the 2005-06 school year. We heard a consistent goal for students from the more than 200 citizens who participated. Parents, business leaders, retired citizens, students, teachers, classified staff, school leaders – clearly told us what they want for students exiting our system:

Prepare all children to be successful and productive in the work place or in higher education while teaching them to become responsible citizens.

In Conclusion

We all have many reasons to take pride in the accomplishments that have been made over the past 12 months. The professionalism of teachers, classified staff and administrators has been exceptional. These groups have worked above and beyond to help students make gains. We are seeing the evidence of that hard work. And it is hard work. We can walk into the classroom and see students achieving. We can look at data and know that students are achieving.

And now we have before us a realistic and achievable goal. It requires our intense and continued focus. It requires more of us than has been required in the past. We have children in need, but we must turn that need into opportunity. We can do that with high quality staff, adequate resources and focus. We can do that with your support.

For that support, the members of the School Board and I thank you.