

State of Our Schools Speech by Superintendent Ann Clark

Thank you, Steven. Good morning, everyone. It's a pleasure to welcome all of you to our annual State of Our Schools event. Thank you for making time to join us.

As Steven told you, we first met when he was in middle school at Alexander Graham and I was the principal there. It has been my privilege to follow his journey from student to successful adult. We want every student in CMS to make that journey successfully. Ensuring that every child completes the journey is the mission of CMS. All of us in this room today care about our children and their education.

Educating a child is a process that begins at home and continues all the way through school and into the workplace and the wider world. Education cannot be accomplished or measured in a single day, a single test or a single year. It's a lifelong journey that builds on success in the early grades to create a foundation for learning later on. It's a continuum of learning and support that begins when a child enters school and continues all the way through high school and beyond. So many people are needed along the way. Parents, teachers, school staff, administrators all have a role to play. So do many others – volunteers, working professionals, citizens, elected officials.

We are fortunate to have the support of our district employees and the wider community. I've asked seven people who are involved with CMS to tell their stories during today's program and they are here on stage. Let me introduce them now and then you'll hear from them as we go along. I will introduce them starting from your left. Psalms Olivia Phifer White is a senior at Harding University High School. Next to her is Katie B. Morris, who chairs the Belk Foundation. Mark Rohlinger is the plant technical director for Bosch Rexroth in Charlotte. Lecia Shockley is the 2014 CMS Teacher of the Year and teaches second grade at Selwyn Elementary. Michael DeVaul is senior vice president of organizational advancement for the YMCA and the proud parent of two CMS graduates. Carmen Concepcion is the principal at Oaklawn Language Academy. Justin Ashley is a social studies teacher at Community House Middle School. We are very glad to have all of you with us today – thank you for taking part in our State of Our Schools event.

I have been in CMS for more than three decades and I want to say this: Today, now – this is our moment. Our district is positioned and prepared to help every child succeed. We have a mission -- and a strategic vision and plan to support it. We have the resources and strong community support to help our students learn and grow. This is our moment to move our students, our schools and our district to a new level of excellence and effectiveness. Working together as a district and a community, we can do it. This is our moment to succeed.

Our success depends on how well we achieve our strategic goals. All of them are intended to strengthen our schools directly and indirectly. All of them recognize that pre-K-12 education is a series of steps, a 12- or 13-year journey for each child. I want to share with you our progress on these goals and how they will help us meet the needs of every student.

Goal 1 – Maximize academic achievement in a personalized 21st-century learning environment for every child to graduate college- and career-ready.

Our top priority as a district in this – and every – strategic plan is academic achievement. We want our students to learn, to grow, to move smoothly and confidently from one academic achievement to the next. The curious kindergartner becomes the eager first-grader, the confident second-grader, the third-grader reading on grade level. Elementary school students move on to middle school, then to high school. Public education is a series of steps for each student, with each step building on the one that came before it. Every employee in CMS supports this journey in some way. Each employee has a role to play in student learning.

CMS has long been recognized as a district with effective, innovative instruction.

We have been consistently high performers in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This assessment, sometimes called the Nation's Report Card or NAEP, measures the reading, math and science skills of students in the fourth and eighth grades. In the most recent NAEP results, which were in 2013, our district's fourth- and eighth-graders had the highest scores in math among the 21 cities participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment. Our students scored second-highest in reading. The NAEP results are important measures for two reasons: They allow us to compare our students to others around the nation and the tests are aligned with the Common Core standards. These are rigorous tests and our students have always done well on them in the decade our district has participated.

Our progress in accelerating student achievement was also evidenced by our state tests this year. The End-of-Course and End-of-Grade tests measure what students learn through the year. They are given in reading and math in grades three through eight, in science in grades five and eight and in three high school subjects: math, English and biology.

Our students last year showed gains in proficiency – the mastery of the material taught – on these tests. Our gains ranged from nine points to 18 points.

The state introduced a new measure to gauge student performance that indicates if a student is on track to be college- and career-ready.

On this measure, CMS outperformed the state average in all three tested areas – science, reading and math.

Our high school students also outperformed the state average on the three tested subjects – English, math and biology.

Another measure of our effectiveness is how our students perform on tests to evaluate their readiness for college work.

The SAT assessment is one of these.

In 2013, our average scores rose in every area. We outperformed the state average as well. We also saw an increase in the number of students who took the test. This is a number we watch very carefully, because it indicates an increase in the students who are planning to go to college.

Another college-readiness measure is called the ACT.

North Carolina now requires all high school juniors to take it. Last year, our scores increased overall, and also increased in English, reading and science.

We also successfully created more access to rigorous courses for our high school students.

Districts across the country offer a set of courses called Advanced Placement (or AP) courses in various subjects. These courses have an accompanying test and students who perform well on the test can earn college credit. Last year we increased the number of students taking these AP courses by 67 percent and increased the number of students taking accompanying AP exams by 62 percent. We're opening the door to access and students are answering the call. We want to encourage our students to continue their education after high school for greater success in life. These data points show that we are making progress on this. Many of our students are indicating they aspire to college, careers or the military after high school.

Our progress as a district is reflected in another number, too: the graduation rate. Our four-year cohort graduation rate, as it is formally known, rose to 85.1 percent last year – our fifth consecutive year of increase.

Just as important, our graduates are attractive to colleges and universities. The class of 2014 earned nearly \$92 million in scholarships – an impressive amount!

We have improved the graduation rate in CMS by 15.3 percentage points since 2010. More than half of our high schools have a graduation rate of more than 90 percent.

In addition, we're seeing increases among subgroups of students – the graduation rate increased for white, black, Hispanic and Asian groups, as well as for CMS overall. This is good news and we're proud of our progress!

I promised you at the beginning that you'd hear from the other people on stage with me this morning – and I'm going to ask Psalms Olivia Phifer White to talk to you now about her successful journey. Psalms is a senior at Harding University High who has attended CMS since first grade. She is active in band, student government, JROTC and was crowned Miss Harding in October! She is also an accomplished pianist, a talented actress and has given many hours of community service through her church.

{Psalms speaks}

Thank you, Psalms.

I'd also like to recognize another Harding student with us today: Zaira Valdez Romero. Zaira, please stand to be recognized. Zaira is proof that education is a series of steps that begins in pre-kindergarten. She was a Pre-K student in 2001 at Sharon Elementary – that is her pre-kindergarten photo on the screen now – and went on to Huntingtowne Farms Elementary and Carmel Middle before entering Harding.

Today, she is a senior who is graduating on time with her pre-kindergarten cohort. She plans to participate in the college transfer program at CPCC so she can study psychology or criminal justice at UNC or UNCC. She only needs two more credits to graduate and she is taking two Advanced Placement courses at Harding and two courses at CPCC this year.

Goal 2 – Recruit, develop, retain and reward a premier workforce.

Psalms and Zaira offer us an important reminder about the importance of having the very best teachers, principals and staff in place at our schools and offices. And that's the second goal in our strategic plan.

I said at the beginning that every employee plays a role in a student's educational journey. It's true. And it underscores the importance of having the very best employees in all of the 18,000-plus positions in our district. We look for the very best people to hire in each position. We also strive to develop the talents of people who already work for CMS, so that they feel valued and engaged – and stay with us. And finally, we want our employees to receive competitive salaries so that we don't lose good people to other districts or other states!

We offer a number of ways that our instructional staff can develop and grow. One of our most innovative approaches is called Opportunity Culture. In the fall of 2013, our district began to rethink its approach to human-capital strategy and to expand the innovative new teacher roles created in Project Leadership and Investment For Transformation, or L.I.F.T. We are helping principals increase their capacity for innovative and strategic use of time, people and money. With the generous assistance of the Belk Foundation, we have put the Opportunity Culture model into 14 schools this year. With the four schools in Project L.I.F.T., that brings to 21 the number of schools working with this exciting way to strengthen teaching and learning. I'm going

to ask Katie B. Morris, who chairs the Belk Foundation, to tell you a little more about Opportunity Culture and her organization's commitment to it, as well as her involvement with Project L.I.F.T.

[Katie B. Morris speaks]

Thank you, Katie. We are so fortunate to have the support of the Belk Foundation, Project L.I.F.T. and our many other community partners.

We are also happy to have a strong network of partnerships to help us identify and train new leaders. Our Principal Supervisor Initiative has been made possible by our partnerships with the Wallace Foundation, Queens University and the University of Washington. The initiative is helping to train our learning community superintendents, who oversee geographic clusters of schools, and their executive directors.

Another leadership program in CMS was nationally recognized last year. Our principal training partnership with Winthrop University, called Leaders for Tomorrow, won the Dr. Shirley S. Schwartz Urban Education Impact Award from the Council of Great City Schools. We have recently initiated a partnership for principal training with Wingate University.

Working together, our human resources, technology and accountability departments have developed a Leader Tracking System. This online tool is designed to enable and support data-driven decision making throughout the principal pipeline, including pre-service training, selective hiring, support on the job and evaluation.

Our new Leadership Development Office within CMS is focused on development and alignment of resources to build the capacity of assistant principals, principals and central services staff. We have expanded our Principal Induction Program to include promising assistant principals. We have also developed a Leadership Development Advisory Council to give us feedback and direction on how we can continue to best meet our leadership needs.

Goal 3 – Cultivate partnerships with families, businesses, faith-based groups and community organizations to provide a sustainable system of support and care for each child.

I mentioned partnerships a few minutes ago and I want to share more with you about the many, many groups and individuals who help make our district so innovative and effective. The simple truth is, we can't do it alone. It takes so many people to nurture and educate a child from pre-kindergarten through high school. As the slide on the screen shows, poverty can be a barrier to completing the Pre-K-12 journey successfully. Partnerships help us fill the gaps of poverty. Every child is unique and working with our partners helps make sure that we don't just offer a one-size-fits all experience. Instead, we are able to meet students where they are and move them forward.

I'm going to highlight just a few of our many partnerships here to illustrate how important community support is to public education.

I'll start with one of the most exciting and innovative collaborations we have: Project L.I.F.T. In 2012, we formally partnered with a local philanthropic coalition to address achievement gaps at nine schools: West Charlotte High School and the eight schools that send students to West Charlotte. LIFT stands for Leadership for Investment and Transformation – and this collaborative effort has delivered plenty of both. It's a public-private partnership with CMS. LIFT contributors include the Leon Levine Foundation, the C. D. Spangler Foundation, the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the foundations of Duke Energy, Wells Fargo and Belk and the Foundation For the Carolinas. Project L.I.F.T. is one of the learning communities in CMS and it's led by Denise Watts. This is a long-term commitment by many in our community and it's showing some promising results. The L.I.F.T. focus is on some key areas: enhancing teacher and school leadership quality, expanding learning beyond the regular school day, increasing access to technology and greater parental and community involvement.

A few highlights that illustrate how L.I.F.T. is improving student achievement and development:

- The cohort graduation rate at West Charlotte rose from 71 percent in 2012-2013 to 78 percent in 2013-2014. Since the Project L.I.F.T. initiative began four years ago, West Charlotte's graduation rate has increased by 22 percent.
- L.I.F.T. students in grades four through eight outperformed comparison students elsewhere in the district on the reading End-of-Grade tests. They had higher growth, higher scores and were more likely to show proficiency or higher.

- On the reading End-of-Grade tests and the English II End-of-Course tests, L.I.F.T. schools showed higher gains than comparison schools.
- All Project L.I.F.T. schools met or exceeded the state's expectation for growth.
- Suspensions continued to decline.
- Teacher attendance and teacher retention improved.

Another important partnership we have is with Meck Ed. This independent, nonprofit agency led by a former CMS principal, Bill Anderson, helps us engage and inform the community about our district and its needs. Meck Ed is our policy partner, helping us to spread the word about changes at the local and state levels that would benefit public education. Meck Ed has also been a leader in the call for compensating educators competitively. The battle isn't won there, of course – but we will continue to work with our local and state legislators to improve the way Mecklenburg County and the state pay our employees.

Raising our state's average teacher pay is the second item on our Board of Education's list of 10 state priorities and three local priorities. Other legislative priorities include giving local boards authority over school calendars, local control over local dollars, restoring the state-funded growth formula for districts, giving public schools some of the flexibilities given to charters, fully funding the state's pre-kindergarten program so that all eligible students can participate, re-examine school performance grades and restore funding for the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program. Our Board's local priorities include restoration of funding for CMS school resource officers, establishing an intergovernmental committee for budget planning and another committee to study development patterns and their effects on education. All of these are important goals for our continued progress.

Another great collaborative effort is helping us nurture and encourage young readers. Working with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, we have encouraged our students in pre-kindergarten through third grade to get a library card of their own. The Library Card Signup Campaign is complete, and the library says that about 17,500 new cards were processed. That's a lot of new library members and it's great news for literacy. The library system also works with us on summer reading programs.

We have many valuable partnerships with local houses of worship. These partnerships, in which a house of worship works directly with an individual school, do immeasurable good for our students and staff. A few examples – but not a complete list:

- Temple Beth El and Sterling Elementary
- New Charlotte Church and Greenway Park Elementary
- Christ Lutheran and McClintock Middle
- Christ Episcopal Church and Rama Road Elementary
- Ebenezer Baptist and Winding Springs Elementary
- Forest Hill and Quail Hollow
- First Presbyterian and Westerly Hills K-8
- Davidson Presbyterian and Blythe Elementary

I am also excited to announce the relaunch of the CMS Foundation, thanks to great work by our CMS Foundation Task Force.

One of the most exciting days in the 2014 school year came last June, when the newly renamed Charlotte Hornets swarmed our schools. As part of that effort, Fred Whitfield, Kim Henderson and Michael Jordan announced the launch of Charlotte Hornets Teacher Innovation Grants with Lowes and Fox Sports South. We have also received generous grants from Wells Fargo and the NASCAR Foundation. These grants will allow teachers to incubate cutting-edge teaching strategies in their classrooms, share these instructional practices with colleagues and increase student achievement across the district.

The Charlotte Hornets grant to the CMS Foundation has already served as a catalyst for other contributions and partnerships.

As part of our effort to make the district more accessible to parents, students and the community, we are also launching a CMS app. As you leave today, I hope you will download our new mobile app so you can stay connected to CMS 24/7. Additional information is on the back of your program with the link and QR code.

As this short list of examples makes clear, these partnerships cover a wide range of schools and their needs. Our faith partners bring clothes for needy students, sponsor staff appreciation events, help provide technology, organize mentoring and tutoring and so much more. These

partnerships are improving the lives of our students and their families. It has been said that government could never replace the helping hand of a neighbor – and these partnerships prove it day after day.

We also have a rich, diverse range of partnerships with businesses in our community. Like our faith partnerships, these enrich the lives of our students. They help prepare them for work and for college, and show them the amazing range of choices and opportunities available. Again, I will not give you a complete list.

But I want to highlight one school's experience with partnership as an example of how powerful these can be. Olympic High School has set the standard in CMS for connecting students with local businesses. Recent graduate Hope Johnson is an example of the amazing things that can happen. When Hope was about to complete her senior year at Olympic in 2012, she told her parents that she didn't want to go to college. Instead, she wanted to pursue a three-and-a-half year apprenticeship program with Siemens Energy. The apprenticeship allowed her to begin community college at no cost during her senior year of high school and guaranteed her a competitively paid position when she finished. The apprenticeship program is modeled on similar programs in Germany. It blends work-based learning in high school and at Central Piedmont Community College with on-the-job training at Siemens. Hope and others who are in this program have received national attention, including a visit from a congressional delegation! If Hope wants to go on to college when she completes her apprenticeship, Siemens will pay the tuition. Or she can simply continue her education by working. Hope told a PBS interviewer that she no longer worries about her future. "I am prepared for my future because I'll have my job and a great education." Hope is with us today – please stand to be recognized.

We have another remarkable partnership with Bosch Rexroth, the manufacturing and technology company which has its corporate headquarters for the Americas in Charlotte. In 2014, Bosch Rexroth donated \$80,000 to help create the Olympic Community of Schools' new Advanced Manufacturing & Technology Center. The money helped to buy drill presses, lathes, mills and a computer numeric controlled machining center. Bosch is helping us prepare our students for advanced manufacturing opportunities in the age of high technology. The company donated another \$40,000 and 3,000 volunteer hours to launch the FIRST Robotics program last year and has made a similar commitment this year. Robotics helps students learn electrical and mechanical engineering concepts, as well as information technology. The Olympic FIRST

Robotics team won a regional championship last year, the first CMS school to do so. Mark Rohlinger, the plant technical director of Bosch's Charlotte manufacturing facility, is here with us today and I'm going to ask him to talk about his company's commitment to education and to CMS.

[Rohlinger speaks]

Thank you, Mr. Rohlinger.

Goal 4 – Promote a system-wide culture of safety, high engagement, cultural competency and customer service.

Thank you. As these partnerships clearly show, we are working to meet our students' needs inside and outside the classroom so that there are no impediments to learning. Goal Four also addresses a wide range of student needs by promoting safety, high engagement, cultural competency and service.

Safe learning environments are essential. It's also important to support the social and emotional learning of each student, as well as academic progress. Our Student Services Department has several initiatives under way that are helping us meet student needs. We have added social workers at two schools this year and 33 elementary counselors. We have four new school psychologists. We also have school-based mental health services in 74 of our schools, thanks to a collaborative arrangement with Mecklenburg County and private mental health agencies to supplement the work with students by our staff. Our Making It Better program is working with an artist to help students, staff and the community identify and prevent bullying – and this innovative effort has won national attention. We also have partnerships to help us identify and stop child abuse and specific professional development for staff and teachers to support student well-being.

In the area of cultural competency, our district is in Year Two of a collaboration with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, juvenile court judges, Youth and Family Services. The collaboration is called Race Matters for Juvenile Justice. Monthly meetings among these agencies continue to yield progress on reducing students' out-of-school suspensions, implementation of restorative justice programs and the implementation of a diversion program

by CMPD for first-time juvenile arrestable offenses. More than 90 principals and central office leaders have participated in the Dismantling Racism training. These strong partners are helping us address social and behavioral issues that can interfere with success in school.

The work being done by the many kinds of support staff is so important. As an organization, we are working to strengthen our employees' engagement. We want our employees to know that they are valued and that their work makes a difference every day. One way we are doing this is through our I Am CMS internal pride campaign. Starting in November, we have recognized one instructional and one non-instructional employee for outstanding service each month. We have been greatly helped in this endeavor by the Charles G. Monnett III & Associates law firm. Mr. Monnett's wife has worked in public education for her entire career, so he knows well how much time and effort our employees dedicate to educating and caring for our students. Monnett & Associates provide a \$100 gift card to each month's winners, who are also professionally photographed for posters that are displayed at their work locations.

Monnett also sponsors a monthly Hometown Hero award, where one teacher is selected each month to receive a \$250 gift card to purchase classroom supplies. Randall Phillips and Bob Dill from the Monnett & Associates law firm are here today and I'd like for them to stand up and be recognized. And I am very proud to tell you that Randall is a 1987 graduate of East Meck High School.

I'd also like to recognize the winners of the I am CMS award so far this year. They are with us today. Please stand as your name is called and remain standing until the list is complete:

- Amanda Berger, middle grades teacher at Oaklawn Language Academy;
- Andre' Raye, head custodian at Hornet's Nest Elementary
- Cathy Surridge, fourth-grade teacher at Pineville Elementary
- Pete Laney, systems engineer with Information Technology and
- Carol Frelig, cafeteria manager at Quail Hollow Middle

And it's my pleasure to recognize the January winner as well, who works here at East Meck: Anastasia Chavez. Ms. Chavez is a teacher at East Meck who has made it her personal mission to ensure that all seniors pass their classes and graduate on time. She builds a list, pulls the schedule for every student and collaborates with their teachers to sit down with each individual

student at risk of not graduating. She does all this in addition to teaching a full slate of classes and volunteering in the East Meck community after school. The colleague who nominated her said, “There is never enough praise for teachers like her” – and he’s right! Ms. Chavez, please stand to be recognized.

All of these employees, and the many others in CMS, make a difference every day in the lives of students. In the rush of the school day and the whirlwind of the school year, we don’t always stop to recognize each other and the important work we do. But I ask everyone here to pause for a moment and think about the thousands of our employees who serve students every day. If you work for CMS, stop and think about the service you provide – take a moment to take pride in our district!

We are proud of the many teachers who fill our classrooms, working to help students learn and grow. I’d like to recognize one of those teachers now – the 2014 CMS teacher of the year, Lecia Shockley. Lecia is a second-grade teacher at Selwyn Elementary. She is a National Board-certified teacher and a 2011 Teaching Fellow. Lecia says that she learns from her students as much as they learn from her. Lecia.....

[Shockley speaks]

I’d also like to recognize the 2014 teacher assistant of the year, Cynthia Corwin. Cynthia works at J.H. Gunn Elementary, where she has been for a decade. She teaches reading and math to students in kindergarten, first, third and fifth grades. Cynthia, please stand to be recognized.

Michael DeVaul is someone who knows about the tremendous contribution our employees make each day. His two children are CMS graduates. Mike is a senior vice president of organizational advancement for the YMCA, which partners with CMS for the Y Readers and Y Achievers programs. He was recognized last year by the White House as a Champion of Change. I’m going to ask Mike to speak to you about the importance of service to children.

[DeVaul speaks]

To close out the discussion of engagement and service, I’d like to recognize a special guest here today. Franny Millen was a 13-year-old student at Bailey Middle School when she asked

her parents how her classmates without computers at home could do their classwork. Out of that discussion came a nonprofit called Eliminate Digital Divide, or E2D. Franny and her family teamed up with Lowe's to put donated computers in the homes of students who didn't have them. More than 300 computers have been donated and placed in the homes of students at Davidson Elementary, Cornelius Elementary, J.V. Washam Elementary and Bailey Middle School. Franny's a student at Hough High now and E2D is still going strong, helping students and their families! What an amazing contribution Franny has made to our district and community. Franny, please come to the stage to receive my highest honor – a game ball!

[presentation of game ball]

I hope each of you is inspired by Franny's entrepreneurial spirit and will join her effort to Eliminate the Digital Divide. Knowing Franny, she has probably already had a conversation with the CEO of Google!

Goal 5 – Optimize district performance and accountability by strengthening data use, processes and systems.

One of our biggest challenges and responsibilities as a public school district is monitoring our progress. There are many ways to do this – I talked about some of the measures we use with state and national testing and the graduation rate. It's important that we effectively collect and interpret data all through the school year – not just testing data but also other information about student growth and school performance. To help our teachers, principals and schools do this, we are supporting teacher use of data through the Data Driven Instruction model. It supports schools in four key areas: school culture, assessment, analysis, and action planning. Currently Data Driven Instruction is in place across all nine schools in Project L.I.F.T. and their leaders are helping bring this to scale across the broader district. This spring, we will pilot the training across all nine learning communities to achieve a full rollout during the summer.

We also recognize that each school is unique. Our Beacon Initiative, launched last year, is under way in 14 Title I schools. Our goal is to develop sustainable, individualized support at each school to accelerate student achievement and build capacity for leadership. We have chosen the University of Virginia as a lead partner in this effort, which will identify and build personalized support structures for each individual school. One of the more innovative aspects

of this initiative is that it will encourage schools to find the outside partners who are best positioned to meet their students' needs. So this first year is being spent in assessing the needs of each individual school. Beacon offers us the opportunity to develop a framework of processes and systems that can still be personalized to meet an individual school's needs. We are excited about this work because we believe it will help us drive broad school reform across our district. We want to build a model for school improvement that is financially and academically sustainable over time. This is the kind of innovation that has made us a nationally recognized district and we're excited about the opportunities that Beacon will help us identify.

We want each school to be able to meet the needs of its students. Every school is unique, with unique students and unique needs. Our success as a district depends not on creating one pattern to give to 145,000 students – it depends on our ability to recognize and embrace the diversity of our students and our schools. I'm going to ask Carmen Concepcion, who is the principal at Oaklawn Language Academy, to talk about how her school focuses on meeting the needs of its students through bilingual education.

[Concepcion speaks]

Thank you, Carmen. I'd like to recognize another principal with us today in the audience for her excellence in developing structures to meet her students' needs. Jametta Martin-Tanner is the principal at Ridge Road Middle School and she's also our Principal of the Year this year! Her community superintendent, Matt Hayes, did a great job of summing up what makes Jametta so amazing: "She leads with heart, consistently making the welfare of her students and staff her top priority." Jametta, please stand to be recognized.

Goal 6 – Inspire and nurture learning, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship through technology and strategic school redesign.

Our strategic Goal Six is also about individualizing education and inspiring learning. We want our students to achieve more than they think is possible. We want to have rigor and inspired teaching, academic achievement and personalized ways to get there. Just as every school is unique, so is every student. We are in the third year of a multiyear plan for transforming teaching and learning through technology and school redesign. We have moved from having no schools be fully wireless in 2012 to having all schools fully wireless in 2013. To maximize this

additional resource, we have increased bandwidth to support technology-based teaching. We have equipped our teachers with laptops to enable online learning anytime, anywhere, and have provided intensive training on laptop use. We have put mobile learning labs in all middle schools. We are acquiring digital content to extend learning beyond the classroom. Our media centers have Chromebooks to support digital literacy, research and project-based learning. We have begun a program for one-to-one tablet learning devices at 12 middle schools and expanded the Bring Your Own Technology initiative in our high schools. Our students will live in a digital world and compete in a digital workplace – and we are working to get them ready to be competitive, prepared digital citizens!

We also want our students to have the opportunity to learn about other places and other cultures. Our Study Abroad program gives high school students the opportunity to travel and study abroad for a year, a semester or a summer. Working with nationally recognized study-abroad agencies and organizations, we can help our students discover the world. There are literally hundreds of programs available for CMS students who wish to study abroad. In the 2013-2014 school year, 364 students from 15 schools visited 10 different countries. In the first semester of this year, 73 students traveled to four countries. Culturally immersive educational travel enriches the lives and broadens the perspectives of our students.

For students who want to learn about other cultures without leaving home, we offer a wide range of language-immersion programs, magnet schools and other themed and specialized programs. Our magnet schools are among the best in the country, consistently winning national awards year after year. The two students who opened the program today are terrific examples of our language-immersion programs and the possibilities they offer.

All of these programs rely on one asset in common: Great teachers in the classroom. Reading, writing, math. Foreign languages, technology training, global citizenship. All of these – and more – come alive in the hands of a skilful teacher. I'm going to ask one of our great teachers, Justin Ashley, to talk about the importance of teaching and why he finds it so gratifying. Justin teaches social studies at Community House Middle School. Justin...

[Justin speaks]

Thanks, Justin.

We are a diverse, culturally rich school district. We are working to give our students every opportunity to broaden their horizons and their understanding of our world. We are succeeding in so many ways with so many students. But we also have more work to do. We want every student to have a seamless journey from pre-kindergarten to that walk across the stage to claim a high school diploma. We want that diploma to prepare our students for the challenging, rapidly changing world that awaits them.

So what have we set as our priorities to take our district to the next level? We have set our sights on a North Star for CMS: Literacy. We will focus even more on having every student reading on grade level by the beginning of fourth grade. Literacy encompasses so many skills that students need, including reading, writing, speaking and listening. This focus will direct us in every aspect of our work because it's our best and most effective way to close achievement gaps. Reading is the key to everything else in school – and we will dedicate our efforts to making sure our youngest students are on grade level in reading by fourth grade and continue that trajectory through their senior year.

We have had notable success in literacy but there is more to do. This focus will help us in many areas. It will help us ensure that our high school graduates earn a diploma that opens doors for them. It will drive our work on continuous improvement – setting goals, reaching them and then setting higher ones. We will focus our efforts on meeting our students' diverse needs so that they come to school ready and eager to learn.

Although we have made much progress overall, we have much work before us. As a district, we do not want to have **some** great schools. We want a community of schools that will educate and inspire all of our students. To help us get there, we are building a school performance framework. This framework will help us support struggling schools and make good schools great. We convened a task force to help us determine what families, teachers and principals want from their schools. They helped us establish eight areas of focus.

- Getting students to academic proficiency – and then beyond it
- Making sure that all students grow
- Ensuring students who are not yet proficient and need help receive it
- Closing achievement gaps

- Providing access to rigor – middle school students taking and passing Math I, students who take AP/IB/CPCC dual enrollment
- Making students college- and career-ready with ACT, WorkKeys and 4s and 5s on EOGs and EOCs
- Ensuring students graduate in four years
- Create a safe, engaging culture at every school

These standards go above and beyond the state's requirements because we don't want to meet the minimum. We want to meet the needs and inspire the dreams of every one of our 145,000-plus students.

We know we aren't there yet. Next week, the state will release the first graded assessments of schools – each school will be given a letter grade, A, B, C, D or F. Some of our schools will get low grades. Others will get high grades. We are committed to moving every school forward. As a district, we will work toward the goal of every school receiving an A grade. We have initiatives such as Beacon and L.I.F.T. to help us get individual schools the resources and leadership needed to drive academic excellence. We will continue to allocate resources – money, time and people – as effectively as possible so that we meet our goals.

But we need your support to succeed. We need your help. We want our students – every one of them – to begin a lifelong journey that builds on success in the early grades to create a foundation for learning later on. This journey requires support and engagement by so many people along the way. Parents, teachers, school staff, administrators all have a role to play. So do many others – volunteers, working professionals, citizens, elected officials. I challenge you to think about your individual role in supporting CMS and how your organization, business, non-profit or faith house can provide its time and treasure to support our strategy. I am officially tapping each of you as ambassadors for CMS. As you leave today, students from East Mecklenburg will hand you a CMS lapel pin which I hope you will join me in wearing each and every day! Welcome to Team CMS!

Our students need us. They need our support. They need support at school and at home, support in class and beyond. With our support, our children will be able to dream – and achieve those dreams. Nothing that we do is more important than preparing our children for the future. So I stand before you as superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools committed to bring

the best I have of head and heart to leading Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. I will keep us focused on our North Star – literacy – in order to deliver a relevant diploma for each graduate so that graduate is highly valued in our workforce. I commit to that, inspired by Franny, Steven, Hope, Psalms, Zaira, Amina, Milan and Mac – and with the knowledge that I am flanked by 18,000 employees committed to doing our jobs with pride and a commitment to excellence to deliver the highest-quality education our kids deserve and our community rightfully expects. We will restore your trust and make you proud of CMS.

I'm going to give the last word today to two people who represent the future of teaching and learning at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. James Ford was the district's teacher of the year in 2013 and he has gone on to win the honor of North Carolina Teacher of the Year as well. Now he's competing for the national award – and I cannot imagine anyone who is better qualified to be the face of teaching for our whole country.

James is going to talk to you about why education matters to all of us. Not just students, not just educators – but every one of us in this room, every one of us in Mecklenburg County. And then you will hear from someone who also represents the future. Mac McManus is a fourth-grader – and an amazing reader! -- at Newell Elementary and he will tell you about his game plan for educational success.

James....