

Skip Schoenhals' speech
October 27, 2009
Vision 2015 Conference

Good morning and thank you all for being here.

It's very gratifying to see so many familiar faces...and so many new ones. I appreciate your interest in the public education system of Delaware.

I am sure all of you are familiar with the biblical story of Noah building the ark to prepare for the coming world-wind flood. From that story someone developed the Noah principle. I think it applies to where Delaware finds itself in the process of improving its public schools. The principle quote simply says:

"No more prizes for predicting rain, prizes only for building arks."

It applies here because it turns talk into action. It doesn't duck the hard work, but faces it head on. Building an ark. Saving the world. Imagine that.

Well, that's what we in Delaware signed up to do almost four years ago when we began the research that led to Vision 2015. The core vision of Vision 2015 captures our commitment:

"IMAGINE, the best schools in the world for every Delaware student...no exceptions, no excuses."

Imagine that, the best schools in the world for *all* our students. Talk about ambitious. Talk about saving the world.

A couple of weeks ago, none other than the wife of the Vice President of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden, an educator in her own right, was speaking at the Delaware Futures alumni celebration in Wilmington. In that speech she quoted one of Nelson Mandela's comments on education. That quote had a special meaning for me because just a few weeks ago from this very day, I was in South Africa, standing in the former home of Nelson Mandela, which is now a museum. The quote which Dr. Biden shared was:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Make no mistake – like Mr. Mandela, we, too, are in a race against time. Providing all our students with a great education is the moral imperative of our generation.

We've made encouraging progress...and we need to celebrate our gains. For example:

- Teachers and administrators in the 25-school Vision Network are changing how they're organized, how they're using their time, and how they're teaching, in order to accelerate learning for the 20,000 students they serve. *Eighty percent of the first group of Vision schools are now showing tangible results.*
- Second, Delaware is leading a national movement to raise academic standards to international levels *and* to improve our state testing system so that it's more useful for teachers, parents, and of course students.
- Third, a broad coalition led by our Lt. Governor is working hard across *three* government agencies and *many* stakeholder groups to set new standards and assemble needed resources to improve early childhood education.
- Fourth, respected national programs, such as Teach for America are now here in Delaware. And we expect that Teacher Residencies are not far behind. Both will help us increase the number of educators who are focusing their talents and energies on high-need subjects and high-need schools.
- And, fifth, Governor Markell and Secretary Lillian Lowery are working on an ambitious education strategy that we believe will position us well for accelerated student achievement, as well as new national investments in Delaware.

Thanks to work such as this, more and more Delaware students have boarded our ark.

[pause briefly...there's a shift in tone/content]

I am excited when I hear about schools such as Wilmington's Prestige Academy, where students are making as much as two and a half years of academic gains in a single year. They've only been at it for one year; imagine the life outcomes for students if they keep that pace. You'll hear more about this program later this morning.

I am excited when I hear about the 12 students who graduated from high school in Indian River —*instead of dropping out* because they attended a twilight academy in a Vision Network district.

And, I am excited when teachers express their gratitude about a new state testing system that will soon give them better—and *more useful*—information to help them be even better teachers and increase student learning.

But we have so much farther to go. Far too many Delaware kids are still getting drenched and paddling for their lives. In fact, we have allowed too many of them to drown.

All of us should lose sleep knowing that we have 16,000 Delaware students trying to learn in 18 schools that have missed their performance targets for *far too many years*. In many of these schools, we're not just talking about a handful of students who are far behind. Rather, 11,000 of these students are in schools where 40% or more of the student categories, or "cells" as they are called, aren't meeting standards.

And we should lose even more sleep knowing that almost a quarter of Delaware's students don't even graduate from high school ... and only one-third that do graduate are considered college-ready.

There is *more* good news . More sunshine is on the way, coming from Washington, DC, of all places...imagine that. Specifically, as you know, the Obama Administration has committed about four and a half billion dollars in new funds to its Race to the Top program and billions more in school improvement grants.

This is an outstanding opportunity for Delaware, but we will be competing for those funds. Think of the educational arks we can build with that kind of transition money. This is exactly the kind of funding that we all knew would be needed to take the bold ideas of Vision 2015 and make them a reality for our children.

I've heard people complain that this competition is just a "money grab." Exactly.

Why wouldn't we want funding to implement the steps we all agreed were top priorities?...higher standards...better testing systems...more highly qualified teachers and school leaders...and greater innovation and accountability across our system.

Race to the Top Funds would be the wind in the sails of the ark we've been building for the past few years. We should all say, thank goodness. What a gift.

But here's the catch ... and it's a big one. Other states are competing hard for the money. Only a small number of states will win. Remember, this is a race-to-the-top contest ... not a spread-the-wealth-across-the-board approach, which is more typical of Washington. Winning this "race to the top" will allow us to *transform* our education system, so that when the funding goes away, we will have a high-performing system that is focused on student achievement.

So, what counts most in this Race to the Top competition? Boldness, innovation, and a track record of “walking the talk.”

And what are our chances to be one of the winners? Many national observers of the education scene think Delaware’s chances are pretty good.

No one has a bolder vision than Delaware. And we will get extra credit for being one of the very first states to assemble a broad-based coalition to craft and support a comprehensive and innovative strategy to implement our vision.

Even better, we’ve sustained our collaboration, even when it’s not always been smooth.

But the reality is that *other states are gaining on us*. They are developing their own big-picture plans—some are even drawing heavily on ours. Even more than that, many of them are doing what it takes to turn big ideas into practice — they are revamping regulations and laws to promote teacher and principal effectiveness...they are strengthening accountability for student results...they are closing or redesigning their lowest-performing schools... and they are creating many more academic options for students who struggle in traditional settings.

Plus, many of them have accelerated their education reform plans, even when their budgets have been in crisis, because the cause is so important.

Just think for a moment:

Imagine how we will have shortchanged our kids if we lose to states like Massachusetts, Colorado, and Louisiana because *they* have acted more urgently to turn around their lowest performing schools.

Imagine the momentum we will have lost if states like Pennsylvania, New Jersey, or Maryland get the money because they have borrowed from *our* plan and committed more aggressively to its implementation.

But imagine how great it will be if we can demonstrate that, in Delaware, college- and career-readiness has become the “new normal.”

And imagine how encouraged our principals and teachers will be if they get the funding flexibility and resources they need to help their students succeed.

And finally, imagine how much our students will gain if we can clone ***many times over*** the pockets of success we have here in Delaware—and that exist all across the country... where very low-income high schools send 100 percent of their students to college...and where huge percentages earn their undergraduate degrees.

We know it can be done.

And, we know we have a world-class plan to get it done.

But we won't get the funds unless we can convince the feds that we are willing to match our compelling vision with bold action.

For Delaware that means that *we need to ratchet up our work in two critical areas*, which are the focus of this morning's sessions.

Specifically, we must – *I repeat, we must* – get more serious about two things:

-- how we recruit, retain, and reward our teachers and school leaders so that we help them ensure greater student achievement.

-- and second, how we can intervene more aggressively when schools fail our students.

In taking steps such as these, we will be building the kind of arks that will lift many more kids to higher ground, now and for generations to come.

In closing, let me underscore that *we remain committed to this*. And we welcome everyone's involvement. We're in this together, for the benefit of Delaware's kids.

...Thank you.

Now, may I ask you to join me in welcoming to the stage Delaware's Secretary of Education, Dr. Lillian Lowery.