



*Remarks by Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams
Superintendent's Conference Day*

September 6, 2016

Thank you, Adam, for that generous introduction. I look forward to working with our teachers to support their leadership and professional learning.

Thank you also President White, Tim Cliby, and Angie Rivera for your words of welcome today. I look forward to all of us moving our District forward together. I am committed to collaborative governance and working with our unions for the common benefit of students. I also want to acknowledge Dan DiClemente, who is in the field supporting BENTE members as we prepare to welcome students tomorrow.

Let me add my thanks to our students in the Monroe Steel Band who came out *before* their first day of school to deliver that fabulous performance. Ms. Scott, you and the Monroe community have much to be proud of, and we thank you for helping us get our day started.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who was able to join us today at Theater on the Ridge and on our Livestream broadcast. I look forward to meeting many of you in person here and as I visit schools throughout the day and during the rest of the week as well.

I've served in public education for more than 35 years and in many roles. The opening of school is always one of my favorite times of the year. It's always great to rekindle relationships with colleagues, welcome new students and reconnect to the familiar faces of students and families we already know. It's also time after summer break to reflect on past experiences, and to apply new learnings to a new beginning. That's what today is about.

Let me explain why I am excited to lead this District—first by thanking the Board of Education for this incredible opportunity. I want to underscore the word **opportunity**.

Because when I took this job, many well-meaning friends and colleagues only wanted to talk to me about the challenges.

“Rochester?” they'd say. “Why would you want to return to Rochester?” High poverty, low achievement scores, bureaucracy, bureaucracy, bureaucracy ... Other Rochester superintendents have tried their best to solve these problems, so why would I leave Boston and return to Rochester?

My answer to both is twofold. First, I have never been able to resist the desire to do what has never been done—especially when the **doing** involves teamwork, innovation and collaboration.

I have seen the impact of great teamwork, systems thinking, innovation and a growth mindset for our students and ourselves. You will hear me talk about and model something called design thinking. When I was younger, my parents, teachers, and then my bosses called creative thinking out of the box—or, sometimes, as breaking the rules! I'm glad it's now got a name, called “Design

Thinking”—and is being used to improve everything from Netflix user engagement, to the business model of Airbnb, to the health of babies in third-world countries, as you’ll see later today.

The second reason is I am glad to be in Rochester. Every day, I find new reasons to be excited about the potential of Rochester City schools to solve problems together with our community. It will take leadership from all of us. It’s also important to remember that leadership starts with action, and that everyone—whether a student or a teacher or a custodial assistant or a Principal—can be a leader if they have the will to act.

Let me share a video that illustrates briefly what I’m talking about.

“The Tree” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPeZ6viNgY>

When I look at Rochester, I see a group of talented, dedicated and experienced people who talk with pride about their work—from the Board of Education, to the students I met in my first few days, to the new teachers I welcomed last week.

It includes the school administrators I worked with during the Leadership Summit, the Mayor and other community leaders I have met with since starting here August 8th. It’s been my honor to meet with our food service workers, our security staff, our technology team—including the student interns who are training our District leadership how to tweet and use Google Docs. In the past month I’ve made it a point to meet a broad cross-section of the people who are part of the Rochester City School District and have a deep stake in what we do.

From all of those conversations I take away the same recurring themes. I hear deep concern about the challenges our students face, and many ideas to help our District succeed, and a fair amount of optimism about the future. When a Board member told me they expect Rochester to be the national model for urban turnaround, I immediately saw the opportunity of a lifetime to design a future together. But we will need to think and act differently.

I’d like everyone to take a moment and imagine what we want for all of our students. It is exactly what I want for my own children, and what you want for yours.

- A District where every school building is top-notch, with state-of-the-art classroom design, makerspaces and state-of-the-art athletic facilities.
- Schools that are rich with opportunities for students to explore music, the arts and creative expression.
- Technology that lets students and teachers thrive in this digital age.

I want schools where every educator—and all of us are educators—believe that all of our students, regardless of their background or circumstance, can succeed. And let’s not just define success as achieving graduation.

I want schools that believe our students can outperform other students in this county, in this state, in this nation and across the world.

Imagine a District where educators are activists. Let me say that again. Imagine a District where educators are activists who feel supported, valued, and trained to deliver the world-class education that Rochester children deserve. Imagine our students being prepared for anything they choose to do in life, because every one of the schools in our District is designed to deliver for every student.

There are four big ideas that I believe will make a difference in transforming Rochester schools into the places we imagine they could be. They are critical to my philosophy as a leader. They are the things I will ask you to join me in working on, to help us drive the improvements in student achievement we all want to see.

None is more important than **prioritizing equity** for our students. All students should achieve graduation. **One hundred percent** of them. I believe that providing **all** children with high-quality education, along with supports to achieve graduation, is the great civil rights challenge of our time. In Rochester—which we know is one of the nation’s poorest cities—it is critical that we create a District where every person, in every department, is responsible and accountable for the education of all students at every school. We must be devoted to eliminating the opportunity and education achievement gaps for urban youth. We can do this by adhering to a theory of action that ensures strong dynamic interaction between great educators, rigorous and cognitively demanding content, engaged students and families, and community partners that bring coherent supports matched to the specific needs of Rochester children.

We will review reports, policy recommendations and budgets through the lens of eliminating gaps and increasing opportunity for underserved youth. This is a deep commitment and unwavering value for me. You’ll hear more from me on educational equity throughout the year. And I challenge you to observe it in everything the Board of Education and I do.

Building relational capacity is a second focus that is required to achieve results. By building shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect, we will improve learning. We will increase engagement and motivation. Recognizing every person’s experience as unique, we can connect to each other through a deep understanding and acknowledgement of race, ethnicity, and culture. This will ensure that we are mindful, respectful, and inclusive.

Rochester brings together people from many different racial, cultural and economic backgrounds. We must build and strengthen relationships, and we must acknowledge the past to move forward. Understanding the impact of trauma, the importance of social-emotional learning and the value of community partnerships is foundational to our work.

I know that there's been a lot of great work already being done in this area, and I look forward to building on that.

Nurturing innovation is also critical to our success. If there was a successful model of urban education elsewhere we could copy, we would have already done that. If educational knowledge and experience were all it took, Rochester already would be higher performing.

We need to consider fresh ideas, and help our schools, leaders, teachers, and students customize solutions for their unique needs in Rochester. Innovation and customization are essential to ensure that every student gets to grade level, that we accelerate their learning, and get them to graduation.

This is what design thinking is all about. Tim Brown, CEO of the Design and Innovation firm IDEO, described Design Thinking as a process – applicable to **all** of us – it's creating new and innovative ideas to solve problems. Design Thinking is an action. It is a verb, not a noun.

Some of you have already experienced this over the past three weeks. All of you will see me model the Design principles to help us target the right problems to solve. Together we will build prototypes and models designed to meet our students' needs, school by school and classroom by classroom. I hope you will join me in building our collective mental muscle to tackle the most complex design challenges we can identify while already identifying bright spots and things working well.

Creating coherence is a fourth challenge I want to tackle. Fragmentation gets in the way of serving our children, our parents, our teachers, our schools or our community. The "system" needs to be coherent and user-friendly. Coherence does **not** mean we all must do the same things. It **does** mean that our work must produce powerful learning for all youth, with equitable and strong outcomes. Every student must have access to opportunities, supports and services without being moved from school to school, and classroom to classroom, to get them.

Parents, principals, and teachers should not have to call three departments in the District Office to figure out how to get a problem solved. You deserve the Wegmans model, where customer service is close to the door and clearly identified for you.

Coherence requires us to recognize the interdependence of the various components of a school district and to understand **how** they reinforce one another to generate the results of improvement strategies. Paying attention to, and creating coherence will help us to achieve the outcomes that simply cannot be achieved without it.

So...To get better, we can't keep doing things the same old way. We need to design and innovate our way to a new model. We have, as you know, many plans, reports, and programs in this District. We're rich in ideas and plans.

Whether it is the Digital Transformation Plan, flipped classrooms, creating Community Schools, student-led governance approaches or personalized learning—all of these things can help create schools that produce sustainable and positive outcomes for students. But only if these plans come off the page and generate collective action. It needs to be all of us, each and every one here and who's watching.

I believe strongly that the school is a unit of change, and that the District Office exists to support each school as they redefine the education landscape across this city. The solutions won't come from District Office—they will come from all of you. Every one of us is a designer, and we can start to innovate in each and every classroom, and each and every school, if we have a system that supports innovation.

Let's hear from a teacher in another District who has been through this experience.

“Karen's Story” video: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/22570825?color=FF7700>

Equity, relational capacity, innovation and coherence. Those are the four big ideas that I believe will help us to unleash the tremendous potential of our students and our schools. The talent is here. The answers are in Rochester.

But there's a fifth element of my role as your Superintendent. It starts with me holding myself accountable. Holding ourselves accountable for action, and working with a strong sense of urgency.

Some of you may have heard about my plan to listen and learn in the first 100 days. Good teachers know that learning means “doing.” There are some good things already happening. Over the next hundred days, of course I will attend District and community meetings ... I will interact with staff, students, parents, colleagues and community partners. But while I am listening and getting to know you, I will also be **learning by doing with you**.

Over the next several months I will outline and engage in a team-based design process starting in District Office. The objective is to bring forth fresh ideas to our Board of Education, schools and community. We will target our design thinking in areas where I believe we can gain immediate traction in support of our schools and collective goals. The first four projects on this list are underway, and you will be seeing and hearing more in the coming months.

Before closing I'd like to share one more video. I want us to really think and ponder what's possible if we work together to understand the needs of our students, then think about new ways to meet

those needs. Sometimes you can do something that has such an impact that you can change the world. Think about those fresh, out-of-the-box ideas that have the ability to change Rochester and the world.

“Baby Incubator” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH5UGDxjLkw&app=desktop>

Think for a moment. Where might we be by the end of this year, and what might we create that makes Rochester city schools even better? We already have so many bright spots—our own incubators and lanterns that promise to improve the course of children’s lives.

- Tomorrow we begin to educate a thousand more three-year-olds than our Pre-K program served last year.
- Our attendance improvement efforts have reduced chronic absence by 1,700 students over the past two years. We’re planning to increase the positive trend this year.
- Through a two million dollar Gear Up grant, community partners at RIT and the Urban League will help us provide extra support for every single ninth grader, and track their progress to graduation.
- We are in the first year of a three-year digital transformation, with an approved plan to provide every student in grades 3 through 12 with their own digital device for use at school.
- At Edison Tech and other schools, new career education pathways are providing our students the education and work experience they need to find good-paying jobs with local employers.

I look forward to sharing much more information as the Central Office moves forward on our own 100-day design projects to better serve you, our schools and our community. Because we are all designers, I want everyone to take part. Please share your ideas with me throughout the year at this address: listenlearn@rcsdk12.org.

There is much to accomplish, and there are so many challenges ahead. But if we think of ourselves as champions of equity, advocates for action, and designers for children, we **will** do this—together.

Leveraging our collective capacity, we will create fresh ideas and fresh Rochester schools—schools where achievement is expected, where students and staff feel supported, and where barriers to success are eliminated, one great innovative idea at a time.

We **will** make Rochester the national success story for urban turnaround. And we will do it together.

Thank you for listening today, and for the work you are doing to prepare for the opening of schools. Thank you to those in classrooms getting ready for a fresh beginning tomorrow with students. As your Superintendent, I look forward to working **with** you and working **for** you in the year ahead. I hope you will join me in the year ahead to create for all of us and our students the opportunity of a lifetime.