

Remarks as Prepared for Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa at the California Charter School Association Annual Conference — March 9, 2011

Good morning. Thank you for this award, and thank you, Jed, for that very kind introduction. It is an honor to be among so many of California's top educators and reformers.

Many of you have heard me start a speech by making this point: It was a Catholic school that gave me a foundation, but it was a public school that gave me a second chance. It was the struggle to find my place at school and find my place in this world that has fueled my drive to reform our public education system.

When most of us went to school in the 1950s and 1960s we were blessed that California public schools were synonymous with excellence. We were the gold standard. But somewhere along the way, our schools began to crumble, both figuratively and literally.

In Los Angeles today, 70% of our thirteen-year-olds can't read at grade level. Three out of four students can't do grade-level math. And what many call the achievement gap — that only two of every one hundred black male students graduate eligible for the UC system — I call absolutely unacceptable.

I was given a second chance by a public school, but the students struggling to find their way today are being left with no chances at all.

This is why I believe that education is the most important issue of our time. It is an economic issue, it is a civil rights issue, and it is an issue that strikes at one of our core values as Americans: The belief in a democratic and free society where opportunity doesn't hinge on your ZIP code, or your parents' tax bracket, or the color of your skin.

My unwavering belief in a public education system for all is why I'm running 21 of the lowest-performing schools in LA, and why I've partnered with the School District and the School Board, teachers and parents, universities, businesses, and non-profits to turn around failing schools and provide better options to students and families.

Working together, we created the Public School Choice initiative, allowing anyone with a proven track record of success to compete to run new or failing schools. Working together, we filed a lawsuit challenging seniority-based layoffs. Working together, we elected — and are working to re-elect — a reform-minded school board. Working together, we more than doubled the number of charter schools in Los Angeles and made LA the proud home of more charters than any other school district in the country.

But we couldn't have done it without the cooperation of partners across the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Now, I've visited enough charter schools to know that most teachers and school leaders didn't end up there by accident. You share my belief in our children, you have chosen to teach in underserved communities, and you have been a part of a California community — now over 900 schools strong — fighting to address the inequalities that have long-plagued our system.

But just as I have pledged to keep fighting for reform, I am here today to call on you — the charter school community — to go beyond your own schoolhouse doors and export your success to the benefit of all California public school students.

Because despite the growth of charter schools, they only serve 3% of public school students across the country.

We need to reach more children and we need to do it faster.

Every day, you help enrich the lives of hundreds of students, but we cannot leave even a single student behind. We have to reach the hundreds of thousands of students who are still in failing schools. The success pioneered by you in our best charter schools has had revolutionary results, but it cannot exist only in your classrooms.

We need you to not only build new schools, but take on the lowest-performing, failing ones.

We need you to hold yourselves to a higher standard, and hold unsuccessful charters accountable by shutting them down.

We need you to destroy your detractors' claims that your success is rooted in "cherry-picking" your students by taking on more of our highest need students: More English-language learners, more students with severe disabilities, more students in foster care, more students coming out of the juvenile justice system.

And, above all, we need you to stand side-by-side with our traditional schools, and in one, unified voice demand that California end the disgraceful distinction of being 47th in the nation in per pupil spending.

Our public school system needs the partnership of the charter school community, whether they know it or not, and whether they like it or not. We must start exporting your innovative ideas, your academic models and accountability measures, and bring them to scale in our school districts.

Whether you like it or not, we need to put the charter school community — as we know it — out of business. Now, before you all stop breathing, let me ask you this:

Don't traditional schools deserve the same relief from overbearing bureaucracy that you enjoy?

Don't all school leaders deserve the same flexibility to spend more money and resources in the classroom?

Wouldn't all schools benefit from a more progressive teachers' contract to give talented and experienced teachers more freedom to teach and the opportunity to finally be paid what they deserve?

Of course they would.

Just like every student deserves a chance to succeed, so too, does every one of our schools. We must start blurring the lines between charter and traditional schools until the distinctions cease to exist. And we need to end once and for all the damaging us-versus-them mentality that has polluted relations between school districts and the charter community and jeopardized the potential for meaningful reform and positive change that benefits all students.

Imagine a public school system that creates a true variety of good choices, rather than a behemoth of a bureaucracy that centrally governs our schools.

Imagine a network of neighborhood schools where every model of reform — charter, pilot, magnet, network partners, and models that have yet to be imagined — are working together with the singular goal of providing students and families with better choices.

Imagine the day when parents and students can choose a school based on learning style and teaching method, instead of the number of metal detectors on campus or the percentage of teachers laid-off last year.

Now, if you think all this imagining is naïve or this dreaming is just fantasy and fiction, I challenge you to look at Quincy Jones Elementary and Synergy Charter Academy in South Los Angeles, two schools sharing a campus that is home to one of the most innovative educational designs. A traditional district school and highly successful charter coming together to teach side-by-side. They are sharing facilities, they are sharing success stories and they are sharing their unwavering commitment to reform.

This experiment is not limited to this one campus. Jordan High School, long troubled and labeled a “drop-out factory,” located in the heart of a housing project, is also creating new choices through cooperation.

Jordan High School will soon reopen as three small schools run by Alliance-College Ready Promise, Green Dot, and the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools.

Synergy-Quincy Jones and Jordan High are shining examples of the future I've asked you to imagine: A future where providing a variety of good options is the only prerogative, a future where teachers will share the wealth of their wisdom, and a future where parents will have a genuine choice for their students.

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." But as beautiful as they may be and as much as we may believe in them, our dreams will never become reality without the hard work of everyone in this room.

You are among the most passionate, thoughtful and innovative educators in the country — often running schools out of church basements or rec-centers, working nights and weekends — doing whatever it takes to prove that all students can learn.

Now we need to prove that all schools can teach.

Today, I stand before you and make a pledge to keep fighting for meaningful educational reform. And today, I ask for your pledge to move your reform efforts beyond your own schoolhouse doors.

With our continued commitment and positive partnership, we can ensure a future where every parent will have choice, and every student will have a chance.

Thank you.