

**School Readiness:
The Building Blocks to a Child's Success
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**Presentation by
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Thank you. I am delighted to be here today, joining Senator Corzine, Governor McGreevey, Dr. Barnett, and Ms. Zalkind to focus on the critically important topic of early childhood education.

Since its founding in 1908, Montclair State University has had a long history of preparing high quality teachers for New Jersey's public schools. Like so many of the nation's public universities, Montclair State began as a normal school for teachers, and progressed in size and mission to become a comprehensive university serving more than 15,000 students in the sciences, business, humanities, social sciences, and the arts. But we have never let go of our historical commitment to the education of teachers.

It is not hyperbole to say there has never been a greater need in the state of New Jersey for quality teachers for our public schools, and especially for our Abbott preschools. At Montclair State, we are educating hundreds of early childhood teachers each year for New Jersey's preschools. Known for many decades for our preparation of outstanding high school teachers, our more recent institutional commitment to early childhood education was made evident in our establishment of a new department focusing specifically on early childhood and literacy education.

Educating an increasingly diverse population of students for full participation in our society and economy is not an option we can ignore, and, at Montclair State, we take our responsibility in that regard as a moral imperative. Our philosophical point of departure is the premise that all of New Jersey's public school students deserve to be taught by a caring and highly competent teacher.

A few years ago, a set of major statistical studies by Dr. William Sanders in Tennessee began to receive a great deal of attention across the country. Dr. Sanders' research showed that the single greatest factor affecting student achievement was teacher effectiveness. All other factors - class size, race/ethnicity, location, socio-economic status - pale in comparison to teacher effectiveness. Those studies confirmed what many of us believed for a long time - teacher quality matters.

Often when people talk about our society's need for highly qualified teachers, they do not include preschool teachers. To the uninformed eye, early childhood education looks simple. Provide a safe and caring environment for young children, simple instruction and guidance in socialization. Any minimally normal person ought to be able to do it. However, the evidence to

the contrary is quite compelling. In fact, early childhood educators must have mastery of a body of knowledge that incorporates the fields of child development, pedagogy, subject matter expertise, and studies related to the family and societal context and must have the ability to use that knowledge to create an educational environment that supports the well being and achievement of a child from birth through age eight. Many years ago, a scientist once said to me that just because an elephant is an animal does not necessarily mean that the elephant will be an effective teacher of zoology. Similarly, it is not enough merely to know how to read to be able to teach a class full of individual children with varied abilities, interests, and backgrounds how to read.

A summary of the educational background required by early childhood educators might include a list, such as the following:

- A deep understanding of how child development interacts with factors such as race, class, language, and social conditions.
- The knowledge and competence to teach a range of discipline areas, including language development, literacy, social studies, math, science, and the arts in integrated and interdisciplinary ways and within a context that is meaningful to the child.
- The knowledge and skills to plan, and assess the effectiveness, of curriculum based on the teacher's professional expertise and an understanding of the context of parent and community expectations.
- Expertise in inquiry and critical thinking strategies in order to facilitate the development of children's higher order thinking skills.
- The knowledge and skills to assess, document, and account for each child's learning over time.
- The skills accurately to assess the needs of a child and to advocate on behalf of children, increasing the chances that every child in the classroom will have the services and opportunities he or she needs to succeed.
- The professional integrity and standing necessary to participate in opportunities for continued professional development and the sharing of information and ideas with colleagues.

These requirements are considerable, but even they are not enough. The highly qualified early childhood teachers we educate need to work in programs and settings that are child centered and developmentally appropriate. Schools must work with the 'whole child' in a world that is whole and not fractured into separate subject areas. Young children learn more deeply from, for example, an ongoing project on weather that incorporates counting, measuring, observing, and new words and concepts than they do from separate and disassociated lessons in math at 9 am, vocabulary at 10 am, and science at 11 am. Young children need teachers that know how to provide both quantitative and language rich environments, with extensive verbal interactions and ample opportunities to calculate and to reason and opportunities for story telling, acting, and reading aloud. They need teachers capable of incorporating art and music into their teaching, allowing children to experience culture and the full range of the human conversation, and they need teachers who know how to provide continuing opportunities for children to experiment with, and test out, the characteristics of their environment and teachers who know how to encourage children to be curious and creative and courageous and different. All of these abilities go well beyond what any nice, normal person could do without the support of excellent training, meaningful apprenticeship, and dedicated practice.

And, finally, teachers and schools of quality must be committed to appropriate accountability. Administering tests is easy, but I have seen enough tests, at all levels, in my many years as an educator to know that large numbers of them do not really provide the assessments that they purport to provide. And, yet, although it is not easy to assess efforts at early childhood education, we must. We must know if our teachers are well prepared, teachers must know if their methods and practices are effective, and we all must know if our schools are succeeding. However, we also must be confident that our assessment methods are really giving us the information we need and that they are contributing to a process of continuous improvement of the learning environment.

These are the goals that we have in mind at Montclair State. The heart of what is distinctive about our efforts is the New Jersey Network for Educational Renewal. Established, funded, and operated by the University, the Network is one of the most mature school-university partnerships in the nation. The Network has 23 member districts, including three large Abbott districts (Newark, Paterson, and East Orange). The partnership works with over 1,000 teachers in these districts who are committed to excellence in teaching, who participate in a wide array of professional development, who work with our teacher education students in the field, and who benefit from campus faculty privileges. In addition, another 1,500 teachers in these districts take part in, and benefit from, the activities sponsored by the Network. Recently, David Grant, the Executive Director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation told us that the Dodge Foundation frequently cites the Network's professional development program as the model for working with teachers to improve and renew teaching and learning.

It is well known that our nation's teaching force is much less diverse than our student population, and the percentage of teachers of color is dropping just as the percentage of students of color is growing. Montclair State is also working to address the critical shortage of teachers of color through the University's Teacher Education Advocacy Center. We have committed a sizable budget to this effort and we have received substantial grant funds from a number of foundations and the federal government to support this work, which includes Future Educators' Clubs in Newark and Montclair schools, a Minority Teacher Candidates Organization, and our Urban Teaching Academy.

All of the University's work in teacher education is guided by a well-articulated vision for teaching and learning and schooling, which we call the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. Embedded in this agenda is a belief in the transformative power of public education in promoting social justice and equity and the betterment of our society and its citizens. The core of our teacher education program is teaching for critical thinking because we believe all students must learn to develop and hone their problem-solving and decision making skills. It is not an accident that Montclair State was the site of the development of the Institute for Philosophy for Children, and it is not an accident that the curriculum and teaching materials developed by the Institute have been adopted and translated for use in elementary school systems all over the world and especially in the newly emerging democracies in eastern Europe.

So what is the bad news I have for you today? Because I do have bad news. It's really pretty simple. Montclair State is not educating enough teachers for New Jersey. As we all know, there

is a serious shortage of teachers across the state but especially in our Abbott districts where the need for talented teachers is greatest. Since the NJ Supreme Court mandate that Abbott districts offer preschool education to three and four year olds in classrooms with certified, early childhood teachers, there is now an acute shortage in this certification area.

So, why don't we just educate more of our excellent, well-prepared teachers? The answer to that question goes to the long-term, fundamental disinterest that New Jersey has shown in the development of the public colleges and universities that account for 70% of the teachers produced in New Jersey. If one looks at states of similar size to New Jersey with comparable economies, states such as Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Indiana, and Michigan, one finds four, five, six, in Michigan nine, large public universities. If one looks at New Jersey, there is only one, Rutgers. New Jersey ranks an appalling 44th in the nation in public four-year college enrollment. Currently, we are exporting to colleges in other states close to 60% of our best-prepared high school graduates. The state's one natural resource, its bright young high school graduates, is being traded away for the dubious benefit of not investing in public higher education. New Jersey, despite its affluence and knowledge-based economy, ranks a dismal 41st in the nation in higher education operating support and devotes only 7.4% of its state budget to higher education. The national average, by way of comparison, is 11.3%. New Jersey has the highest net higher education out-migration in the nation, and the studies show that the majority of students who leave their home state for higher education do not return. When it comes to the export of students, many of whom would have been our future teachers, as well as our scientists, entrepreneurs, public servants, and so forth, New Jersey resembles Alaska, and could not look more different than states like Virginia or North Carolina, which not only keep their own best students, but attract them from states all over the country. The irony is that, largely because of the attractions of location, New Jersey's public colleges and universities are very good, and yet students go elsewhere for simple things such as residence halls, for decent recreational facilities, and for enough classrooms and seats in the computer labs. To further exacerbate the problem of out-migration, the boomlet is on the way, and, by 2008, New Jersey will be producing close to 25,000 more high school graduates a year than we have done in recent years. New Jersey's public colleges and universities, the primary baccalaureate producers in the state, will not have places for those students if the status quo is maintained.

Right now, Montclair State graduates 400 teacher candidates a year, including almost a hundred in early childhood. In addition, we are currently educating over 250 teachers a year who already work in Abbott preschool centers, which means that Montclair State produces over half of the teachers in the Modified Alternate Route program for P-3 certification in the state. Nonetheless, at the present time, the Abbott preschool programs are still not serving all of the eligible 3 and 4 year olds in these districts. As more eligible children enter Abbott preschool programs, the shortage of certified teachers will grow. And more children will enter (or at least need to enter) preschool programs because New Jersey is experiencing the fifth highest population growth rate in the nation, and that growth is heavily in the younger segment of the population.

So, we have established that teacher quality matters, that Montclair State has attained nationally recognized excellence in teacher preparation, and that we are facing a teacher shortage in the state. The next step for the University was, consequently, obvious. We needed to grow. When I arrived at the University in the fall of 1998, we had about 12,000 students. This fall we will have

more than 15,000, and, by 2008, we will have closer to 20,000, and we will have reached the size university that one would expect a state like New Jersey to have. So far, by the way, New Jersey has not provided any resources to support that growth.

Obviously, not all of the University's growth will be in teacher preparation programs. However, as a central part of our growth plan, we want fully to double our capacity to produce high quality teachers for New Jersey, with a very significant increase in the area of early childhood education. A critical enabling element to building that capacity is the construction of a major facility on the campus that is designed to be a new and much enlarged home for our College of Education and Human Services, that will include a state-of-the-art center for teacher preparation and learning technologies, in fact, the ADP Center thanks to a generous gift from that corporation, and that will provide fifty new classrooms, laboratories and lecture halls for instruction. This \$80 million project, on which we will break ground this summer and which is scheduled to open in 2005, will enable us to connect the University's faculty electronically with hundreds of teachers and thousands of students in our 23 partner school districts. It will enable us to offer intensive professional development programs for newly trained and veteran teachers encompassing uses of the Internet, interactive databases for curriculum and assessment, video-streamed programming, and laboratories for developing new uses of technology for teaching and learning. We have received corporate support for this project, and, thanks to New Jersey's federal delegation, we have also received federal support, and I remain hopeful that the state of New Jersey will yet show some interest in the project.

But, even if we have the facilities and capacity to prepare greater numbers of teachers, how do we keep them in the schools? Recent studies show that the greatest barrier to sustaining teacher quality and the greatest cause of the general teacher shortage is poor teacher retention. Retirements account for only 12-25% of teacher turnover nationally. 51% of teachers leaving their positions do so because of job dissatisfaction and they go on to pursue other jobs. That's a huge percentage! Furthermore, 40% of teachers leave the profession during the first five years of teaching. And why they leave is no great mystery: low salary, lack of respect and appreciation, lack of administrative support, lack of mentoring, difficult beginning assignments, poor resources in their schools, lack of autonomy, too much isolation from adults, lack of meaningful professional enrichment opportunities, too many external mandates to respond to, and too little concrete evidence that their efforts are making a difference. These very conditions that lead to teacher flight from the schools are especially acute in the area of early childhood education. Certifying P-3 teachers is not enough to keep the most talented of them in our preschool classrooms.

The problem of retention is not beyond the reach of solution. We know what we should be doing. We need much more in the way of support and mentoring for new early childhood teachers. At Montclair State, we have a grant from the Schumann Fund to prepare early childhood center directors to be mentors for new teachers in Newark. This program is a very fine one, but it reaches only a small fraction of the early childhood center directors in the state. We must also give teachers time, as part of their professional responsibilities, to collaborate, to learn, and to problem-solve with colleagues. Early childhood teachers need support for collaboration with parents, who are essential partners in young children's learning and development. No infrastructure currently exists to provide these supports and conditions for

preschool teachers. The University's Network, about which I spoke earlier, is a major attempt to provide this continuing support structure, but we need adequate resources to support and sustain this work.

All of us who care deeply about the future of New Jersey must work together to ensure that our schools succeed. Once a teacher is in the classroom, the die has pretty much been cast. New Jersey's colleges and universities are where, in so many ways, the process all begins. At the universities, we need to select from among our best and most committed students to be our teacher candidates; we need to educate them properly; and we need to partner with the schools to provide an environment that encourages their continuing professional development and their commitment to stay in the schools.

The philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, described the task of the university as "the creation of the future." That idea has a number of compelling implications, but none is more compelling than the fact that the university educates the teachers who will, in turn, educate our children and oversee their schools. For the sake of our future, we have to get it right.