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**2018 State of the Schools address by Superintendent Ed Graff**  
*(as prepared for delivery)*

Good morning and welcome.

If you weren't feeling moved when you arrived this morning, I know you are now thanks to the upbeat and enthusiastic performances by our students. I'm constantly amazed at the many ways they can inspire and motivate us every day. They are the reason we rise up every morning. Let's give them all another round of applause.

I want to acknowledge North Community High School for hosting us this morning. Many staff pulled together to coordinate today's gathering, so thanks to all those who worked tirelessly to put everything in place. And thanks to all of you for joining me this morning.

We are very fortunate to live in a City where so many people are willing to come together at 7:30 a.m. to engage in a dialogue about our city's students. I appreciate that our staff are joined this morning by members of our school board and other elected officials, many of our partners, and those at the heart of our work: students and families.

Two years ago, we held a similar event where I declared that the state of our schools is the story of our schools, and our story is MPS Strong. I had just begun as Superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, and that declaration was both factual and aspirational. MPS Strong speaks to the many positive things happening in our schools every day, and also of what we hope to be: Strong for our students, for our families, for our staff, and for anyone who works with us.

If there is a theme running through our gathering this morning, it is one of partnership, because it truly takes a village to educate all children. The students performing today are all participants in out-of-school-time activities provided by partner organizations who understand the need for youth to have access to enriching experiences that develop the whole child. Many of the successes we will celebrate this morning were accomplished in collaboration with local funders and community partners.

Authentic partnerships are strengthened by intentional communication and information sharing. With that in mind, today is the first of what I hope will be multiple opportunities for me to share with you how we are going to keep getting better at serving all of our students. This work builds on our successes. And I believe with our combined efforts and partnership, we are poised to become a national model — an urban district that ensures all students have the support, academic skills and resources they need to be successful — in every way we define success.

Before I share our vision for the future, let me begin with a few facts about where we are today. Next week, Minneapolis Public Schools will welcome more than 34,000 students back to school. MPS is the **28th** largest employer in the state of Minnesota. We are a \$650 million business employing more than 5100 teachers and education assistants, 150 bus drivers, 200 cafeteria workers, 250 custodians and nearly 1000 other professionals all who are dedicated to serving our diverse student population. I am pleased to report that we are beginning the 2018 school year with great momentum



in many areas — from improving student health and wellness to creating safer learning environments to building positive cultures and focusing on academics in each of our schools.

Over the last two years, we have shown what it means to be MPS Strong both inside and out of the classroom.

- Inside the classroom, we focused on the needs of our students and completed the adoption on a new standardized PreK-5 literacy curriculum that has already shown positive results. In fact, we believe we will see measurable gains in our elementary reading scores when state-data is released later this month.
- Likewise, we laid the foundation for safe and positive learning through the introduction of social, emotional learning, which enhances students' abilities to succeed in school, careers and life. We were able to launch social emotional learning in our district with partnership and seed funding from several philanthropic partners.
- To support our academic goals, all of our elementary students now receive 30 minutes of recess each day because we know healthy bodies support healthy minds. And many of those students will be able to play outside on playgrounds where rubber mulch has been replaced with a more natural wood fiber mulch.
- MPS continues to source fresh food from local farms, and we partner with local chefs and community members to assure that our farm-to-school program remains rooted in the community.
- We are also proud partners in the "**Minneapolis Safe Routes to School**" initiative, which finds ways to increase biking and walking to school and established a strong foundation for collaboration between the City and the District.
- And knowing how important sports are to a well-rounded student experience, MPS offers 35 different athletic programs for students and joined forces with the Minnesota Twins to launch "[Winning in the 9th](#)," a partnership that stresses the importance of 9th-grade students starting their high school experience with positive academic success.

Like I said, there is a lot of fantastic work happening both inside and outside of our classrooms for our students.

Of course, investing in MPS staff is also vital to academic success and here too we have progress to report. Through partnerships, we continue to prioritize the diversity of our new hires at all levels throughout our district. Research indicates that student learning is enhanced when they have an opportunity to interact with teachers and administrators from similar backgrounds and experiences.

This past year, we were also able to continue with our Minneapolis Residency Program — a grow-your-own program to increase the pool of candidates of color for teacher vacancies in hard-to-fill areas like special education — thanks to the support of local partners, the University of St. Thomas and the State of Minnesota.

These are just a few highlights of what we mean when we say MPS Strong and why I am more convinced than ever that as a school community MPS is a place where you can expect great things.



The foundation has been laid. We have successfully aligned our academic work around four core priorities to enhance student achievement — equity, literacy, social and emotional learning, and student support systems, which you'll hear more about in a few minutes. We've begun to reimagine how we serve our students, families and staff. Graduation rates are up, and for the first time in a decade, we presented and approved a balanced budget for this school year that does not rely on reserve funds.

Critical to laying that successful foundation has been the intentional work we've done to engage families and communities. Over the past two years, I have heard from many voices in this community. They come from people who are sometimes unhappy, but who are genuinely concerned about children and families and the education we are providing.

Many of those people are parents, some of whom are with us here today. I want to personally thank you for joining with us not just to support your own children, but the children of our entire community. Thank you for your partnership.

You have my promise that as we move forward, we will not ignore or discount your voices.

In fact, we have reaffirmed our commitment to listen, to hear, to understand and to respond. We have begun to focus on improving our service through the practice of cultural humility.

Many people are familiar with cultural competency, which is about acquiring knowledge and understanding. Cultural humility, however, goes deeper. It's about reflection, growth, and developing mutually beneficial partnerships with communities on behalf of the diverse populations we serve.

Similarly, we are working to improve our efficiency, and to increase our expectations—both for ourselves and for those we serve. What does this look like put together? Already we have:

- Re-organized our central office to better support schools and programs,
- Increased community connections,
- Begun implementation of a comprehensive professional development plan for staff,
- And we have aligned to focus the entire district on those four core priorities for student success I mentioned earlier: equity, literacy, social and emotional learning and student support systems.

This school year, we will continue to build on the foundation we have put in place.

- 1) We will deepen our focus on literacy in all grade levels. We must and will keep it the bedrock of all learning.
- 2) We will deepen our emphasis on modeling and teaching social-emotional skills. We must and will provide competent and caring teachers and support staff who work for our district. Everyone who works with us must care about student learning. Everyone.
- 3) We will deepen our focus on equity. We must and will work to make our schools welcoming and inviting places for all students, families and the community. All of our students must see themselves reflected in our curriculum and their learning. They must experience learning environments where their unique perspective is invited and honored.



- 4) We will deepen our commitment to provide systems of support for our students. We must and will work hard to provide programs that respond to the individual needs of students no matter where they are on the continuum of learning—whether they need help getting caught up or to be pushed farther ahead. We will ask our partners to do the same by extending the learning day during key out-of-school times, such as before and after school, on weekends and in the summer. Learning does not stop outside of the classroom.
- 5) Finally, we will deepen our practice of engaging the community. Building on the intentional community engagement of our most recent budget adoption, over the coming months we will share with the community a bold new design to make sure our District supports a new vision for every MPS graduate.

We have much to be proud of in Minneapolis Public Schools. That said, we know we have more work to do and I can assure you that we will not shy away from our remaining challenges to address that work.

We know not all of our students are where they must be if we are to achieve high standards and prepare them to take their place as global leaders and citizens in our community. That means we must redouble our efforts. Our students must be given opportunities that move them forward. And this is possible with the support of the thousands of people who are willing to stand with us.

So, I have shared our successes and some challenges, and I've talked about our current work. Now I would like to spend our last few minutes looking toward the future.

Moving forward, we will define our goals and strategies for MPS in a document we refer to as the Comprehensive District Design. The Comprehensive District Design, which will be introduced in greater detail next month and taken out for discussion and feedback throughout the city, will demonstrate a new vision for how we will prioritize our primary and most important work: academic learning for all of our students. It will also contain strategies to invest in our staff and better engage families, communities and partners to achieve lasting change in Minneapolis Public Schools.

Through the implementation of our Comprehensive District Design, we will work to deliver on a universal set of high expectations for every graduate in MPS. Likewise, we want to be held accountable to a collective set of experiences each day for all of our students, staff, families and community. Every MPS school you attend or visit will provide the same culture of high academic expectations for all students. Staff will practice cultural humility. And we will focus on continuous learning and growth, which is our goal for every department and school.

The Comprehensive District Design plan — which will be presented to the Minneapolis Board of Education for a vote in December — will support students who, for various reasons, need additional help to meet our newly developed expectations for MPS graduates. It will provide more opportunities for students who have mastered grade-level coursework and need greater challenges. And it will expand access to programs our students need to succeed once they graduate, including career and technical courses, post-secondary educational opportunities and experiential learning.



Everyone in this room knows we take seriously our charge of educating the children of Minneapolis. We came into this profession because we believe in the work. At the same time, we cannot do our work alone. We know educational programs alone will not address needed changes in housing, transportation and employment to lessen the concentrated effects of poverty.

We're grateful for the partnership of Mayor Frey and the City of Minneapolis in working to address this need through the "Stable Homes, Stable Schools" initiative. Together, we hope to make sure families experiencing homelessness can find affordable housing within a half mile of their community school.

And all of us here today will need to continue working together with the Legislature, school districts statewide and other state and city government entities to find solutions for these complex issues. Now more than ever partnership is key.

Community partners, we need your continued support to extend our four core priorities of equity, literacy, social and emotional learning, and student supports beyond the school day.

We've seen great examples of what this collaboration looks like over the past few months. With partners from across the city — and funded through a generous donation from the Minneapolis Foundation and Generation Next — we were able to launch a new initiative, MPS Strong Reads, to keep kids reading all summer long. With help from organizations like Beacons, Boys & Girls Clubs, Eastside Neighborhood Services, Phyllis Wheatley, NorthPoint, YMCA, Hennepin County Library and others, we have distributed more than 4,500 free books to children across the city and established 16 little libraries. And we're proud to say these books reflect the cultural, racial and linguistic diversity of our students. This is what partnership around literacy can look like.

Business and community partners, we need your ongoing support and partnership to broaden Minneapolis' shared sense of responsibility for youth development. We need to increase both the quantity and quality of opportunities for students — from internships and tutoring to mentorship and leadership experiences.

Our students are talented, creative and eager to experience new opportunities and challenges. Through partnerships, we can provide them a chance to achieve their dreams.

Finally, many of you have partnered with us to support our upcoming referendum, which Chair Inz talked about this morning. By stabilizing our fiscal situation through the combination of the referendum and changes to programming and services, we will be able to invest the funding in schools within the priority areas of literacy, equity, social/emotional learning, and support services for all of our students, no matter where they are in their learning.

We also need every person here today to stand with us through distractions and difficult decisions. We need your partnership as we work to maintain a structurally balanced budget and advocate to secure full state and federal funding for our special education and our English language services and programming.



We need you to stick with us as we learn more about the State's new NorthStar Accountability System that identifies schools along a progress continuum. Not all of the attention these reports generate will be positive, but we can't let critical voices or incremental progress thus far deter us from our focus of meeting the individual needs of each of our students and preparing them for lifelong success.

We need your continued partnership.

As I stand before you this morning I am optimistic. I'm optimistic that our intentional and collaborative efforts over the past two years, the promise of our Comprehensive District Design, and an unwavering commitment by our more than 6,000 employees to serve the students and families of Minneapolis will yield the results we want for all children.

As I said earlier, everyone in this room knows the importance of educating the children of Minneapolis. You are here today because you care about that and share our belief that strong schools reflect strong communities.

This is powerfully laid out in a quote from Lilian Katz, a university professor who studies early childhood education. I believe it summarizes why our collective efforts to educate all our children to universal high expectations is so important.

She wrote<sup>1</sup>:

[Each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children and grandchildren is intimately linked to the welfare of all other people's children. After all, when one of our children needs lifesaving surgery, someone else's child will perform it. If one of our children is threatened or harmed by violence, someone else's child will be responsible for the violent act. The good life for our own children can be secured only if a good life is also secured for all other people's children.](#)

Powerful words. Minneapolis Public Schools must be a school district built on high expectations for its graduates and providing high support to deliver on the promise of being strong every day for students, staff, families and communities, no matter where they live in Minneapolis.

It is now my pleasure to introduce one of our partners, Courtland Pickens, who serves as an artist in residence at several MPS schools, including Patrick Henry and Franklin. The song he is going to sing speaks to what can be accomplished when we work together in partnership for a common cause. With the support of everyone here today and all those committed to seeing students succeed, I believe we can rise up and show the hope and the courage required to achieve this vision.

Please welcome Courtland.

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<sup>1</sup> Lilian Katz. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from AZQuotes.com Web site: [https://www.azquotes.com/author/39264-Lilian\\_Katz](https://www.azquotes.com/author/39264-Lilian_Katz)