Remarks to Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee
Mayor Gregory A. Ballard
8 a.m. June 8, 2011
As prepared for delivery

Any city that unlocks the secrets to consistently high quality education and graduation rates, combined with strong post-secondary opportunities, will be a magnet for the businesses of the future.

As I said in my State of the City address, Indianapolis must have schools that parents want to move to, not from. A quality education that helps prepare students to become productive citizens and remain employable is crucial to making Indianapolis the most livable big city in America.

Among the many education questions facing the city, two stand out today. One is what we should do about the imminent state takeover of up to seven IPS schools later this year. The second is the larger question of where we want to go as a city when it comes to our public education system.

First things first. As part of a state law that passed in 1999, the State of Indiana can intervene in or even take over management of schools that fail to meet the State’s minimum education standards for six consecutive years. As many as seven IPS schools, including others across Indiana, face the very real prospect of being taken over by the state.

Just as I do on most issues of concern, my first steps are to listen and learn. I’ve read a lot and talked with a lot of people, including State Superintendent Dr. Tony Bennett, IPS Superintendent Dr. Eugene White, leaders in charter schools, the Mind Trust, the State Board of Education and others. I know that the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce is also studying this issue.

My focus right now is on achieving the best possible results for the students at these particular schools. There is a community consensus that after six years of failing to meet minimum standards, these schools must undergo significant change, and do so now. The status quo at these schools is not acceptable. So, the city took action.

At my urging, the Indiana General Assembly changed the law this year so the Mayor can ask the State Board of Education to return these schools to local oversight. It is a law I plan to use next year when the city petitions the State to incorporate these schools into a system similar to our successful charter program. This approach strikes the right balance between maintaining the status quo, which is not acceptable, and a complete state takeover of these local schools.

Let me be clear, I respect Dr. White and our classrooms are filled with many dedicated and talented teachers who are doing a very difficult job in very difficult circumstances. I also believe we absolutely must make some fundamental changes at these schools. So, I support Dr. Bennett’s efforts to reform these schools and help these students. Yet, I believe local solutions are better over time.
The city, beginning under former Mayor Bart Peterson and continuing today, has a stellar record of overseeing charter schools. In 2011, Stanford University found that charter school performance in Indianapolis outpaced the traditional public schools in learning gains. We set high standards, demand results and hold accountable schools that don’t measure up. Our model and our connection to the community is much stronger than any state bureaucracy.

In our charter model, individual schools are free of much of the unnecessary bureaucracy of centralized school administrations. The Mayor’s office does not run schools; we do not decide who to hire or fire; we do not decide what buildings to use; and we do not make any of the day-to-day decisions in the classrooms of these schools. Charter schools are free to innovate; free to empower their teachers and reward them for high performance. We have a compliance and accountability model. We set high standards and we hold the charter schools accountable to these standards. Our accountability system includes regular school visits by members of the City’s Office of Education Innovation, annual analysis of a school’s performance on both ISTEP+ and Northwest Evaluation Association assessments, annual visits by local education experts, annual financial analysis by an independent accounting firm, and surveys submitted by parents, staff, and students.

Succeed, and they are permitted to continue to educate our children. Fail, and we demand change - period. It is important to note that none of our charters have ever reached the level where the state could take over. We demand changes long before that – and it is working. If not, we close the school, as we just did.

People are noticing. Last year the Walton family, of Wal-Mart fame, noticed our success and pledged $1.3 million through their family foundation to help develop new community-anchored charter schools in Indianapolis. A few weeks ago we awarded the first grants and I look forward to hopefully welcoming these new schools into our city in the next year or two. Also in 2010, we were the first city in the nation to develop a plan to transition private catholic schools into public charter schools.

Our program is focused on results for our children and it is a similar model we must bring to bear on these failing schools. It will not be easy. It will take hard work and perseverance to turn these schools around. They need to be transitioned with care. It’s not like we are flipping a switch here. This all must be done with much thought and care because failure could set back education reform for years.

The return of local oversight of our schools sets the stage for the larger discussion about education in our city as a whole. I understand there are some thoughtful and concerned leaders out there who believe the Mayor should take-over all of IPS. I appreciate their passion. I share their concern that we must improve the education system in our city in order to remain competitive and grow as a community. However, I think these calls are premature right now.
First, the landmark reforms passed by Governor Daniels and the General Assembly have not begun to be implemented yet – let alone given time to work. All schools in Indianapolis need the time to use the new tools available to them to improve the education of our children.

Parents, school board members and administrators now have more options and choices than ever. Parents have more choice where to send their kids. School boards and administrators have new tools such as higher pay for high performing teachers and the ability to make more appropriate personnel reforms. However, it is not enough that state law has changed; everyone involved must act and adapt.

Second, I believe our immediate focus should be on the successful turnaround of the schools being taken over by the state. Once we successfully turn around these schools, then we can tackle the larger issue of IPS as a whole. At public meetings last week regarding state takeover, parents and teachers both expressed concerns that administrators kept changing staff, goals and missions every couple of years hoping something would work. Let’s not make the same mistake.

We need to be quick, but methodical in our approach. Even U.S Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recommended that we start with achievable first steps when undertaking major reform.

There is no question that our city needs outstanding schools – and that is a discussion larger than just IPS. We have ten other school districts, plus public charter and private schools, but reform can only take us so far. Without a caring adult in the lives of these students it’s not likely to get us where we need to be. If a parent won’t play that critical role, then we as a community have a responsibility to step up. That’s why I was in Washington, DC a few weeks ago meeting with national charitable groups discussing a new effort to connect caring adults with at-risk youth.

Our community must also recognize and expand upon our successes. Yes, we have some large challenges, but we also have some great success stories in public education in our community. Speedway schools are exceptional: high graduation rates, no school debt, and a close knit part of our community. Did you know that Marion County is home to two of the state’s three Presidential Scholars? Neither of these outstanding students attended one of our premiere private schools, they graduated from two of our great public schools: North Central and Franklin Central High Schools. And let’s recognize when there is great news at IPS. Just last week School 84 was named the top magnet school in the nation!

The education of our children shapes our future as a city. Our community objective must be to have schools that are among the best performing in the nation. I believe we will get there so long as we start with the premise that each child deserves a student-centered, learning focused environment.
For the remainder of this year, I intend to continue my ongoing dialogue with Dr. White and Dr. Bennett to assist them in their work together as they deal with the state takeover of these failing schools. We will be seeking input across our community and from education experts to put together a detailed plan to petition the State Board of Education to transfer these schools to a charter-like model with local oversight.

Now, unlike ever before, there is an opportunity for our community to embrace the change that will lead to a better education for each child. I’m optimistic. We’ve made progress in the last few years as a city and with recent state reforms and the support of parents, teachers and partners like the Chamber and the Mind Trust; we have a real opportunity to position Indianapolis extremely well nationally. This effort will take a lot of cooperation. So long as we keep children as our first priority and take the time to methodically and carefully work through these issues, our city will be successful.

Thank you.