Thank you for being here again this year for an update on the state of Atlanta Public Schools. When I left last year, I said we were poised for the second half of our climb up the mountain, and we were holding on for dear life. I hope today to give you a sense of where we are on our journey one year later.

How many times have you picked up a newspaper, and thought...why don’t they write more about all the good things going on in our schools?

Well, I brought my grading pen along today, and I’m going to start off by giving a big “A” to the Atlanta Journal Constitution for a story they did about one of our schools last week.

I would give them an A PLUS...but their headline isn’t as accurate as it could be. Their headline reads: Venetian Hills “a hidden treasure.” It really should be: Venetian Hills “one of Atlanta Public Schools’ many hidden treasures.”

I’m talking about an excellent, front-page story that reporter Bridget Gutierrez did last week about the remarkable turnaround at Venetian Hills Elementary.
Five years ago, Venetian was not doing well academically. It had been placed under state sanctions, marked as an under-performing school, and ordered to offer students transfers to better-performing schools because it had failed to meet basic academic standards.

Fast-forward to 2007. After making dramatic gains on state reading, English and math exams, the southwest Atlanta school has been marked once again, but this time as a high-performing school.

In fact, last month, the U.S. Department of Education named Venetian Hills Elementary a “Blue Ribbon School” — which is the country’s highest education honor.

Venetian Hills is truly a story of total transformation. This school is a good illustration of the impact of our reforms across the district. But Venetian Hills is not alone in its success. This year, for the first time in our history, EVERY ONE of our elementary schools including our charter schools -- 100 PERCENT-- made Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the federal, No Child Left Behind Act.

The Council of Great City Schools, the organization that represents the nation’s urban public school districts, has told us that as far as they know, Atlanta Public Schools is the only urban district in the country that can make that claim.

I want to see a show of hands from those of you who would have believed eight years ago that we would be standing here today making that claim? I DID.

As a matter of fact, when we surveyed our kindergarten teachers in 1999, 90 percent of them felt that their students would not finish high school.

The critical challenge now -- for all of us -- is how do we take those things that are working at our elementary schools—and are beginning to make a difference at our secondary schools—and effectively apply them—to all of our schools?
All progress begins with attitude, and I think we should all take our marching orders from one of our kindergarten students' favorite TV cartoon characters, "Bob The Builder."

On his cartoon series, whenever "Bob" is facing a big job, one of his pals usually asks the question: Can we do it? Bob always stands tall, puts a big smile on his face, and says proudly, "Yes We Can."

And when it comes to the Atlanta Public Schools, "Bob" is right—the answer is, "Yes We Can."

We have the knowledge, we have the ability and we have the power to change children's lives for the better. In the words of poet Robert Frost, we have an opportunity to give the children of Atlanta something to look forward to with hope and to look backward to with pride.

So how do we take the lessons learned at Venetian Hills and our other successful schools—those make/break factors that lead to high-performing schools—and apply them throughout the district?

What are those things we are doing to raise achievement in our schools?

1. We put comprehensive school reform models in all our schools.
2. We gave school teams planning time and put coaches in the classroom to help our teachers improve their delivery of instruction.
3. We aligned our curriculum and scope and sequence with the Georgia Performance Standards.
4. We gave teachers and school leaders the tools to analyze student performance so they can continually adjust instruction.
5. We recruited high quality principals and invested in principal training to help them become even more effective instructional leaders.
6. We put together school reform teams that provide cross-functional support to schools under the leadership of high performing executive directors of schools.
7. And, finally, we targeted our resources to help our lowest performers.
Because nearly 75 percent of our students qualify for free and reduced-priced lunches which is an indicator of low socio-economic status, we often are called on to help solve problems that many of us take for granted.

When kids don’t show up for school, we call them, when they don’t show up the next day, we pay a visit to their home to see what the problem is and help them find a solution.

If a child can’t see the blackboard and the family can’t afford to buy glasses, then we intervene and get the family what it needs. If they can’t pay their utility bills and they don’t have any electricity, then we help the family get the help they need. When they are sick, we refer them to appropriate health agencies.

The best example of all that we are doing to improve student achievement in Atlanta Public Schools is our signature reform initiative, Project GRAD. It is the major driver in the success of our reform work in our elementary schools.

Project GRAD, which is in about one-third of our schools, has proven that the problems facing inner-city school systems can be overcome with the right resources, strategies and school-community collaboration.

I’m pleased to report that Project GRAD scholars currently are enrolled in 49 colleges and universities throughout the country.

All of our Project GRAD schools are making extraordinary gains in student achievement. From the period 2003 to 2007, graduation rates for Project GRAD high schools have dramatically improved. In fact, all three schools now exceed the national average for urban schools:

Carver from 23% to 66%
South Atlanta from 37% to 74.7%
Washington from 62% to 86.8%
The questions before us today are:

1. How do we continue the transformation of all elementary schools so our students don't just meet standards, but exceed them?
2. How do we accomplish a similar transformation of all of our middle and high schools?

Last year, 71 percent of our middle schools made AYP and three schools came off the Needs Improvement List. We are proud of these achievements but not satisfied. So what else can we be doing?

We've started our middle school transformation this year by opening up two single gender academies to dramatically change one of our lowest performing middle schools – The Benjamin S. Carson Honors Preparatory School, formerly known as West Fulton Middle School. We have opened The B.E.S.T. (Business, Engineering, Science and Technology) Academy at Benjamin S. Carson for boys and The Coretta Scott King Young Women’s Leadership Academy for girls.

Why single gender? The research is clear.

- Some students pay more attention in class when they don’t have distractions from the opposite sex.
- They experience more leadership opportunities that result in higher aspirations and they more likely will attend college.
- And boys and girls learn differently and teachers and administrators can better address those styles when students are grouped homogenously.

I want to salute our partners in this work. The 100 Black Men of Atlanta, the Atlanta Cluster of the Links, Inc. and Morehouse College, Spelman College and Agnes Scott College - they are all working diligently to provide tutors and mentors and other supports for our students.
We invite you to visit these schools at any time that is convenient for you. When you see firsthand the phenomenal work that is going on day in and day out in our classrooms, we hope you will think about joining our corps of volunteer mentors and tutors.

We are not stopping our transformation of the middle schools with the opening of the two single-gender schools. We have appointed an executive team that is exploring different models of delivering educational services to middle school students.

I’ve asked the team to be innovative, think outside the box, look at programs across the country so that our new middle school models will be research based, built on data and represent best practices.

We are taking a look at magnet models and themed academies. We’re exploring organizational structures, services being provided to students, and issues around curriculum, instruction and assessment. We’re talking with our key stakeholders—parents, students, teachers, principals and community members — and using that information to help us develop programs that will meet the specific needs of our students and their families.

We intend to have a middle school transformation plan in place by June of 2008 with timelines and budget similar to the High School Transformation Plan and a specific plan for the transformation of each middle school.

Now, I want to take a minute now to give you a pop quiz.

Once a teacher, always a teacher and I can't let this opportunity go by without administering at least one test during our time together today.

Which way is this bus traveling — To the left or to the right? All of you who think it’s going to the right — raise your right hand. Thank you. All of you who think it’s going to the left — raise your left hand. Thank you.

Preschoolers throughout the United States were shown this picture and asked the same question. Ninety percent of the pre-schoolers gave this answer.
"The bus is traveling to the left." When asked, "Why do you think the bus is traveling to the left?" they answered: "Because you can't see the door to get on the bus."

Our preschoolers and kindergartners are a lot smarter today than we were when we entered school. We know that higher-level thinking and analytical skills are required for our students to be successful in the new global economy.

To that end, we know it is critical that we provide our students with strong mathematics and science skills. A recent report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, entitled "Tough Choices or Tough Times," noted: "There will be no success for the country unless we are among the top two in technology in every industry in which we hope to be a major player. That requires us to be among the very best performers in international comparisons of mathematics and science achievement."

I told you last year that we had to focus on implementing our mathematics and science initiatives if we were going to move up the mountain. I asked at that time for help with our work, and, as I'm sure you heard yesterday, the General Electric Foundation stepped up to the plate.

To quote one of the most famous taglines in advertising history, "GE - We bring good things to life." That tagline was never truer than it is today.

GE and its Foundation are partnering with the Atlanta Public Schools to bring mathematics and science to life for our teachers and our students. Throughout the years, G.E., through its corporate foundation, has donated millions of dollars to finance education initiatives. The leadership and staff of GE have also donated their time, talents and skills to help the young people of Atlanta and other select cities realize their dreams. The people of GE are true champions of education and we are pleased to have a partnership with them.

Yesterday the GE Foundation awarded $22 million to the Atlanta Public Schools to support our math and science initiatives over the next five years. This award, we believe, is the largest grant ever made to the Atlanta Public Schools
by a private entity. Certainly, it is the largest during my tenure as superintendent.

This award is the result of incredible teamwork on the part of our APS staff and the GE Foundation Team. The Team worked for more than a year to turn our vision for *New Ideas in Science and Math* into reality, and create a plan to truly encourage and support student excellence in these areas. Will all of you who participated in the development of the GE grant please stand and be recognized. Thank you.

Although student performance in science and mathematics has improved in all grades, it is not at levels high enough, or consistent enough, to suggest a truly balanced instructional program in these two areas.

Many of our students will stay in our city and contribute as our future citizens. Others will move on to work across the nation and some will work in other parts of the world. We want our students to be prepared for an unknown future that is full of opportunities and possibilities.

In a city like ours, where major scientific, engineering and research-based universities, technology and aviation-specific corporations and institutions thrive, the jobs of the future, particularly in Atlanta, will require at least two years of college. We believe that improved student achievement in mathematics and science is critical for our students to adequately perform on the local, national and global stages and also for acceptance into and completion of college.

Recently released data from the 2007 State Assessment Program suggests that APS continues a consistent eight-year trend of progress, and demonstrates that teachers, leaders and students are successfully navigating Georgia’s new more rigorous Performance Standards.

In the courses and subjects where the new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) have been taught for two years, the percentage of district students meeting and exceeding the standards on the State’s Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) has improved significantly in all 19 GPS content area tests. The data show that APS students are improving at a faster
rate than students throughout the state, which is very encouraging since one of our goals is to close the achievement gap with the state.

But again, although improvement in mathematics and science was demonstrated this year, overall student performance in these areas still lags behind other subjects. If we are to achieve world-class status or best in class status, our instructional program must be able to consistently move larger numbers of students to proficiency and beyond.

We believe that the GE investment and our comprehensive strategy and approach to improvement in mathematics and science will provide the appropriate "catalyst" for improved student achievement in these areas as well.

While continuing our focus on elementary reforms; strengthening our middle schools, and re-inventing our math and science curriculum and professional development at all grade levels, we also are taking additional steps to complete the transformation of our senior high schools into small learning communities and small schools.

This August, we added two more complexes of small schools-- on the campuses of South Atlanta and Therrell. These new small schools now provide interest-specific learning and career development opportunities for students from these communities, and will build on the successes and lessons learned from the New Schools at Carver.

Speaking of the New Schools at Carver, I am proud to report that early indicators of success are strong and encouraging. All four of the new schools met the academic requirements for AYP, attendance is above 90 percent, students are progressing as planned, and over 85 students have already earned admission and credits at Georgia State University. I am proud to report that our pilot project in high school transformation is working!

While I am on the subject of what's working -- in the October 18th issue of The Economist, there was a very interesting article describing what the world's
best performing school systems - based on PISA scores (Programme for International Student Assessment) -- have in common.

The study, which was done by McKinsey and Company, concluded that schools need to do three things:

1. Get the brightest and best teachers
2. Get the best out of teachers, and
3. Step in when students start to lag behind.

The article asks the question: Don’t schools do all this already? Actually, according the research, they don’t. The article states, and I quote, “If these ideas were really taken seriously, they would change education radically.”

While we continue to bring new ideas, initiatives and restructuring into our schools, we must never for a moment lose our focus on recruiting and retaining high quality teachers.

Lou Gerstner, former IBM chairman, and head of The Teaching Commission on which I served, put it succinctly when he said:

"If we don’t step up to the challenge of finding and supporting the best teachers, we’ll undermine everything else we are trying to do to improve our schools. That’s a conscious decision that would threaten our economic strength, political fabric, and stability as a nation. It’s exactly that clear cut."

- Lou V. Gerstner, Chairman, The Teaching Commission and Former Chairman, IBM

It’s critical that we continue to recruit the best and brightest teachers to come into our classrooms and we must provide the structured support to help them become masters of their craft. Also, we must do everything in our power to
retain these high quality teachers and keep them committed to APS' vision of student success.

Teaching matters and good teachers make learning matter! It is just that simple. We are committed to finding new ways to support our teachers, proposing innovative ways to restructure jobs for teachers; and finding the resources to pay quality wages and salaries to high quality teachers.

Will this be easy? No, the current school funding formulas make this a difficult enterprise. With your help and the help of others, yet un-named, we will redesign the current reward system and structure for teachers and create ways and means to recognize excellence and high quality teaching and learning.

For the past two years, we have been involved in the Santa Cruz Mentoring Model, and feedback from our teachers who have been mentored and those who are doing the mentoring has been outstanding. So this year, as one of our most important initiatives, we have expanded the program to

We will continue to provide extraordinary professional development and collaborative teaching models, create financial incentives to attract high quality teachers to work with children and high school students who require the most time and attention, start having the difficult dialog about reallocating district resources to support high quality teachers, and design incentives that make teaching a respected profession once again.

Atlanta Public Schools is doing some really tough, risky things. There are no models out there to guide our way through total transformation of our urban district. We are in uncharted territory. We continue to need your help and support - to have our community partners stand shoulder to shoulder with us as we continue this trailblazing journey of total transformation.

The APS story of success so far would not have been possible without the help of the many committed people in our community.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize and thank the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event again this year. We are fortunate in
the Atlanta Public Schools to have strong partnerships with our business community, and your untiring support and involvement is greatly appreciated. Thank you.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of the Atlanta Board of Education who are here this morning. None of this, our continued success and growth, would be possible without your constant commitment and the solid position you have taken over the years for continued system advancement. Will our board members please stand and be recognized once again. Thanks to all of you for your time, hard work and dedication to our city’s children.

I must thank our mayor, Shirley Franklin, for her continued support and dedicated leadership. As you all know, she has been an active proponent of public education and has consistently been steadfast in her support of our school system.

Thank you to the president and board of the Atlanta Education Fund. I am looking forward to working with you as we continue on our journey to reposition Atlanta Public Schools as one of the nation’s top performing urban school district.

It is through the support of civic organizations, companies and foundations working in collaboration with the APS staff that allows me to report to you today that the State of the Atlanta Public Schools is solid, - we are climbing the mountain to excellence with great speed, we are staying the course and our future is bright!

The base of support for our efforts is wide and deep, and it is built on values that have, at their very core, the desire to help all of our students realize the American Dream!

We have researched best practices, implemented change and reform initiatives, made calculated improvements, invested soundly and appropriately and raised expectations. All the while, vehemently declaring that all students can and will learn.
As we increase the percentage of students who perform and excel in our schools, we are sending more well-prepared graduates to colleges and universities and eventually into high-pay, high-skill careers that will contribute to a healthy economy for our communities and personal freedoms for our students and families.

Transforming Atlanta Public Schools into a world-class, best-in-class, school system is within our reach. We, here in Atlanta, have the history to prove that we can host the Olympic Games and entertain the world; we have led and changed the direction and vision of America through the civil rights movement; we have created a new city – an international city, the business capitol of the south; and together, we are working to build a new world class education system, one that will make us all proud to support.

The young people we serve are our highest priority. Their safety and education top our list of what’s really important. Their achievement, performance, attendance and behavior matter to us, to them, to their families and to this entire community.

Again, here in Atlanta Public Schools, we literally have the opportunity of a lifetime to become one of America’s highest-performing urban school districts. More and more of our 50,000 students and their parents, our 8,000 employees, and the many communities we serve will support this mission when we engage them.

As Senator Claiborne Pell, who is largely responsible for the creation of the Pell Grants that provide financial aid funds to U.S. college students, has said: “The strength of the United States is not the gold at Fort Knox or the weapons of mass destruction that we have, but the sum total of the education of our children and the character of our people.”

That’s why we’re here. And, together, that’s where we’re going! Last year, I described our journey as a climb up a mountain.
When we take 12 years as the benchmark for total district-wide transformation, we’re almost two-thirds of the way to completing our climb and making history here in Atlanta.

Let’s continue the Atlanta tradition of dreaming the impossible dream, of transforming those dreams into reality, and making the future bright for all our children.

We need your support, we welcome your engagement, and together we will continue to reach new heights on our journey to the top of the mountain.

Thank you.