



January 18, 2010

Markell marks MLK Day

The News Journal

In a speech that focused on improving our schools, Gov. Jack Markell today is delivering the following address at events around the state celebrating the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Here is the text of his speech, as provided by his office:

Dear friends - Each year on this day, so many television and radio stations pay tribute to Martin Luther King by rebroadcasting his "I Have a Dream" speech. It may well be the greatest single speech of the 20th century, one of the few major addresses where the power of God can be heard in its cadence, its echo and its call to action.

And as much as he was one of the great leaders in history, one of the true champions not just of our time but of all time, he was, first and foremost a man of God, humbled in his presence and grateful for the life he was given.

In the last speech Dr. King delivered, the night before his assassination in Memphis, he began by speaking of the opportunity he was given.

He said that, were he "standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now," and were given the choice by God of when, in all of human history to live,

"Strangely enough," he said, "I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy."

"Now that," he said "is a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. It's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars."

While the issues that confront us as a nation today may be quite different than those Dr. King and so many others fought, and marched, and bled to solve; the fact remains that our state, and our nation, and our world have found themselves recently in some dark times indeed.

And that is why we are so lucky to be alive right now. Because it is our challenge, and our opportunity to bring light to this darkness. And we are.

Nowhere can that light shine more brightly than in the hearts of our children and nowhere can we make a greater difference than in our public schools. It is where we, together, can and have been spending so much of our time and efforts and are seeing real results.

It was on this day, last year, that I announced that Dr. Lillian Lowery would be my choice to be our state's Secretary of Education. When I asked her why she wanted the responsibility, she said that improving opportunity for our children was the great moral imperative of our time – and she has filled every moment of her time with that dedication to changing business.

Since this time last year, our state passed new laws to give school districts greater flexibility to meet the needs of the children they serve each day.

We passed new laws to help us recruit great teachers and reward them, and during the last year, we abolished the DSTP and are replacing it with a system that replaces the simple pass/fail system of the past with a measure of how much a student actually learns during the year from their teachers.

During the last week, the day before Dr. King's actual birthday, our state made significant changes in how we measure academic success and what we can do to help children who attend schools that persistently fall short of keeping their promise to their students.

For schools that have not met targets for educational progress in an area for at least two years, the Department of Education will provide a support team and work with the district to create an improvement plan that may include increased use of community partnerships and supplemental services for students, professional development and mentoring, use of family crisis therapists, technical assistance, and performance incentives.

For schools that do not show education progress for three or more years: The Department and district will expand support and evaluate more reforms. This may include replacing school leadership and select staff, providing outside expertise to advise the school, decreasing management authority at the school level, and implementing scheduling changes to increase teacher collaboration time and extend learning time.

For schools that have shown a sustained inability to make educational progress, their districts will be required to make fundamental changes in the school, which may include closing the school, converting the school to a charter school, contracting with a management company, or other major restructuring efforts that will vary depending on the school's particular circumstances.

Under this new way of approaching schools that are falling short for our children, we are developing a "Partnership Zone" program, where the Secretary will select a limited number of schools that have been well below performance targets for several years to partner with the district and the Department to chart a brand new course for achieving student success.

This is not business as usual because, when it comes to our children, business as usual is no longer an option. As Dr. King wrote in his letter from a Birmingham Jail, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Tonight or tomorrow, so many years after Dr. King's great speech before the Lincoln Memorial, Delawareans will be headed down to Washington, DC to give a message to our President Barack Obama and his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. It is a message endorsed by parents and grandparents across our state.

It is a message signed by every single one of our state's school districts, superintendents and teachers unions. It is our submission to the Race to the Top program and it lays out in great detail how seriously we are taking the challenge to give every child in Delaware an honest chance at success. It explains our vision for the future and makes clear that, for us, the stars we see most clearly in the darkness are the lights of our children's unlimited potential.

For this vision to be realized, for children to be able to attend the strongest possible public schools and prepare themselves to meet the great challenges of their age, we need to continue to work together, speak up together, and move forward together.

We can, and we will.

I would like to end with the same call to action that Dr. King made so clear that night in Memphis:

"Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God, once more, for

allowing me to be here with you."
