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Conference brings together government, educators

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The University of Delaware hosted "Vision 2015 and Delaware's Race to the Top", an educational conference to discuss the next stage of Delaware's plan to create the best schools in the world by 2015. The event was held Tuesday at Clayton Hall, off New London Road and featured guest speakers Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals, chair of Vision 2015, who discussed "Progress to Date and What's Ahead"; Lillian Lowery, secretary of the state Department of Education, who spoke on "Delaware's Strategic Plan for Public Education and Race to the Top Goals"; Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, keynote speaker; and Gov. Jack Markell.



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

Vision 2015, championed by the Rodell Foundation and supported by a broad segment of the business and education communities, is Delaware's plan to transform its public education system to a world-class entity. It focuses on student achievement, fairness, and accountability, and sets high expectations for every child and educator. It further states: To support these expectations, Vision 2015 is working to implement six major system reforms: setting high sights; investing in early childhood education; developing and supporting great teachers; empowering principals to be great school leaders; encouraging innovation and requiring accountability; and establishing a simple and fair funding system.

Vision 2015 has not been met with universal praise, with some critics claiming it is too expensive and vague. Government funding has been scarce, even in good times.

Duncan spoke of the federal government's commitment to elevate America from its 15th spot of the most educated countries in the world and that schools must be evaluated from the top down in determining teacher support, parental interaction, and student involvement. Duncan told the audience of educators and government officials that leadership is needed to not only build strong school communities, but also to weather the tough times.

The focus of America's education system is not achieving high test scores, the Secretary said, but in getting students advanced beyond their current levels.

"Take a student who is three years behind their current year. If a teacher can advance the student two years in their studies, that teacher is a hero."

Duncan also talked about how teachers and principals need to encourage current students to complete their higher education to be able to compete in the world market. He stated that, nationwide, 30 percent of students that start 9th grade do not finish 12th grade. In minority groups, such as African-Americans and Hispanics, that number is 40 percent or more.

The Secretary concluded by reiterating the commitment of the Obama administration in elevating education across the board to ensure that America's workforce is qualified to fulfill the jobs of the 21st century.

Governor Jack Markell's remarks centered on the unique position Delaware holds in organizing multiple agencies to achieve a single goal.

"A system that walks away from teachers and students stuck in schools that might be failing or that prescribes changes that may look wonderful on a whiteboard or position paper but are not practical in the classroom. But as we all know, in Delaware nothing needs to be impossible. We can move more quickly, act more decisively and work more collaboratively than others – but only if we are committed to working together – school-based personnel and business, teachers and parents, the State Department of Education, district administrators, and local school boards – every stakeholder needs to be aligned with the same vision, which I believe is this: By placing our children's needs first and foremost, Delaware schools will produce students prepared to succeed. Those students will learn in schools staffed by highly qualified teachers who are passionate about their profession and are managed by administrators that offer inspiration and collaboration, access to innovation and useful assistance."

Markell concluded his speech by emphasizing that Delaware is well-positioned for attaining tremendous growth in student achievement and that Delaware has a huge advantage over other states with the collaboration of its teachers and the business community.

"While some like to paint huge divisions between many of the players, I have learned something over these last many months: When it comes to improving Delaware's schools, we all have much more in common than we have differences. Let's find those commonalities. Let's debate those differences. And let's work together on an agenda that will allow us to say that we provided our children with the opportunities that they so richly deserve."

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