

**Remarks for the Washington Literacy Council Graduation
October 2, 2010**

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Congratulations! You --- the graduates of the Washington Literacy Council whom we celebrate today --- you are champions! You have triumphed over considerable odds in your drive to become powerful women and men. There is no greater power than the ability to read, to write, to communicate effectively and persuasively. With this power, you can change lives for the better --- your own lives, the lives of your children and families.

You are graduating in a moment of change and some controversy for our city, and much of the debate focuses on education. I've spent most of my professional life in education. While most of my experience has been at the college and graduate school level, because our students come from the K-12 environment as well as from the community at-large, I have developed some perspectives on the issues surrounding basic education.

There are three key issues that are central to your triumph today:

1. Adult education really matters!

Too much of the education reform debate excludes parents and other adults as the most influential teachers of children. But we know from years of research that the parent's educational levels will have a great impact on the child's ability to achieve. When parents read to their children, children are more likely to do better in school.

Certainly, it's no secret in this room that adult illiteracy is a massive problem in the District of Columbia where, by some estimates, 35% of adults cannot read --- a number that has been reduced a bit today by your own success. But the fact remains that in a city that also boasts the highest rate of college degrees among metropolitan areas in the nation --- more than 47% of DC residents have bachelor's or master's degrees --- we also have one of the highest rates of adult illiteracy and poverty.

This scandalous situation is made worse when education reformers focus exclusively on K-12 education to the exclusion of adult education. While classroom teachers are important, of course, the other adults in a child's life might be even more important when it comes to early childhood learning. We need stronger advocacy for the inclusion of adult education opportunities in any long-term educational reform program for the District of Columbia.

2. Poverty matters!

The educational divide in our city that I cited above --- the bimodal literacy chart that shows more than 47% of adults with degrees and more than 35% who can't read --- is a direct product of poverty. In addition to ignoring the need for more emphasis on adult education, education reformers too often deny the impact of poverty on educational opportunity, claiming that poverty

is just an 'excuse' rather than a debilitating social condition that continues to be a shameful symptom of our nation's even deeper sins of racism and classism. Poverty does not exist because people don't try hard enough. Poverty exists because mainstream public policy and social structures have excluded parts of the population from full participation in the economic engines of success, including good schools, safe neighborhoods, adequate housing, ready access to affordable health care and child care, and, of course, the jobs that will pay a living wage.

A census bureau report released last week revealed that 43% of Black children in DC live in poverty, an increase of 12% since only 2007 when the rate was 31%.

In that same period of time, since 2007, the District of Columbia got a new baseball stadium, many new recreation centers and, thankfully, new school buildings, and many neighborhoods continued the "gentrification" that urban planners say is the hallmark of a thriving city. But baseball and bike paths bypass the deeply rooted protracted problems that foster poverty and illiteracy in too many places in our city. Over the years I've had occasion to ask several successive mayors what their plans are to attack the poverty problem, and each one quickly changed the subject to investments that will keep middle class and upper class taxpayers here, while leaving the problem of poverty languishing in the far eastern corners of the city.

3. Self-determination is essential!

All of which leads to my third point: we can't rely on the political system to address poverty effectively, and the school reform movement is unlikely to unravel its own philosophical debates any time soon. But in the best American tradition of empowered citizenship, we have one important part of the solution right here today: self-determination!

There is no weapon more powerful than an individual's determination to improve his or her circumstances through acquiring better educational skills in order to participate more effectively in the economy. Your own self-determination, along with the dedication of the volunteers who work with the Washington Literacy Council, makes your triumph today so much sweeter and more durable. You have proven to yourselves, your families, your communities that you can succeed in spite of whatever barriers were in front of you at the beginning. You now know that you can keep succeeding, equipped as you are with the foundation to keep moving forward.

I hope that many, even most, of you will decide to keep going in your educational attainment. Get your GEDs, find a local program that will take you to the next level of learning --- a program that specializes in preparing you for particular kinds of work, or a college program that will open new pathways for continuing learning.

At Trinity, both on our main campus in northeast DC and in our program at THEARC in southeast, we have hundreds of adult learners like you who started out with some trepidation, uncertain of the future, but absolutely determined to succeed. We have women and men today in our classrooms who, while clearly skeptical of their abilities at first, are learning about supply and demand curves, how to read balance sheets, how to create a statistical analysis, deconstruct a Shakespearean play or write a business plan. Some started with an associate's degree, unsure of

whether they could ever write a college paper or pass a math exam; some are now earning their MBAs and thinking of future positions as teachers or executives or entrepreneurs.

Nothing is impossible for an individual who embraces the transformative power of learning. Today, you prove once again the wisdom of the old adage that 'Failure is impossible.' You have become beacons of hope and success for your families and communities. May your journey in learning continue to excite you, challenge you, inflame your imaginations and enrich your lives.

Congratulations!