

2016 MABE Annual Conference

Text of Remarks by Past President Verjeana M. Jacobs

All across Maryland, school districts have started the 2016-2017 school year and next year we will do so after Labor Day with yet another opportunity to prepare our students for the world that awaits. As students fill school buses, walk to neighborhood schools, and arrive at the school building to hear the infamous bell starting the school day leading students from one class to another and the final bell, prompting the return home ---- school is back in session.

Approximately 870,000+ students represent Maryland's public school population. These are **our students**. Nearly 12% receive special education services; 7.4% are English Language Learners; 42% are eligible for free and reduced meals because of the family's income relationship to poverty.

And so what is happening out in the world *that effects our students and classrooms?* In addition to bringing their individual talents, many children come to school clothes clean, supplies purchased. They come from homes that have access to the internet, access to educational tools, they get help with their homework, and they are ready to learn.

For others, not so much.

We *also* have many students across the State entering our schools unprepared and unequipped to learn... in many ways that are outside their control and those coming from conditions of poverty face many, many additional hurdles unknown to their classmates or frankly to their educators. This reality makes our jobs definitely more challenging.

I'm not here to talk about the challenges that educators face teaching to the varied academic needs of **all** of our worthy students, rather I want us to focus on the choice we as Board members have to make an incredibly positive impact on students' educational experience or we can add to the long list of negative factors by making policies and weakening accountability that contributes to inequalities students already face.

The world around us has and is changing dramatically. Hanging on to traditional methods of educating students with curriculums that favor students who have had previous exposure to learning opportunities is quite frankly failing many students and leaving them unprepared, and of course, the unfortunate singular focus on grades and test scores singularly fails our students.

Each year in September, we commit to producing students who are equipped with the 21st century knowledge and skills needed to excel and each year in June our high school graduates are the pride of public education – they exemplify the promises we've made to the community. Maryland's 2015 graduation rate was more than 80% and by many standards that is not so bad, darn good actually....but what about the nearly 20% that are not graduating from high school and we know what happens to them...

How many are in your district?

And so as leaders of our respective school districts we have an obligation to connect with the realities faced by the children we serve....

And so how do we connect with others who have different life experiences....?

WE CONNECT IN OUR HUMANITY....IN OUR DELIGHT AND LOVE OF THE CHILD AND OF THEIR POTENTIAL.

So let's think about how we connect with the children we serve?

Let me make it a bit more personal ----

I'd ask you to take a minute and close your eyes – picture for a minute an individual child.....now since our natural inclination is to view the child we most likely identify with, maybe who looks like us, may be of the same socioeconomic status

I need you to change that picture and view the child that you wouldn't normally connect with... these are the silent kids...the 20%ers who right now are not making it. **We are their voice....or are we...are we also silent?**

We are not the voice for just 80% of the kids but the voice for each and every child, 100% of them and in some cases.... their only voice...

that is our work and that is the work that MABE challenges us to achieve....

In the service of serving children, it must always be our business NOT TO become comfortable and complacent that any percent of children...that any child is being left behind.

Here, today there are children in our school districts ---- at each education level – elementary, middle, high - who are not achieving academic success and --- **that** is our responsibility.

Recently you may have seen a news report that went national of a Prince George's County school bus engulfed in flames and the hero school bus driver who saved the lives of the 20 *elementary school children* by getting them quickly off the bus when the fire started. Not only did bus driver Renita Smith get all of the children safely off the bus, but as the bus was burning, Ms. Smith went back onto the bus to make sure she didn't leave any child behind.

At a ceremony a week ago last Tuesday to recognize Ms. Smith for her heroic actions, one of the students on the burning bus, Mikhailis, age 6, turned to bus driver Smith and said, "Thank you for saving my life."

What a difference can one bus driver make? How about us? What difference can one board make? What a difference can you as an individual board member make?

Indeed *it is* the PROMISE, HOPE, and OPPORTUNITY for each individual child that we are responsible for....right, it is *our* responsibility to give the children, *our scholars*, the tools so that they can achieve and reach their potential.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO AS BOARD MEMBER

So what is truly our role? Boards of Education exist to serve children....

And so I challenge us all, not TO accept status quo....

We must do our due diligence, don't stick our heads in the sand....for it is not about us and our positions...

Sometimes we have to feel the discomfort in order to change...

With the political climate we are in, where words don't match facts... and facts don't match outcomes....what do our constituents say about us?

How does a board of education effect change?

We effect change by keeping close to our hearts and our minds WHO we serve....children..... (picturing that child....remember)

We effect change by keeping in mind during our discussions and decisions regarding priorities that while for some children their greatest dilemma is what brand of computer or cell phone or other technology they will have, or which sport or instrument to play.....while others are faced with hunger and homelessness and some even violence all while trying to learn basic reading and math skills. We recognize that some of our children are courageously experiencing overwhelming circumstances that we have never had to face, and that they are forced to face these circumstances at such a young age.

We effect change by saying "No more will I tolerate a 2-tiered system one for the privileged and the other for the underprivileged and that I will do more than say it, I will act on that commitment." The privileged who get the more experienced teachers, better resources, newer school buildings, quicker repair response times, active PTAs with ability to raise funds, and "the other for the underprivileged" in our system who consistently get less of all that and more.

We accept all to easily excuse that parents are not present, that they do not create a home environment conducive to learning, that they use the school system as their child care and are not involved in their child's life.....sometimes very true...but...

If kids come to us from strong, healthy functioning families, it makes our job easier. If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important.
-Barbara Colorose

AND not only do we need to effect change on our local district level, we need to stay focused on education issues at the state level through MABE.

MABE

A core part of the Maryland Association of Board's of Education's vision is that MABE, serving Maryland's Boards of Education for almost 6 decades, ***is and has been a champion for public education*** in Maryland. Our mission is to provide members a strong collective voice to support local school board governance ... We know what we do well...awesome...and each year we come to the annual conference, we reacquaint with our colleagues from across the State and we hear some from great, inspiring speakers...

We are doing the hard work, gosh knows these past several years, I've seen the dedicated commitment of those I mentioned earlier and many others, so you can imagine my shock this week when I was in the company of some of Maryland's high ranking officials...in Annapolis, who have significant responsibility for public education in the State...our conversation included a reference to MABE.

Guess what folks, they never heard of MABE.... I'm not kidding, never heard of us, the Maryland Association of Boards of Education.

Well of course these people had to be aliens...from God knows where...but of course they were not...well maybe they were but... we could sit and chalk them up to being from another planet. Or the shock that I felt, and I imagine you too, can be our wake-up call that we need to be more effectively and pro-actively communicating a sense of urgency on behalf of the children who are not doing well and other important education issues being considered by the State...our children deserve no less. It is the 20% where we MABE could improve...do more....strive for.

And so I ask are you ready TO CONNECT WITH THE CHALLENGE? Go back to your individual school district's and effect change by holding ourselves and the school system accountable to the children --- to individual children who come to us with additional challenges..."it makes our job more important".

And at our upcoming November Board of Directors meeting, come prepared. We're going to be talking about equity – so between now and then become more strongly connected to the children in your district who are not making it. Understand more fully who they are and what their issues are.

Come with both your politically correct and non-politically correct reflections about this issue to help guide our full, robust discussion as to what equity looks like and how to ensure it in your district.

As Maryland students fill our classrooms every day, I ask you **to connect with the challenge** --- defy boundaries, reject limitations and open a worldview for every child. It takes courage, audacity, and grit but if not school boards, then who?