

Belmont Public Schools
Back-To-School Address
September 6, 2011
Thomas S. Kingston, Interim Superintendent

[SLIDE 1: TITLE]

Good morning.

Because I have been Belmont's interim school superintendent only since July 1, it is, perhaps, presumptuous of me to welcome you back to a new school year since the greater majority of you have been colleagues within the school system much longer than I; but let me presume, nonetheless, to grant us all a hearty welcome back to our profession and our vocation.

Some of you may know that I retired last June as superintendent of the Chelsea Public Schools, a hard-pressed inner-city system where 85% of the students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch and where 82% of the students come from homes where English is not the first language—a system just like Belmont's, right! **[Slide 2: RESUME]** What you may not know is that my career spans a dozen different jobs from English teacher in a wealthy consolidated high school district in north

suburban Chicago, through more than a decade in the federal government, to seventeen years in Chelsea during and after the city's partnership with Boston University.

[SLIDE 3: NISP] Although I retired from Chelsea, I had determined not to retire from our profession but to remain active as a coach within the new and evolving state program for training and inducting new school superintendents in Massachusetts. When an invitation to apply for the interim superintendency here in Belmont arose last spring, I entered my credentials because of my desire to draw upon as wide an array of experience in Massachusetts so that I might be as productive as possible within the new coaching program. Admittedly, I have a personal professional development interest in learning all I can while leading in Belmont. In my series of interviews, I came to admire the district's past leadership, to respect the character and talent of the Belmont School Committee, to appreciate the depth of talent and skill within the district's professional ranks, and to apprehend the intense

challenges of a district that has consistently been perceived to be one of the top twenty performing school systems in the Commonwealth.

[SLIDE 4: ENTRY] One of the extended, planned activities in which I am currently engaged is a series of conversations with almost anyone willing to talk—town leaders, parents, new professionals, students. In fact, I will want this fall to set aside some time in the schools to meet with you, with students, and with parents.

[SLIDE 5: STABILITY] I take as my charge from the Belmont School Committee, and, indeed, from the parents and citizens of this community, to do my best to help all of us maintain the stability of a system well known historically for its excellence, and to work with the broad community to maintain and obtain the resources required for protecting that excellence. I understand and empathize with the pain and insecurity that this professional community had to endure last year during very difficult conversations about a budget in constrained

economic times, and I truly believe that both town leaders and we in the school department wish to do all we mutually and collegially can do this year to avoid erosion of educational quality, dissipation of morale, and the dissolution of good faith and good will.

There are notable achievements of the Belmont Public Schools to embrace and acknowledge: **[SLIDE 6: WELLINGTON EXTERIOR]** There is a new, beautiful, and environmentally exemplary school building—the Wellington—that will welcome students tomorrow morning; the state testing results demonstrate once more the outstanding quality of the educational program and concomitant excellence of teaching that exist in this town; the respective bargaining units and unions have cooperated with immense good faith to ensure that the district retains its exceptionally well-qualified professional and support personnel within what we all recognize to be restrictive resources; **[SLIDE 7: BELMONT HIGH]** Belmont High School has earned the distinction from *US News & World Report* of

being one of the nation's best-performing secondary schools; and families continue to move into Belmont in large part because of the earned reputation of its schools. Our new additions to the professional staff represent the continued attraction the district has for talent and intelligence.

Let me now answer for you a question I've had to ask myself: What do all these facts mean for the work of an interim superintendent; in short, for the time I reside as the chief executive officer of the Belmont Public Schools, what is my presumed and assumed charge?

[SLIDE 8: HIPPOCRATIC OATH] First, I believe the Hippocratic Oath bears repeating: Do no harm! I do not intend simply to keep a seat warm for an eventual successor, but I also will do my best to avoid creating any restrictive shackles for her or him, or to divert or derail us from the district's continuous improvement goals.

[SLIDE 9: STRATEGIC PLAN] Second, the district has an admirable and aggressively ambitious eighteen-month strategic plan. I intend for all of us to honor that plan, to continue to find ways of measuring the progress we make to realize the six broad goals. To do so requires us to continue the work of the professional learning teams, to endow the district leadership council with authority to guide and amend initiatives, and to respect and implement the respective school improvement plans.

[SLIDE 10: NEW TEACHERS] Third, there will this year be no new initiatives, no addenda, only functional amendments and adjustments in accord with the strategic plan. We will move forward with the educator evaluation planning and discussions; we will support the professional development of all of us through refinement and revisiting the work of the professional learning teams; and we will extend our efforts to be ever more reflective and collegial about our work and our accomplishments.

[SLIDE 11: ANGUISH] Fourth, I take to heart the anguish of this past year. The School Committee and town leaders know deeply the pain that professionals in this district have endured. **[SLIDE 12:**

BALANCE] Working together and paying attention to the concerns and worries of all the citizens of Belmont and of the professionals who provide the community's services, we will be striving hard to plan thoughtfully, to be honest and transparent about the resources required to maintain an excellent school system, and to continue to be prudent and diligent stewards of the community's investment in education.

Personally, I believe that education is the primary means for a community to attain social justice. That principle requires us to maintain and protect this school system, to promote among the highest communal priorities educational opportunity while still ensuring the most efficient and effective use of the resources that sustain the enterprise.

Fifth, because I am a coach among such other experienced retired superintendents like Belmont's own Peter Holland, I intend to bring back whatever lessons I can, not just about the superintendency, but about leadership and leadership development, about core instruction, and about proved teaching excellence.

[SLIDE 13: INSTRUCTIONAL CORE] What I believe we must do to maintain the stability of our system and to ensure that we do not compromise the quality of education in this town, what we must do is maintain our focus upon what Richard Elman and others describe as The Instructional Core. Central to our mission, at the center of every school building in this town, and the focus of every classroom, is The Instructional Core: Teachers and Students in the presence of Content. Everything we do, every bit of strategy we employ, every professional discussion and agenda we create should always return to how well we are supporting the continued professional growth of teachers; the academic, social, and emotional growth of children and young adults;

and the high standards and quality of the content with which we engage them.

[SLIDE 14: CLASSROOM] One activity that I will consistently undertake this year is regular classroom visits within our six schools, usually accompanied by one of the building administrators, and usually following the professional rounds model so common to the medical profession. I want all our teachers to understand that I am not their evaluator; I am not the one who writes their annual appraisals. What I do want everyone to understand is that for all of us to assess how well we honor the instructional core and how effective we are at implementing the common core curriculum depends upon our mutual observations and discussions about what students are doing in classrooms and about the tasks they are asked to perform.

No so incidentally, when I visit classrooms, with or without others, I do ask that you let us be as unobtrusive and non-disruptive as possible.

Please don't stop everything to introduce me to the class. I don't need reverencing! Of course, if children start pointing and shouting "Stranger Danger," by all means tell them who I am; or if they ask, "Who was that masked man," after I leave, go ahead and tell them. Otherwise, let us be just one more set of adults in the building.

I do have one abiding desire, a desire I hold when I teach, a desire I use as the litmus for the overall assessment I make about classes, schools, and programs.

[SLIDE 15: NATHAN]

Here, folks, is our client, our patient, our student. Here, folks, is an eager kindergartner sitting at his new desk on the first day of school. He is very real to me because this is a picture of my grandson Nathan on his first day of school last week. My abiding desire in every district I have

served is for every classroom and every school to be one where I would readily be happy—and, indeed, proud—for him to be attending.

[SLIDE 16: MUSIC] Nathan's dad, my son Andrew, is a jazz musician, among other things. In a published conversation about jazz, Andy describes the jazz ensemble as a group engaged in a collective project, a project no one musician owns. The project does not work when one musician dominates or tries to dominate; it only works when each musician works off the others and focuses on the common activity—the jazz improvisation. When the work is done well, Andy says, the effect can be transcendent.

[SLIDE 17: SCHOOL STUFF] Teaching, too, is both skill and art; and we teach best when we, too, like a successful jazz ensemble, work together and collegially towards the common goal of an effective instructional core. The result can be as transcendent for us as it must also be for our students.

I wish us all a highly successful school year. I await eagerly the opportunity to visit you in the schools, and I will be hoping to have many opportunities to explore our work in conversations together.

Thank you. And, please, treat every child as someone's grandson or granddaughter!