

Thank you so much, Dr. Washington.

I am very honored to speak with you this morning as you close a very successful 40th Anniversary conference. This is special for me, too, since I was your Governor 40 years ago and we have worked together and been friends ever since.

Speaking of when I was Governor, one of our conferences was in Nashville and we attended a session held at the Grand Ole Opry. Many of you are too young to remember Minnie Pearl – a beloved country performer. Minnie told us that people ask her how she is so effective in reaching out to audiences. She said she simply looks out at the audience . . . and loves them . . . and they love her right back.

Now, I can't see each of you this morning but, being education leaders throughout the state and some beyond, I truly love and respect each of you . . . and hope you will try to love and respect me – and each other – right back.

As we all know, we are experiencing a very troubled period in the history of our great country. The Coronavirus continues to have a negative impact on our health and our economy. Many of our people are unemployed and their families are struggling. And on top of our many COVID 19-related difficulties, we have been experiencing a national response to the tragic killing of George Floyd, an African American in Minneapolis.

This and other tragic killings have brought about a major public reaction, nationally and internationally. The issue of racial inequity and police reform will be with us for some time – and the issue calls for some clear response.

You may be interested in an opinion piece on this subject that I recently co-authored with Don Gordon, the Executive Director of the Riley Institute. It was published in the Charleston *Post and Courier* on June 16, five years from the date of the horrific Mother Emanuel AME Church tragedy. (https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/commentary/commentary-we-must-act-now-to-dismantle-structural-racism/article_78cf25ba-acf8-11ea-be4d-2b9b43c62182.html.)

So, now, in the midst of all of these troubles, each of you shoulders a piece of our state and national responsibility to educate our children . . . and prepare them for what we hope will be a peaceful and healthy life.

Accomplishing this leadership challenge will take real commitment and courage on the part of our school administrators and other school leaders.

Hemingway defines courage as “grace under pressure.” That is a worthwhile goal for each of us . . . “grace under pressure” . . . especially as we deal with the turmoil and the pressure of our time.

As I thought about the theme of this conference – *Developing School Leaders* – several books I’ve read recently came to mind.

One is co-authored by my Undersecretary of Education in Washington, Dr. Marshall Smith, who is a very brilliant and caring educator. He also is married to a now-retired public school principal.

Mike, as he is best known, was Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University when I asked him to join me at the U.S. Department of Education. He and a colleague, Jennifer O’Day, previously had worked together at Harvard and can be credited with creating the so-called “Standards Movement” – which I strongly supported, as Governor and then as Secretary and since.

Even though the standards movement often became somewhat mis-understood and mis-used over subsequent years, Mike and Jennifer got us – as a nation – thinking about teaching and learning to high standards for all children.

Just last year, Mike and Jennifer wrote a new book entitled *Opportunity for All*. It opens with a discussion about the San Bernardino, California, School District in the year 2016.

At that time, the city was described by the press as “a broken city.” Of the 100 largest cities in America, San Bernardino ranked as the second poorest – second only to Detroit. The city’s poverty level was well over 40 percent, and the city was five years into bankruptcy.

But even in those difficult times, San Bernardino’s civic and community leaders banded together in a collective effort to strengthen their public schools. They realized that this was necessary to strengthen their city . . . their struggling city.

The San Bernardino Schools Superintendent, Dale Marsden, spoke at an important community meeting and opened with this remark.

“Our journey starts and ends with leadership. Leadership matters at every level. From the boardroom

to the classroom to our city council, to our local, state and national governments, even to the seat you are in today . . . your leadership matters, your engagement matters. We want you to leave today with this city in your heart.”

Marsden’s leadership made a huge difference in the major improvements that subsequently occurred in the San Bernardino schools – all beginning in this public meeting under the banner, *Making Hope Happen*.

But, for hope to flourish, people had to see concrete possibilities for change toward improvement. For this, Marsden turned to neighboring school systems that – despite their challenges – had made a significant positive impact on outcomes for their traditionally under-served students.

This is the first point of effective leadership that I want to make this morning. Do not hesitate to call on other school districts for help – and be willing to help others when you are called upon. Utilizing other school districts’ examples of success is a mark of strength of leadership – not a weakness. It can quickly ignite a spark of hope in your own struggling schools.

San Bernardino’s own clear progress has kindled that spark into a flame. It has enabled the development of a growing group of partners to join and contribute to the improvement effort.

When I am asked for the one thing that I’d suggest to improve a school district or an individual school, my response is to provide leadership for collaboration – work together and share ideas and strengths with others. Just as collaboration with other superintendents can help improve your school district, so can collaboration within your district or school.

Strong superintendents and other district leaders will work jointly with principals, teachers and staff, as well as parents and students. In the individual school, a strong principal knows that teacher leaders and student leaders – along with parents and community leaders – can make a very positive difference.

Before I go further, let me acknowledge that leadership is much more complicated today than in earlier times. I am well aware of that, which makes me all the more grateful for the jobs you all do.

Another book I’ve enjoyed recently is titled “*Nuance – Why Some Leaders Succeed and Others Fail*.” It comes from a Canadian, Michael Fullan, who advises policymakers worldwide.

Fullan identifies the characteristics of the new kind of education leader that will be required in our increasingly complex society – one who can get beneath the surface and help us understand and leverage deep change for the better.

He calls such people “nuanced leaders” because they first learn and grasp how things work in the current system. Then – and only then – they think and work with others to figure out how to make the system work better.

They do not make change merely for the sake of change – they make change for the sake of lasting improvement.

For effective change, then, the true leader carefully and thoughtfully must analyze the current system and all of its parts . . . how do things work in the current system . . . and what things do not work. He or she must see the trees and the forest simultaneously.

There will not be meaningful change in schools or districts unless the leader has nuanced insights and deals with the whole system. This means knowing all about the system as it currently exists and studying the various shades of possible change that would improve the system as a whole. Decisions that require judgment, getting people on board, drawing on local knowledge, ingenuity and commitment require “nuanced leadership.”

As you well know, situations in and around schools are becoming increasingly more complex with each passing day. Fullan observes that conventional schooling and just more of the same will not meet the challenges that face educators and learners of the 21st Century.

Indeed, the fact that all of this major conference – including my speech – is being held virtually is a reflection of the enormous challenges and transitions you already have dealt with so successfully in 2020.

But the good news, Fullan says, is that “nuanced leaders” can teach others to be nuanced. However, we have to get inside the process and break the cycle of surface change. “Surfacers” treat problems as technical – that is, with step-wise solutions.

Nuance, on the other hand, is about new cultures and new ways of thinking and acting. It is not about following a checklist or set of steps. “Nuancers” work with key principles that lead to adjustable actions – “adjustable” being key.

So, what are some nuanced character traits that help build strong leadership. First and foremost, I would say INTEGRITY. If people can't trust you or your word, they will not be willing followers.

COURAGE, as I mentioned earlier, is another essential for successful leadership, especially when it comes to change. I'm sure that each of you has experienced at one time or another that many, or most, people don't like change. Some firmly – and often vocally – downright resist it.

The comic strip character, Dilbert, puts it well. Change is good, Dilbert says. *Change is good . . . YOU go first!*

In addition to thick skin, then, the nuanced leader must have the RESILIENCE to stay the course toward his or her long-term VISION for school improvement. The “course” changes often – and nuanced leaders adjust to the changes.

As we all know, there is no silver bullet in education. But we must have a goal that is determined to be in the best interests of all of our children – and then a plan for achieving that goal. The plan should be comprehensive, not piecemeal, and the timetable for achieving the vision must be reasonable.

Education change does not happen overnight. It takes a nuanced leader with an aspirational goal, a well-thought-out plan to achieve the goal and then consistent implementation. If we believe in the vision, we must have the resilience to stay the course – but, as I've said, always be willing to adjust to changing conditions.

All of this gets us back to the importance of COLLABORATION. But I would add that we must express GRATITUDE – over and over – to those who have collaborated in working toward the goal. It doesn't matter if the participant is another school leader, a local government worker, a grandparent or the school janitor. A nuanced leader will have the HUMILITY to give credit to all who have contributed to the process.

Such strong, nuanced leadership will help us achieve overall education improvement to benefit all children. Importantly, though, a nuanced leader also will help lead through adjustment to temporary disruptions, such as we are experiencing now.

So, as we prepare to close SCASA's 40th Innovative Ideas Institute in a year fraught with difficulties and complexities, let's emphasize using COLLABORATION as a basic strength for our own public school and school district. By working together, we can improve in so many ways. Observing and copying

successful programs and practices of neighboring and other districts and schools, while at the same time sharing your ideas and successes with your neighbors, those will help all of us grow to meet the needs of our 21st Century learners.

That is why you all are participating in this conference – to gain new perspectives and collaborate with peers and experts on the most effective instructional and leadership approaches to maximize student achievement.

I will add that, if you're not already aware of the *What Works South Carolina Clearinghouse* – put together by my Riley Institute at Furman – I urge a visit to the website to learn about many of the successful programs already underway throughout our state. It's a great resource.

In addition to collaborating, become “nuanced leaders” through your understanding of the complexities of our times while you master knowledge of your own school or district system. Become a change agent willing to adjust your actions in response to the fluid conditions you face.

A difficult challenge is before each of you right now. This makes your work more important today than ever before.

As I close, I ask each of you to re-commit to your very serious responsibility – the education of all of our children. That is your duty as school leaders.

Tagore, the sensitive Indian poet, said it this way.

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and found that life was duty.

I acted and, behold, duty was joy.

Thank you so much for what you do. You and your family be safe and healthy ... ready to do your duty this fall ... and delight in personal joy while doing it.

Thank you.