

March 10, 2010

AN OPEN LETTER
TO PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AND ARNE DUNCAN, US SECRETARY OF
EDUCATION

Dear Mr. President and Secretary Duncan:

T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, has been designated by the Virginia Department of Education as a “persistently lowest-achieving school.” Alexandria’s only public high school qualified for this label because our 11th grade Virginia Standards of Learning assessment pass rate for reading last year was 84 percent, and our combined pass rate for three math end-of-course tests (Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry) was 77 percent. These test results place us in the lowest 5 percent of 128 Virginia secondary schools that are eligible for (but do not receive) Title I funding.

Let me first say that there is no argument that our school division can and must do a better job of meeting the needs of all students. Shortly after I started in Alexandria as Superintendent of schools, I publicly presented and discussed our test scores for all No Child Left Behind (NCLB) subgroups with teachers, students, administrators, and members of the community. We acknowledged that while we do an outstanding job for many students, too many students are not making the grade.

We know that we can do better. We know that not all students pass standardized tests or make it to graduation day. We acknowledge that every single dropout is a student whom we have underserved. We pledge to work responsibly, professionally, and as hard as we can to find a way to move from 84 percent of our students passing 11th grade reading tests to 100 percent, and to move from 77 percent of our students passing end-of-course mathematics assessments to 100 percent.

Still, I wonder, when the U.S. Department of Education cast a wider web to identify “persistently lowest-achieving schools,” whether you knew that the catch would include a school like T. C. Williams which:

- Every year sends more than 80 percent of our students to college, many to Ivy League schools.
- Offers 24 Advanced Placement (AP) classes and pays for every student in an AP course to take the exam.
- Offers a curriculum of 188 courses, including organic chemistry and five years of French, German, Latin, and Spanish.
- Is the area’s only comprehensive high school, offering courses leading to dozens of professional certifications, in addition to college preparation, with all classes on campus.

- Is famous for successfully melding one of the most diverse student populations in the country, with students from more than 80 countries, speaking more than 60 languages.
- Provides a laptop computer to every student.

I want to be clear that I am not against NCLB. In fact, I admire its high ideals and its commitment to every child's achievement. However, a school's success should not be measured by standardized tests alone. Its strengths are cause for celebration. Its weaknesses must be identified with transparency, studied from multiple perspectives and remediated. As I walk the halls of T. C. Williams, visit its classrooms, eat in the lunchroom, and meet with TC students in committees, I know that there is a heart to a school that cannot be measured by a single stethoscopic or normative rating.

As we work to transform T. C. Williams High School, we ask that our school and community be treated with the same respect that we offer to each student who works hard but doesn't quite make it. We don't give up on these students. We would never label them as persistently lowest-achieving students. We believe that each of these students has promise, just as we believe that T. C. Williams has great promise and can be among the best schools in America.

Mr. President, when you visited T.C. Williams in the spring of 2008 as a candidate for President, you spoke of hope. You spoke of change. We believed. You inspired our students, stirred their imaginations, and created dreams for many of them. We now invite you back to TC to rekindle that dream with us as we accept your challenge to learn more, to think at higher levels, to be better citizens, to care more about one another, and even to pass more standardized tests.

Mr. President, we are neither a perfect school nor a persistently lowest-achieving one. We are the Titans, proud of our diversity and our tradition of excellence, and equally committed to continuous growth and improvement. We will not rest until every student achieves at high levels and graduates prepared for college, work, and life.

We are the Titans, Mr. President, and we will meet this challenge as we have met other historic challenges.

Sincerely,

Morton Sherman
Superintendent of Schools