

Denver MLK Parade Keynote Speech
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Good morning! Thank you for this humbling honor to be part of a celebration that remembers a man who was one of the greatest American leaders of the twentieth century.

I grew up in the sixties, watching the events of those times – protests against the Viet Nam war tore through college campuses, Harper Lee won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel "To Kill a Mockingbird," Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, we listened to the Beatles and Marvin Gaye, and four hundred thousand people marched on Washington in support of jobs and freedom.

That march, which took place on the 28th of August 1963, was a turning point in American history. The final speaker to stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day, as I know you are all well aware, was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He told us of his dream. He said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Dr. King's words spoken on those steps are some of the most moving ever uttered by one of the preeminent leaders of his or any other generation.

On Jan. 15th, Dr. King would have been 79 years old. His inspiring and eloquent "I Have a Dream" speech was given almost 45 years ago. And sadly, Dr. King was taken from us nearly 40 years ago.

Dr. King devoted his life to issues of justice and opportunity. He showed our nation how systematic injustice was keeping America from living out its promise to the world. He showed us how the lack of opportunity meant that the potential of millions of children could never be realized. He charted a course of progress for us to follow during his lifetime and after his death.

These issues remain vitally important to us as individuals, as a community, as citizens of this country. Not just today, but throughout the year, we must take time to remember Dr. King, to reflect on the progress we have made, and examine what remains to be done.

Dr. King once said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." Today as we remember Dr. King's life, we are also reminded of other individuals inspired by his legacy,

whose tireless exertions, sacrifices and struggles have made our world a better place.

Let's celebrate the leadership of the Honorable Peter C. Groff, who this past month became the first African American state senate president in Colorado history and only the third in U.S. history. As a state legislator, Sen. Groff has passed landmark legislation prohibiting racial profiling. An advocate for children, he passed legislation requiring booster seats for young children, and he has secured tens of millions of dollars to combat health disparities.

Let's honor the late Richard T. Castro, an educational and civil rights activist who was one of Colorado's true champions of disenfranchised communities. At age 25, Representative Castro became one of the youngest lawmakers ever elected to the House of Representatives, a post he held for five terms. As a student activist, Castro was arrested after intervening when police allegedly beat a Latino youth. The incident sparked an intense awareness of relations between the police and the Latino population.

Throughout this incident and others like it, Castro advocated change through education and politics, rather than violence. Castro once said, "Education's role in our society cannot be minimized...It is quite probably the most critical investment a people can make."

Let's reflect on a true lion of the civil rights movement in Denver – Rachel B. Noel. Mrs. Noel became the first African American ever elected to the Denver School Board and the first African American woman to hold an elected office in Colorado. Three weeks after the assassination of Dr. King, Mrs. Noel was reeling from the murder and feeling the need to make a difference. She introduced the Noel Resolution to the Denver School Board, calling for a plan to integrate Denver's Public Schools. Her plan was passed within a month, under a cloud of threat to Mrs. Noel and her family.

When she called for equality of education in Denver schools, Mrs. Noel did it calmly, yet forcefully, because as she said later, "I didn't mind my voice being heard."

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But I won't be telling you anything you do not already know when I say, there is still a divide in opportunity. Dr. King often referred to education as the great equalizer. He said that educating the common man is the secret to success that progressive societies must understand to remain successful.

As an educator, I, too, strongly believe that education is the best equalizer. Education serves as a bridge between despair and hope.

It allows everyone, regardless of their background, to achieve on the basis of merit. And, not to be judged on the color of their skin

We, as a nation, have made great strides in providing opportunity through education access, but we still have a long way to go.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said it herself in May: “In too many of our cities, the reality faced by communities of color and low-income kids is shocking.” Citing urban “dropout factories” and a 50 percent dropout rate for African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, Spellings said, “We must ensure the same opportunities available to kids in the suburbs are available to kids in the city. If we don't, we will most certainly become a poorer, more divided nation of haves and have-nots.”

According to the Education Trust, high school graduation rates are dramatically lower for students of color than for white students. 91 percent of white kindergartners graduate from high school, while only 87 percent of African American and 62 percent of Latino kindergartners ever finish high school.

National trends show that 60 percent of white students entering college graduate, while 41 percent of African-Americans graduate and 47 percent of Latino students will finish their four-year degree. And, graduation by the age of 24 is seven-times greater for high-

income students than it is for low-income students. Does that mean high-income students are seven times smarter? Of course not!

Colorado is a prime example of this disturbing paradox. We currently rank in the top five per capita for college-degree holders, yet we're importing our college graduates. Sadly, Colorado ranks near the bottom in the number of low-income students and those from underrepresented backgrounds who go to college.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems conducted a recent study to determine whether higher education institutions were adequately and equitably funded relative to similar "peer" institutions around the country. This study demonstrated that Colorado institutions with high enrollments of students of color, such as Adams State, CSU-Pueblo, the community colleges and Metro State, were the lowest funded. Unfortunately, this is an unjust extension of white privilege.

A positive development is that ethnic diversity has become the holy grail of colleges and universities; everyone is trying to achieve it. A high-achieving high school student of color is the most sought-after demographic in the college applicant pool. And our more prestigious schools are working to increase their matriculation rates of these students. These institutions are beginning to realize that cultural and ethnic diversity adds to the richness of our education, and that

the perspectives we gain from these varied experiences are valuable tools in life. They are further realizing that supporting the success of these students will contribute to the overall quality of our community, collective culture and economy.

But what about the conventional student of color who graduates from an urban high school and whose achievements are more modest? These are the students -- place-bound, often of limited economic status and whose preparation for college is less rigorous -- who are largely served by our public urban institutions. In sheer numbers, they dwarf the students of color who attend the more prestigious institutions.

Dr. King once said, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically... Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.” Urban low-income and students of color are coming to college with severe academic deficiencies, particularly in the areas of writing, mathematics and science.

Furthermore, many students from economically challenged backgrounds lack college-going family precedent or role models. It is critical that these students have access to full-time faculty of the same ethnic background to serve as mentors, helping them navigate the transition from high school to college. And why shouldn't a low-

income or student of color have the same access to a full-time faculty member as their white counterparts?

We're not living up to the progress that Dr. King envisioned. It is time for change. Achieving the great equalizer—education—is an economic necessity. More education means more income, less unemployment and more civic participation.

As an educator, I have a special obligation to try to make a difference in this area, and I promise you that I will do that. Metro State is poised to meet the social and economic imperatives to educate more low-income and students of color. We will continue to build on our already solid foundation of community programs focused on improving K-16 education for these students.

But the truth is, as educators, we can only do so much. Dr. King inspired Americans to think beyond themselves, look past differences and strive for equality. When we work side by side to serve the community, we bridge barriers and learn that, in the end, we are more alike than we are different. Educators need our communities to work with us to provide equality and opportunity in access and expected experience for all students.

I encourage you to get involved! Turn your concerns into action. We need more voices like those of Peter Groff, Richard Castro and

Rachel Noel. We must confront these disparities in education, and reverse the “dropout factories” that Margaret Spellings refers to. We need to make sure these gaps are not so significant that they, all on their own, predetermine the future of our children.

Engage in the reform of the K-12 and higher education systems. Talk to your city council representative, legislator, neighborhood association, local principals, teachers, and business leaders.

We must keep Dr. King’s vision alive for the next generation. If we each do our share to not only push our society to succeed at educating all children, but to demand it, then we have a real chance to see Dr. King's dream come even closer to reality.

Progress takes time. As Dr. King said, “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle.” Thank you.