STATE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION ADDRESS

"Making a Difference in the Lives of Students"

JON J.P. FERNANDEZ
SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION
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LIGUAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
6:00 PM

Buenas yan Hafa Adai. Thank you for being here tonight.

Let's give the **George Washington High School Color Guard** and our **Liguan Elementary Singers** another round of applause.

Didn't they do a great job?

Thank you also to Principal **Tony Cepeda** and the entire Liguan Elementary School family for welcoming us here to their school tonight.

Also, let's recognize the GDOE Planning Committee, led by Deputy Superintendent **Erika Cruz** along with a team of principals and assistant principals who helped put this event together. Let's give them a hand.

I am grateful to see all of you here today.

What brings us together is not a speech but our unbending commitment to "making a difference in the lives of students."

It would be my pleasure to recognize each and every one of you here, but I would like you to have enough time for dinner.

So let me just take a brief moment to recognize a few special guests.

Governor Eddie Calvo could not join us tonight, but we do want to welcome **Lieutenant Governor Ray Tenorio**. They both helped us get off to a good school year with their adopt-a-school project this year.

Thank you so much.

From the Guam Legislature, I want to thank the Senators who could join us today, especially, **Speaker Judith Won Pat** who has been a strong advocate for the Department, having once been a principal herself.

Also, the Judiciary has been a strong partner in our efforts to keep schools safe, promote positive behavior, and teach our children and our teachers how to identify and respond to bullying in our schools.

Let's recognize Guam Supreme Court **Chief Justice Phillip Carbullido**, **Associate Justice Robert Torres**, and **Judge Kathy Maraman**.

And from the Guam Superior Court, **Presiding Judge Alberto Lamorena III**.

I also want to recognize and thank the Guam Education Board for working with me over these past few months to enable a smooth transition into this job.

Let's acknowledge them, beginning with our chair **Francis Santos** and members **Ron Ayuyu, Mae Camacho, Dr. Jose Cruz, Dr. Anita Enriquez, Barry Mead, Dr. Paul Pineda**, **Joe San Agustin,** and **Rosie Tainatongo.**

Last but not least, please allow me this rare opportunity to publicly say thank you to my parents: **Dr. Juan** and **Gloria Fernandez** – who made my education their priority when I was growing up.

And a big thank you to my wife **Melissa Lamorena-Fernandez** and our two children **Gabriella** and **Zachary**. The three of

them have been my most important supporters each and every day.

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I stand here, honored and humbled to be your Superintendent of Education.

Our Department is comprised of 40 public schools where we currently serve 31,698 students.

We employ 4,000 employees, including 2,100 teachers who work day in and day out to support our children.

We are the largest agency in this government, and our mission is the most challenging and, I would argue, the most important.

Important to our children.

Important to our families.

Important to our community – and to our future.

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I am also honored to be here as a public school parent.

I have a very personal stake in the success of our department.

I too want my children to get a high-quality public education.

To be supported by effective teachers and strong principals.

To be engaged and inspired so that they enjoy learning.

To have the best shot at success that we can give them.

So as I stand here tonight as both superintendent and parent, I want to reaffirm my commitment:

As long as I have the opportunity to serve, I will work hard each and every day to ensure that our public school system puts the interests of our children first – not just my children, but every child who walks through our school doors.

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This being my first State of Education address, let me just be clear about what this is and is not about.

I am not here to offer answers to specific questions about busing, or about bullying, or overcrowding, or the GW double session.

I think I do that on a pretty regular basis.

I am also not here to lay out a detailed 100-point plan for the next five years.

We will get to that very soon, there's no doubt about it.

I want to use this opportunity to lay out the starting point for where we are today and where we hope to go in the near future.

This is not about bells and whistles.

It's about laying a foundation for change, and that foundation must be focused on what we are doing to promote student achievement.

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With that in mind, let me say then that the state of education on Guam is slowly improving but quite fragile.

And we still have a long way to go to meet our goals for our children.

On Guam, it may sometimes feel like we are swimming against the tide in trying to improve our school system, but there are so many people here who continue to work hard at it, no matter how difficult things may seem.

I believe we are finally at a major turning point.

We are beginning to head in the right direction, even if we are still near the starting line.

If we can focus on five key areas, I believe we can make substantial progress for our students in the coming years.

These five areas, which I will address today, include:

- Higher standards and greater focus on student achievement
- Effective teachers and principals
- A more responsive and high-performing organization
- Support for facilities, schools, and classroom needs
- A consistent and sustained path toward improvement

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Let me begin by addressing student achievement.

A couple of weeks ago, I submitted our annual report on the school district's performance.

It is posted online, so I'm not going to walk through too many details today.

I want to talk about the bigger picture.

We know we need to do a better job of increasing the number of students who test proficient on their annual standardized assessments – the SAT-10.

Every year, we see the same thing.

Our first grade students traditionally score the highest percentage in terms of students who rank proficient in Reading, Language Arts, and Math.

But beginning in second grade, we experience a dip in that percentage that continues through high school.

In comparison to the nation, Guam follows the same patterns of dips and high points, except we consistently score lower.

And over time, this performance trend has been relatively unchanged.

For instance, as a district, the number of 4rd grade students proficient in reading was 19 percent five years ago, compared to 19 percent this year.

The number of 8th grade students proficient in math was 7 percent five years ago, compared to 7 percent now.

And just 2 percent of our 12th graders were proficient in math five years ago, compared to 1 percent today.

It's the same thing with our dropout and graduation rates.

Since 2007, between five and seven percent of our students in high school have dropped out of school each year.

Mirroring this, approximately one out of every three students who starts in the ninth grade does not complete high school, putting him or her on a life course that will yield limited job opportunities and result in social and financial hardships.

This traditionally low performance is consistent throughout the district and over time, but we also see some pockets of good news.

We can say that we have seen significant improvements in the schools that have made deliberate efforts to address student achievement.

Several schools over the years have even surpassed the national average in a number of areas, confirming for us that it is possible for our students to achieve at high levels and compete with their mainland counterparts.

I do want to always the schools that are performing – compared to the rest of the district – consistently well or seeing notable improvements over time.

This is not a comprehensive list, so please do not e-mail me tomorrow with your complaints.

This past year, at the elementary level, we saw Agana Heights, Inarajan, Carbullido, PC Lujan and Tamuning do very well compared to schools in the district. Congratulations!

Here at Liguan, a solid finish in the top ten in most grade levels.

At the middle school level, congratulations to Oceanview for being first overall in 6th grade achievement.

Inarajan Middle School -- 1st in 6th grade math and 8th grade science.

Benavente Middle School -- 1st in 7th grade math.

FB Leon Guerrero -- 1st in 8th grade reading and social sciences.

At the high school, George Washington and John F. Kennedy continue to be the school district's top performers in almost every category.

But despite the hard work and improvement in some of our schools, let's acknowledge that our overall district performance has remained mostly unchanged.

Yes, we know there are some factors that contribute to this.

In particular, there are two major issues related to our performance on the SAT-10.

First, our curriculum, instruction and assessment are not aligned.

That is, we know that our content standards and what is taught in the classroom do not always match up with the skills being tested on the SAT-10.

It makes it difficult for teachers to teach to our standards and then expect students to perform well on the year-end assessment.

It is not impossible to align both at the school level, but it requires extra attention and work.

The other related issue is that the SAT-10 test essentially just compares our students' performance against a representative sample of students on the mainland over a particular range of knowledge.

It does not actually inform us whether our students are learning what they are being taught here our classrooms.

Isn't that what really counts?

These two issues are ones that we will be addressing in the future, but we still refuse to use them as an excuse.

The fact is – we have a job to do.

We have to help our students, no matter what it takes.

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As I said earlier, I have great hopes for improvement in the near future.

We have learned from the past and are taking steps to make things better.

One major component of our improvement effort will be the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, a state-led effort supported by the National Governors Association to improve our nation's education standards.

The Common Core, in my opinion, is not just another fad – it is not the next best diet or exercise program.

It's about implementing high-quality education standards that will help children acquire 21st century skills, help them go to college or get a good job.

At this time, forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and three territories (including Guam) as well as Department of Defense Education Activity schools have adopted the Common Core.

I believe the Common Core will raise our standards and set high expectations for our students and our principals and our teachers.

That is what we want.

To challenge our students so they will ready to compete in a more global, sophisticated, and interconnected world.

To challenge our teachers to develop the knowledge and strategies needed to deliver rich content to their kids.

To challenge our principals to be accountable for their students' outcomes.

Over the coming year, we will be spending a lot of time and resources helping principals and teachers become familiar with the Common Core and the changes that will be required in the classroom.

This step is critical so that teachers know exactly what is expected of our students in order for them to meet the standards and can begin designing lesson plans and activities to help get their students the required content.

We are also working to get better-aligned assessments up and running.

This coming spring, we are going to pilot our own criterion-referenced test aligned with district content standards. The full roll-out will be completed by Spring 2014.

Also in 2014, we will roll out the Common Core assessment to test student performance in English, Language Arts and Math.

What you can expect from the Common Core is a more aligned and demanding curriculum for out kids as well as better assessments to tell us whether we are truly teaching our kids what they need to learn.

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Simply improving standards and better aligning our assessments will not get the job done.

Above all, teachers matter.

Teaching is difficult. It's not easy to be out there in the classroom with 25, 30, sometime 35 kids, trying to get them to learn.

I think we need to pause and thank our teachers:

- Teachers who, year after year, pay out of their own pockets to provide basic school supplies for their students.

- Teachers who get to school early, stay late, volunteer during lunch or their prep periods because they are committed to helping our kids.

- Teachers who work hard to communicate and work with parents to help address student needs.

- Teachers who set the very best example through their work ethic, professionalism, attire, attitude and collaborative spirit.

We all know – because we have experienced this ourselves sometime in our past – that the key to success for our students is having an effective teacher in every classroom.

Who are our effective teachers?

Effective teachers believe that every child can learn, that every child has a right to a good education, that every child deserves a chance to succeed.

They know that they, as teachers, have a significant influence on their students' achievement.

Their engagement with students can even mitigate the potential negative effects of poverty, low parental involvement, and other challenges.

Effective teachers are masters of their subject area and skillful strategists in the classrooms where they work.

They adjust to meet the unique learning styles and proficiency levels of all of their students.

As we implement the Common Core over the coming year, we are going to provide support, training, and strategies to help teachers adjust to the changes that the Common Core brings.

This will mean training teachers to understand more clearly what effective teaching "looks like" in the classroom.

We will provide refresher and advanced training for all teachers in their subject areas.

We will focus on opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers to share best practices.

And we will provide teachers with more frequent evaluations, targeted feedback, access to material, and guidance on improving strategies promote student learning.

Through a grant from the National Governors Association, applied for and received through the offices of Governor Calvo, we are now working closely with a team of teachers to develop an evaluation tool to will help us gauge teacher effectiveness.

When we roll out this tool next school year, you will see that it puts student achievement as the central focus of quality instruction.

It will seek feedback through multiple classroom observations by administrators, other teachers, support staff, parents and students.

It will help teachers get a better sense of their progress and what can be done to improve.

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Strong principals are critical as well.

They are my front-line leaders.

I depend on their leadership, problem-solving skills, and ability to build school cultures that are focused on better outcomes for students.

I know we have good principals in our school system.

They are the ones that know and accept that they are ultimately accountable for their students' academic success.

Where principals have been traditionally focused primarily on the school environment, the good ones know that improving instruction and learning is our core mission.

They know that a well-painted facility, improved student discipline, and good school maintenance are important.

But if we get all of this right without improving the school's academic performance, it is like painting a car that has no engine – it may look good, but it won't get us anywhere.

We are asking principals to focus in on the instructional needs of their schools.

To build a school culture where data is used to drive instruction and decision-making;

Where collaboration and professional learning communities are supported;

Where principals look forward to sharing best practices with their peers and are constantly looking for ways to improve.

We are going to make a concerted effort this year to build a stronger and more cohesive principal corps.

Through the principal-led Leadership Academy, we will be asking principals to come together more often to learn from each other, receive professional development, and get targeted support based on their individual skills and knowledge.

We are also going to be more explicit in implementing a mentorship opportunity for inexperienced administrators – an opportunity that will pair them with more experienced leaders.

I would also like to do more to recruit others who are interested in administration so that we can build the "bench strength" that we need to move ourselves forward.

But most of all, I plan to work closely with our principals to ensure that we are shifting our focus collectively towards student achievement.

Sometimes, we don't need extra training, we just need to implement.

Over the next four weeks, for example, I have informed our principal cadre that I would like to meet with them individually to go over, in detail, the SAT-10 results.

How did their kids perform?

What is going to change to improve results?

How will the school address the needs of the kids who are struggling?

What will we do to get our kids prepared for the annual tests?

Too many times, we tend to focus on our school facilities or staffing issues or maintenance.

But what is most important is our students and what we are doing to help them advance.

What is important is instructional leadership and an unrelenting focus on student outcomes.

I also did something else.

I asked my staff to mark off extra time in our FY 2014 budget process so I could have principals explain and defend their budget proposals to me.

Usually, our schools prepare their budgets to meet the requirements of the board-union contract as well as our legislative mandates.

But we never ever get funded at these levels, and we can almost get away with not holding ourselves accountable because of that shortfall.

I have asked principals to add more modest budget proposals, this time focused on issues that relate directly to student success: Accelerating student achievement; strengthening teacher effectiveness; preparing students for college and career; and integrating technology into the classroom.

We need to prepare the FY 2014 budget with a keen eye towards advancing teaching and learning.

I want our principals to help lead the discussion for how we do that.

What might help them, at their school, lead the way?

Extended school day or school year?

Instructional coaches?

More technology equipment and training?

Our principals need to advocate for what they believe will help their students be successful academically.

They need to have a vision for their kids, so I know exactly how they are prioritizing their resources.

My principals know, I hope, that I will continue to be involved at our schools.

That's where the success or failure of our efforts will take place.

I am a big supporter of school autonomy. But I look at that from a performance basis.

For those schools that are doing well, my job is to get out of your way so you can do your jobs.

For those schools that need improvement, please save me a good parking spot at the front.

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If the action is truly in our schools and classrooms, then what is the role of the central office?

Our organizational chart shows a school system that revolves around the central office and the Office of the Superintendent.

This is upside-down.

Our Department must revolve around the needs of our students and classrooms.

We need to facilitate solutions and not "more red tape."

Part of what I am committed to doing is building a more responsive, customer-service oriented agency.

We have a large department and immense responsibility, but that does not mean that we can't answer the phone or be polite or be helpful or provide a timely response.

Our job is to serve our customers – and those are our children and our parents.

What are we doing to make sure that our children's needs are met?

What are we doing to ensure that parents feel welcome to discuss issues related to their children's progress?

What can we do to reach out more often?

I expect all of us to adopt a strong customer-service attitude, and in the coming year, I plan to see our culture be more customer-friendly.

We will establish a mechanism to provide better access to information about our department, divisions and schools.

We will establish protocols for dealing with our customers.

And we will put in place an accountability system where we can "test" ourselves to see if we are complying with our own goals.

In addition to customer service, we have another issue that weighs heavily on us and that is our high-risk designation by the US Department of Education and the requirement for us to have a third party entity manage our federal funds.

I believe we are on a path toward removing ourselves from high-risk within the next year or two.

The US Department of Education visited and had a lot of good things to say this summer.

But we recognize that we are still climbing to the top of the hill --- we are not ready to cruise just yet.

If we are going to get off of high-risk, we need to address our major audit findings, including our inability to monitor and track fixed assets and to effectively account for non-appropriated funds.

We need to complete the implementation of our new financial management system and shore up support staff in the central office and our schools to ensure that we have sufficient internal controls to properly manage our funds.

We need to continue to integrate the new financial management system so we can reduce manual efforts and support future process improvements.

We are primed to go paperless but we need to push beyond our comfort zone, beyond our previous way of operating to get there.

I believe we can become a high-performing organization.

Not many of us believe it yet, but I do.

If we follow through with the full implementation of our financial management system and ensure that we have

properly trained staff, we can lead the way as a financially responsible organization.

We can demonstrate our ability to be tech-savvy, nimble, responsive, analytical and accountable to the public, to our schools, employees and children.

I know that there still some employees who continue to fear change and resist some of the advances.

But we can not turn back.

We are pushing our agency into the 21st century, and we can get there if we stay the course.

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As we strengthen our central office, we need to also recognize the need to deal with our overall resources, specifically in the area of facilities and supplies.

There is no doubt that we have significant facilities issues all over this island.

Schools constructed over fifty years ago without windows.

Overcrowded schools.

Schools that flood every time it rains.

Schools with whole wings or gyms or rooms shut down.

Yes, we have made some progress with the most recent round of school construction at Okkodo, Astumbo Middle, Liguan

Elementary, Adacao Elementary and John F. Kennedy High School.

These newly built or renovated buildings show what we can do collectively when we put our minds to it and when we work with our partners in the private sector and in other parts of government.

But we have a long way to go to ensure that all of our children are able to go to schools that are safe, welcoming, modern and conducive to learning.

This is why it is so important to appreciate the fact that we are now able to address some of our current facility needs using $60 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds:

- By the end of December, George Washington High School will have 16 newly renovated science, technology, engineering, and math classrooms.

- We also will renovate 9 STEM classrooms at Untalan Middle School as part of an entire renovation of the original campus.

- For these rooms, we are purchasing STEM equipment, including lab fixtures, computers, and furniture to help run these classes.

- By this summer, students at Southern High School will finally have a new fine arts center and new gym rebuilt after almost a decade of neglect.

- All of our schools will receive structural and roof repairs. Students at Simon Sanchez will have their gym back, without the puddles.

- All of our schools will receive electrical and fire alarm upgrades. For those of you at Oceanview Middle School waiting for your gym to be opened after eleven years, that day is coming within the next month.

- All of our schools are wired but will also continue to see much-needed upgrades to their data/Internet connections. In the works, an opportunity to offer wireless.

- We also will be pushing the teacher laptops and mobile laptop carts into our schools by the end of this year. It has been a long time coming.

But we have many future needs, especially with some of our schools already bursting at the seams.

We are currently working on an expansion to Okkodo High School to accommodate more students.

John F. Kennedy High School has seen significant growth in its population.

George Washington High School, if it were not for the double session, would be overflowing with over 2,700 students.

Over the coming year, we will be working to create a master facilities plan, using the building-by-building assessment being conducted by the US Army Corps of Engineers, and

incorporating the changing demographics and needs of our students.

We want this plan to help us prioritize to meet the needs of our school system and maximize already scarce resources.

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Aside from the facilities themselves, we also have issues with school equipment and classroom supplies and materials.

In my school visits, principals never fail to point out some of the building or equipment issues that have gone unaddressed, in some cases for many years.

And teachers, without complaint, tell me about the amounts they pay out of pocket to make sure their students have pencils, paper, crayons, the very basics.

I am proud to announce that we are able to use the $2.8 million received from the U.S. Department of Interior this summer to address some of our needs.

Last week, I announced that we are allocating $1 million to schools based on their student populations in order to address some of their equipment and facility issues.

Schools can use their portion of the funds to to improve their playgrounds, buy school and playground equipment, purchase laminating machines, buy benches or meet other priorities.

An additional $1 million will go to schools based on an allocation of $500 per teacher, nurse or counselor to be used towards classroom supplies and materials.

I want this funding to be used to purchase pencils, notebooks, paper, and other materials that should not be coming out of our teachers' pockets.

I know it's not enough, but it's a start.

As we move forward, we need to figure out how our schools are going to be supported to meet our basic expectations of what our children deserve when they enter the classroom.

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Before I close, I want to comment on the sense of direction that I see for the school system.

When I came on board in July, I made it a priority to visit all 40 of our schools within the first month.

And I didn't just drive by.

On each visit, I took time to tour the school grounds, visit with students, and speak with teachers and administrators.

I went from Simon Sanchez to Southern, from Upi to Malesso, from F.B. Leon Guerrero to Oceanview.

On my very first visit, a young man at Simon Sanchez High School raised his hand to offer his suggestion for what was needed to move the school system forward.

His answer sticks with me to this very day.

He said --- CONSISTENCY.

I know what he means.

Since 1991, our department has had 21 different superintendents, a number that I have cited before.

21 superintendents in 21 years!

In the toughest urban school districts on the mainland, the average superintendent tenure is somewhere between two and three years.

How is it that we average one per year?

Education is a long-term proposition.

The full impact of what we do today is sometimes felt years after because children are not light switches --- we cannot just turn them on and off.

It takes time for change to set in, be accepted, and yield results.

Education reform takes patience, commitment and unwavering determination.

When I visited our schools, administrators and teachers would echo this sentiment.

They described the merry-go-round at the top and its impact on stability and confidence within the organization.

They described efforts to implement past reforms and the introduction of new “flavor-of-the-day” programs.

They talked about "hunkering down" until the new leader or new program passed.

We need to stabilize our organization, agree on a path toward improvement, and demonstrate our ability to stay true to that path so we can evaluate our progress and make rational decisions about how to improve our efforts.

The organization must have the capacity and strength to withstand short-term challenges and difficulties in order to promote the long-term goal of improving student achievement.

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When I look at the year ahead, we have so many challenges to address – it's true.

But I am not discouraged.

I see possibility.

I see opportunity.

We are trying to lay a foundation for change, and I've talked about some of what we will be doing in the coming year:

- Implementing the Common Core
- Focusing on Effective Teachers and Principals
- Building a Responsive Central Office
- Addressing the Basic Needs at Our Schools
- Moving Forward in a Sustained Way

We haven't begun to scratch the surface of some other issues that are already a part of the discussion for what's ahead in the near future:

- Maximizing use of data and technology
- Looking at use of instructional time
- Building a system of choice within the traditional school system
- Addressing the needs of migrant learners
- Addressing culture alongside college and career

I could go on and on, but patience is a virtue and the road ahead is long.

In the spring, as we prepare to update our District Action Plan, we will be focusing on the broader set of needs, but for now, I want to focus on building a solid foundation.

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Let's just see if we can mark a starting point today.

A moment where we look at each other here in this room and commit to building a public school system that puts our children first.

A public school system that supports effective teachers and principals and is responsive to our students and their families.

A school system that is run efficiently so that resources can be maximized in our schools and classrooms.

Where our school buildings are welcoming and safe, where our children can play and learn, where our classrooms have textbooks, computers, and basic supplies.

I want us to commit to working together to chart out a path of improvement and, instead of fighting or outmaneuvering one another, we focus on what is best for each child we serve.

And what is best is that we help them, each and every one, graduate, go to college, and begin careers that will lead them to being productive, contributing members of our community.

Thank you for your time and patience tonight.

Thank you for being here.

And, most of all, thank you for your commitment to making a difference in the lives of our students.

Si Yu'os Ma'ase.