

Good evening. As I listen to these proceedings I am persistently reminded of this joke:

Fifty Olympic athletes are running from a bear. One of the runners asks her teammate who is just ahead of her, "Aren't you scared that you may not be able to run faster than the bear?" Her teammate replies, "No, because I don't need to run faster than the bear; I just need to run faster than the slowest runner in the group, and my sport is sprinting. The massive weightlifter at the back will be left behind and will be the bear's lunch."

This illustrates one way of structuring society: the fast leave the slow behind to their fates. Another way to structure a society would be for the entire group to turn on the bear. The athletes could smack the bear with cast-iron frying pans and jab the bear with sticks. The bear would probably be intimidated by fifty stick-and-frying-pan-bearing athletes and bound off into the woods. If the Olympians think of the problem as my problem and your problem, someone will get devoured. If they think of it as our problem, then the weightlifters (who are the slowest runners) can clop the bear with frying pans harder than the swiftest runners in the group; they may be the most capable of defending the group of Olympians as a whole. If the runners face the problem as a group, no one needs to be left behind.

Likewise, if we think of our community as composed of people with different strengths and weaknesses and we face problems together, we can overcome those problems. We do have a major problem in this school district. A large number of our students cannot read or do math. The question we face tonight is: will we stand together as a community to face our problem, or will we let the slowest among us be devoured?

If we leave children behind in our schools, the odds are very high that they will remain illiterate and innumerate for life. Without literacy and numeracy, these students will probably face a life of poverty.

We are the richest country in the world, living during the wealthiest time ever in history. We can stand and face the problem in our midst. It is not necessary to leave some behind in order to save others.

If we chose the path of leaving the slow behind to save the fast, the fast will eventually slow down and be left behind as well. One day we will all be vulnerable to what we fear, and our legs will fail to carry us away from the bear fast enough. This is the law of the wild.

The law of civilization is different. Civilization's civility is measured by how it protects its most vulnerable. Our children are vulnerable; we are leaving many of them behind. I believe this curriculum is a means of turning and facing illiteracy and innumeracy as a community. Therefore, I urge its adoption.

I wish to close with some words from a man whose birthday we observed on Monday:

"We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured."