

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Inaugural Address
May 16, 2011

Remarks as prepared

Honored guests, Mr. Vice President, Dr. Biden, Mayor Daley, First Lady Maggie Daley, Members of the City Council and other elected officials, residents and friends of Chicago.

Today, more than any other time in our history, more than any other place in our country, the city of Chicago is ready for change.

For all the parents who deserve a school system that expects every student to earn a diploma; for all the neighbors who deserve to walk home on safer streets; for all the taxpayers who deserve a city government that is more effective and costs less; and for all the people in the hardest-working city in America who deserve a strong economy so they can find jobs or create jobs -- this is your day.

As your new mayor, it is an honor to fight for the change we need and a privilege to lead the city we love.

We have much to do, but we should first acknowledge how far we have come.

A generation ago, people were writing Chicago off as a dying city. They said our downtown was failing, our neighborhoods were unlivable, our schools were the worst in the nation, and our politics had become so divisive we were referred to as Beirut on the Lake.

When Richard M. Daley took office as mayor 22 years ago, he challenged all of us to lower our voices and raise our sights. Chicago is a different city today than the one Mayor Daley inherited, thanks to all he did. This magnificent place where we gather today is a living symbol of that transformation.

Back then, this was an abandoned rail yard. A generation later, what was once a nagging urban eyesore is now a world-class urban park. Through Mayor Daley's vision, determination and leadership, this place, like our city, was reborn.

We are a much greater city because of the lifetime of service that Mayor Daley and First Lady Maggie Daley have given us.

Nobody ever loved Chicago more or served it better than Richard Daley.

Now, Mr. Mayor, and forevermore, Chicago loves you back.

I have big shoes to fill. And I could not have taken on this challenge without Amy, my first love and our new First Lady, and our children, Zacharia, Ilana, and Leah.

And I want to thank my parents, who gave me the opportunity to get a good education and whose values have guided me through life.

I also want to thank President Obama, who turned our nation around and who loves Chicago so much, he understood why I wanted to come home to get our city moving again.

New times demand new answers; old problems cry out for better results. This morning, we leave behind the old ways and old divisions and begin a new day for Chicago. I am proud to lead a city united in common purpose and driven by a common thirst for change.

To do that, we must face the truth. It is time to take on the challenges that threaten the very future of our city: the quality of our schools, the safety of our streets, the cost and effectiveness of city government, and the urgent need to create and keep the jobs of the future right here in Chicago.

The decisions we make in the next two or three years will determine what Chicago will look like in the next twenty or thirty.

In shaping that future, our children, and their schools, must come first.

There are some great success stories in our schools -- wonderful, imaginative teachers and administrators, who pour their hearts into their mission and inspire students to learn and succeed. I honor these educators. I want to lift them up, support them and make them the standard for the Chicago Public Schools.

But let us also recognize the magnitude of the challenge and the distance we must go before we can declare that the Chicago Public Schools are what they should be.

Today, our school system only graduates half of our kids. And with one of the shortest school days and school years in the country, we even shortchange those who earn a diploma. By high school graduation, a student in Houston has been in the classroom an equivalent of three years longer than a student in Chicago even when both started kindergarten on the very same day.

Our legislature in Springfield has taken an historic first step, and I want to personally thank Senate President John Cullerton, Senate Assistant Majority Leader Kimberly Lightford, Speaker Mike Madigan, House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, Representative Linda Chapa LaVia, and all those in the Illinois General Assembly, members from both parties, who took this courageous and critical vote. Finally, Chicago will have the tools we need to give our children the schools they deserve.

A longer school day -- and year -- on par with other major cities. And reformed tenure to help us keep good teachers and pay them better.

Each child has one chance at a good education. Every single one of them deserves the very best we can provide.

I am encouraged that the Governor will act soon to make these reforms a reality for our children.

To lead our efforts in Chicago, we have a courageous new schools CEO, and a strong and highly qualified new school board, with zero tolerance for the status quo and a proven track record of results to back it up.

As some have noted, including my wife, I am not a patient man. When it comes to improving our schools, I will not be a patient mayor.

My responsibility is to provide our children with highly qualified and motivated teachers and I will work day and night to meet that obligation.

But let us be honest. For teachers to succeed, they must have parents as partners. To give our children the education they deserve, parents must get off the sidelines and get involved. The most important door to a child's education, is the front door of the home. And nothing I do at the schools can ever replace that. Working together, we will create a seamless partnership, from the classroom to the family room, to help our children learn and succeed.

We will do our part. And parents, we need you to do yours.

Second, we must make our streets safer.

Chicago has always had the build of a big city with the heart of a small town. But that heart is being broken as our children continue to be victims of violence. Some in their homes. Some on their porches. Some on their way to and from school.

During the campaign I visited a memorial in Roseland, one that lists names of children who have been killed by gun violence. This memorial is only a few years old. But with two hundred and twenty names, it has already run out of space. There are 150 more names yet to be added.

I want you to think about that. Think about what it means.

Memorials are society's most powerful tribute to its highest values -- courage, patriotism, sacrifice. What kind of society have we become when we find ourselves paying tribute not only to soldiers and police officers for doing their job, but to children who were just playing on the block? What kind of society have we become when the memorials we build are to the loss of innocence and the loss of childhood?

That memorial does more than mourn the dead. It shames the living. It should prod all of us -- every adult who failed those kids -- to step in, stand up and speak out.

We cannot look away or become numb to it. Kids belong in our schools, on our playgrounds and in our parks, not frozen in time on the side of a grim memorial.

Our new police chief understands this. As a beat officer on the force who worked his way through the ranks, and the leader of a department who dramatically reduced violent crime, he is the right man at the right time for the right job.

But here too, like with our schools, partnership is key. The police cannot do it alone. It's not enough to bemoan violence in our neighborhoods. Those who have knowledge and information that can help solve and prevent crimes have to come forward and help. Together, we can make all of our streets, in every neighborhood, safer.

Third, we must put the city of Chicago's financial house in order, because we cannot do any of these things if we squander the resources they require.

From the moment I began my campaign for mayor, I have been clear about the hard truths and tough choices we face: we simply can't afford the size of city government that we had in the past. And taxpayers deserve a more effective and efficient government than the one we have today.

Our city's financial situation is difficult and profound. We cannot ignore these problems one day longer.

It's not just a matter of doing more with less. We must look at every aspect of city government and ask the basic questions: Do we need it? Is it worth it? Can we afford it? Is there a better deal?

While we are not the first government to face these tough questions, it is my fervent hope that we become the first to solve them. The old ways no longer work. It is time for a new era of responsibility and reform.

I reject how leaders in Wisconsin and Ohio are exploiting their fiscal crisis to achieve a political goal. That course is not the right course for Chicago's future.

However, doing everything the same way we always have is not the right course for Chicago's future, either. We will do no favors to our city employees or our taxpayers if we let outdated rules and outmoded practices make important government services too costly to deliver.

I fully understand that there will be those who oppose our efforts to reform our schools, cut costs and make government more effective. Some are sure to say, "This is the way we do things -- we can't try something new" or "Those are the rules -- we can't change them."

This is a prescription for failure that Chicago will not accept. Given the challenges we face, we need to look for better and smarter ways to meet our responsibilities. So when I ask for new policies, I guarantee, the one answer I will not tolerate is: "We've never done it that way before."

Chicago is the city of "yes, we can" -- not "no, we can't." From now on, when it comes to change, Chicago will not take no for an answer.

Finally, we need to make Chicago the best place in America to start a business, create good jobs, and gain the knowledge and skills to fill the jobs of tomorrow. Chicago lost 200,000 residents during the last decade. No great city can thrive by shrinking. The best way to keep people from leaving is to attract the jobs that give them a good reason to stay. The jobs of tomorrow will go to those cities that produce the workforce of tomorrow.

So, we must make sure that every student who graduates from our high schools has the foundation for a good career or the opportunity to go to college. We must pass the Illinois Dream Act, so the children of undocumented immigrants have the chance to go to college. And we must make sure our city colleges are graduating students that businesses want to hire. If Chicago builds a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, the businesses and jobs of the future will beat a path to our city.

Stronger schools. Safer streets. An effective and affordable government. Good-paying jobs. These are the fundamental challenges confronting our city. If we can get these things right, nothing can stop Chicago. And people will come to see a city on the move.

And we can only get them right by working together. I pledge to you today, that's exactly what we're going to do.

City Council members, new and old -- I reach out a hand of mutual respect and cooperation and I welcome your ideas for change.

That also goes for businesses large and small, and all of our labor unions. It goes for organizations from every neighborhood, and our charitable and academic institutions. All of us have a role to play in writing Chicago's next chapter. And anyone open to change will have a seat at the table.

Together, we can renew and strengthen our city -- community by community, neighborhood by neighborhood, business by business and block by block.

None of what we must overcome will be easy, but in my heart I know this: The challenges for the city of Chicago are no match for the character of the people of Chicago.

I believe in our city. I believe in our city because I know who we are and what we're made of -- the pride of every ethnic, religious, and economic background, and nearly three million strong.

Almost 140 years ago, a great fire devastated Chicago. Some thought we would never recover. An entire city had to be rebuilt from the ground up -- and it was. That is how we earned the title of the Second City.

Less than 100 years later, portions of our city burned once again. They were ignited by the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the injustices he fought to overcome.

Chicago still bears some of the scars from that time. And while, there is still work to do, we have made substantial progress.

Look at the three of us being sworn in today. Treasurer Stephanie Neely and Clerk Susana Mendoza. Both are superb public servants who represent the best of our city. They are among a new generation of smart and capable civic leaders.

I think it is fair to say, we are not our parent's Chicago.

An African-American whose family came from Grenada, Mississippi in the great migration north; a daughter of immigrants who came from Mexico; a son of an Israeli immigrant from Tel Aviv and grandson of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Our parents and grandparents came not just to any American city. They came to America's city. They came to Chicago.

The three of us have achieved something our parents never imagined in their lifetimes. And while our three families traveled different paths, they came to the same united city for a simple reason - because this is the city where dreams are made.

Over the next four years, we have schools to fix.

Over the next four years, we have streets to make safe.

Over the next four years, we have a government to transform and businesses and jobs to attract.

But above all, let's never forget the dream. The dream that has made generation after generation of Chicagoans come here and stay here.

I am confident in Chicago's future because I have seen it in the eyes of our schoolchildren and heard it in their voices.

I saw it:

- In the Whitney Young kids who took first place in our state's academic decathlon and third place in the Division 1 national championship.
- In the five high school students from Kenwood Academy who won the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarships - the highest number in any Chicago Public School.

- In the Simeon High School basketball team that just won back-to-back state championships and showed us what they are made of throughout the season.
- In the graduates at Urban Prep Academy, a high school for African-American males, which for the second year in a row is sending 100% of its students to a four-year college.
- In the sophomores at Englewood High School who reached the semi-finals in the spoken word contest.
- In Jeremy Winters, a junior at Simeon who started his own after-school arts program, which is now a model for Chicago.
- In Martell Ruffin, the young man I met at an el-stop who after a full day of school, spends several hours at the Joffrey Ballet School.
- In the young man who led us in the pledge today, DeJuan Brown, a child I met on the campaign. He was struggling in school, became interested in public service, got more serious about his studies and now he is getting As and Bs.

And I saw it in Brian Reed, the tenth-grader who gave me a tour of Ralph Ellison High School.

Shortly after I met Brian, I learned that he had been attacked at his bus stop by four young men who had beaten and robbed him. He was injured so badly, he was hospitalized.

When I heard the news, I reached out to his principal. Days later, his teacher delivered a letter from Brian.

Brian wrote: 'I am doing fine now and (I'm) back in school. My attendance is good and I try very hard here. I just wanted to tell you thanks for checking on me.'

Despite obstacles, our children, children like Brian, just keep on working and never stop dreaming. There is no doubt the children of Chicago have what it takes. The question is, do we? Will we do our part?

For the next generation of Chicagoans, let us roll up our sleeves and take on the hard work of securing Chicago's future.

Our problems are large, but so is our capacity to solve them -- only if all those who profess a love for this City of Big Shoulders are willing to bear the responsibility for keeping it strong.

So today, I ask of each of you -- those who live here, and those who work here; business and labor: Let us share the necessary sacrifices fairly and justly.

If everyone will give a little, no one will have to give too much.

And together, we will keep faith with future generations, and the visionaries of our past, who built on the shores of Lake Michigan a city where dreams are made.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the city of Chicago.

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