Good Evening Mr. President and Members of the Board:

This is always a night I look forward to because I think it is so important to reach out to our parents, our children, our staff and our taxpayers to explain where we have been and where we are headed. Tonight is the sixth report like this I have had the honor to deliver during my tenure as Superintendent, and just like before there is plenty to talk about . . . milestones, accomplishments, challenges.

The anecdotes are too many to mention, but here are a few I would like to share:

For example, this past year, almost 10,000 people viewed a video profile of Westminster High School graduate, Daniel Mason, who grew up in our district, faced obstacles, and is now attending Harvard Medical School. Although we continue to face a challenging mobility rate that influences complicated graduation and dropout formulas, our latest numbers tell us students who began ninth grade and stayed with us for four years at Westminster High School yielded an 83% graduation result. Along those same lines, our five-year graduation rate for our second language learners exceeded the state average.

A group of students from the Hodgkins Elementary Autism program received a special invitation to tour Sports Authority Field and the replica of Mile High Stadium from the Denver Broncos coach at that time Gary Kubiak. The kids tell us it was a dream come true.
Three educators from Japan chose Westminster Public Schools as the place they wanted to come to learn about an effective “blended services” learning model and we were among a select group of educators invited to the White House last December to focus on Better, Fewer and Fairer Assessments.

There were other milestones and accomplishments that I want to go into a little more detail about.

**New Name**
As I looked back over the past year, I realized that it was a year ago this week that our Board of Education took the bold and important step of changing the name of our district to Westminster Public Schools.

We made this change after talking with a lot of people and assuring our community that while we have a new name, we are committed to honoring our rich history and I think we have done that. You will recall that last spring we named our Westminster High School Greenhouse in honor of Phil Love and the Westminster High School Theatre bears the name of Joanna Ramsey, two of our long standing educators in the District.

In August, we unveiled our logo, colors and tagline, “Where Education is Personal”. This tagline reflects our approach to every aspect of our education system. Our Competency Based System (CBS) is committed to ensuring that all students reach their full potential, and that students are not passed along to the next learning level because they simply show up for school. Our workforce deserves better, our colleges deserve better, and most importantly our families deserve better.

**AdvancED**
This past year also brought about an important partnership that is helping us do a better job in the classroom. AdvancED, an internationally recognized accrediting agency, visited 215 of our classrooms and conducted 500 interviews so they could
truly understand and evaluate our Competency Based System. AdvancED accredits some of the most prestigious schools in Colorado and we were pleased that when their analysis was complete, they validated our efforts by awarding us a five-year accreditation rating. In fact, we are the first school system in Colorado to earn the full five-year accreditation rating.

Beyond that, we have replicated some of AdvancED’s practices by closely inspecting the work going on in our classrooms across the District. This fall, we began school “learning walks” where staff visit classrooms, ask questions of students and teachers and in the end provide valuable feedback. To date, 74 teacher leaders and administrators have learned from 2,230 classroom visits since the beginning of the school year. I think it is generally agreed that the purpose of the “learning walks” is continuous improvement, which is an essential component of our system.

**Westminster Academy for International Studies (WAIS)**

In 2016, we also opened another school of choice, giving our families additional options about the kind of education their child receives.

Westminster Academy for International Studies opened its doors at the site of the former Westminster Elementary building on Irving Street, providing instruction focused on an International Studies curriculum, including Spanish language instruction and after school programming. This year, the school is providing our families with a PreK-6 option, which will expand to PreK-7 next year and the year after that a full buildout of PreK-8th grades.

Tonight, we will be discussing the possibility of WAIS becoming the district’s second innovation school with our Board of Education in the public Study Session. If approved, they will be joining the Colorado STEM Academy (CSA) in this designation. It has been a lot of work, and I want to give a shout out to Principal, Russ Warwick, and the professional staff at his school.
Career Technical Education (CTE)
At the high school level, we have made tremendous progress in our CTE program. There is a huge demand in our economy for students who graduate high school “career ready” and who can take the skills they learned in the classroom into the workplace. These are jobs in the construction, healthcare, food service industry and so much more. About 1,600 Westminster High School students are currently enrolled in our CTE program. In November, our CTE Advisory Board of over 80 people met here at Westminster High School to help us focus our programing and ensure we have the flexibility to meet the needs of an always changing job market.

Our students are also working in internships, and in April we are hosting a Spring Job Fair.

Creative Arts Pipeline
Our Board of Education has also made a smart strategic decision to explore the development of a creative arts pipeline. The program will ensure that all students have access to foundational arts, while we provide higher level support for students who wish to take full advantage of the arts programs here at the high school. For instance, our theatre arts and music programs are some of the best in the state and we think it’s important for our students at the elementary school level to understand that someday they too can be on the “big stage”. This is a great place to put in a plug in for Westminster High School’s upcoming performance of Tarzan on March 15-18th.

Early Childhood Education
Of course, we all know the path to becoming a successful high school graduate begins at a very early age. Our Board of Education deserves special recognition for understanding that and providing the resources to truly change lives.

Not only has the Board continued its commitment to free full day kindergarten, but this past year, we entered into an innovative pilot program that offers free
full day pre-school to families in our community. Those families are part of a study to look at the impact full day preschool has on children and quantify how an early investment in learning can lead to long term educational success.

In 2017-18, we are going one-step further by offering tuition-based Infant/Toddler/Preschool care at our Early Learning Center located in the Perl Mack Community Center.

Facilities and Finance
While we have been actively engaged in the CORE academic programs we offer, we have continued to wisely use our district resources to improve our facilities. For example, Flynn Elementary was our latest school to receive a significant redesign. We also repurposed the historic Union High School building to serve Colorado STEM Academy’s (CSA) full K-8 expansion. Our middle schoolers at CSA now attend a beautifully renovated STEM Union.

Next step, this summer, we will be renovating Harris Park Elementary.

Safety and Security
Of course, our highest priority is the safety and security of our students, and I am proud to tell you that our relentless focus on those issues is paying off. The most recent survey of our middle and high school aged students found that 88% of them said they felt safe at school … and they have good reason to feel that way.

All of our schools have camera systems and two-way communication systems at the main entrances. All of our buildings have the necessary tools to track daily visitors and know who is in our buildings at all times. Parents, rest assured, our schools offer a safe environment.

We have also upgraded our parent notification system so it is faster and more accurate than ever before. With our new name change and website redesign, we also created a District App which I encourage you to download free of charge and
get in the habit of using it. The App is a great resource for emergency
notifications, but is also an important education tool, allowing two-way, instant
communication between families, teachers and principals.

So, as I look back at the past year, I am proud to say we have accomplished some
amazing things as a result of our Vision 2020 Strategic Plan, which is our guiding
document. I am confident in saying Westminster Public Schools is in a very strong
position moving forward.

Challenges

Accreditation and Accountability
Still as we move forward, we have many challenges, including resolving our
differences with the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and the state’s
accountability process.

As you know, we believe the appropriate Performance Framework rating for
Westminster Public Schools should be “Improvement” not “Priority
Improvement”. We are in the midst of discussions with CDE and the Colorado
State Board of Education to resolve this dispute. Earlier this month, I shared our
Position Statement with the community, which explains why we think we deserve
an “Improvement” rating and I encourage everyone to read it. It describes, in
great detail, the remarkable progress we have made in Westminster Public
Schools. I don’t believe that anyone who reads the report can doubt that our
children are better off because of the steps we have taken.

The report is lengthy, but here are some of the highlights:

- Of the 13 schools placed on the 5-year accountability clock as “Turnaround”
or “Priority Improvement” in 2010, all have exited the clock.
• Even though our Competency Based System (CBS) faces obstacles with the state accountability model and its emphasis on once a year high stakes testing, we are still closing the achievement gap.

• We also believe the implementation of the state accountability system has been inconsistent and discriminatory, and that state testing data have lacked validity and reliability.

Later this week, I look forward to meeting with CDE’s Commissioner of Education, Dr. Katy Anthes, to talk about our status with the state, and discuss a path forward that will allow the state to work with us in managing our district’s challenges and innovations. We have also made it very clear that we will vigorously pursue all available options to ensure that we continue to educate our students in a high-quality school system.

I know I speak for all of us in Westminster Public Schools when I say that we believe it is time our district’s progress and our staff’s hard work are acknowledged and the issue of local control in this community is recognized. Our local Board of Education, all of whom are graduates of the school district, were elected to do what is best for the children of our unique community, and I am confident that they have done an exemplary job of this and will continue to do so. Board, I want to personally thank you for your individual, collective, and courageous leadership.

**Culture**

Finally, I want to say something about the political and cultural tensions that are now felt across this country. I believe as adults in WPS, we have two critical roles we play before we ever get to academics. We are the conscience of our school district and we are the guardians of the children.

It’s important for every family to know that Westminster Public Schools welcomes all students, regardless of their income, ethnicity, language, and citizen status.
Our goal is to educate every child that walks through our doors in a caring and supportive environment that makes each child feel safe and valued.

An old Chinese proverb describes our approach pretty well:

“If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.”

In these divisive times, I think it would be helpful if we all focus on what unites us and make a commitment to be kinder to one another and display “civil discourse”. After all, a child’s vocabulary at school is heavily influenced by what he or she hears at home, in the media, and from other adults. Just last week, I received an email from someone making the case that “kindness” is not a noun, as stated in the dictionary, but actually a verb … a call to action.

We know an act of kindness can be as simple as offering a smile to a stranger or asking someone how they are doing and listening to the answer, but kindness as a verb is going a step beyond symbolic words. Tomorrow, you will see a new list of resources on the Superintendent’s page on our district website specifically to assist families who may be finding themselves in distress in the current social climate. In the days to come, our district will also be organizing an anti-bullying taskforce to assist in making sure our district’s policies around this important topic are being enforced.

I would like 2017 to be a “Year of Kindness” in Westminster Public Schools where staff, parents and students partner with the members of the community to live a life based on the values of tolerance and respect for one another. Here we celebrate the diversity of thought. In Westminster Public Schools every point of view is respected, and we honor the right of everyone to respectfully and civilly share an opinion.
Finally, I want to thank everyone listening for your commitment to our district and for the honor to serve as Superintendent of Westminster Public Schools.