It really is a privilege and a pleasure to be with all of you. When I left the Rockefeller Foundation six months ago I worried about losing my connection to the Comer SDP family, to people that I have grown to respect and have great affection for. I’ve since realized that you can never get divorced from the Comer family. You may get to be a slightly more distant or close cousin, but you’re always still part of the family and I appreciate that.

To tonight’s recipients of the Patrick Daly awards, I salute and thank you. It’s obvious that you are not just principal leaders but principled leaders. Your students and their families and all of us are very fortunate. I salute to and honor the memory of Patrick Daly. His life was not only a model of principled leadership, but an inspiration to all of us who aspire to leave our little corner of the earth better than we found it.

Did you ever have the strange feeling that you’re in the wrong place? You walk into a room and look around and say to yourself, “Am I supposed to be here?” Well, I had exactly that feeling when I looked at the previous speakers at the Patrick Daly Awards dinners, and I’ll explain why when I name a couple of them for you.

Two years ago Hugh Price was the speaker. For my first five years at the Rockefeller Foundation I worked for Hugh. He was a mentor and a close colleague, and still is. Hugh is an important leader in American life today, and he has the knack for saying the right thing at the right time in the right way.

Two years before that James Comer was the Patrick Daly speaker. Among the many things that I admire Dr. Comer for is his unwillingness to say what policy makers may want to hear instead of saying the truth. Dr. Comer’s work always reminds me that the goal is not to change schools but to change kids’ chances to grow while they are in them and to succeed when they get out.

A year before that, Edward Joyner was the Patrick Daly speaker. My dear friend Ed, from whom I have learned much, can almost always move me to tears when he speaks his words are so poignant and powerful. So you have that illustrious list and me, an Italian-American girl from the Outer Boroughs.

You can see why I thought that I was in the wrong place, but I’m not. In fact, I'm in the right place to work on one of the most vexing questions facing public
policy and personal activism today: How to create large numbers of schools in all kinds of places that work for all children--especially if they are poor children, or children of color, or new to this country, or don't speak English, or all of those rolled into one. I felt like I was in the right place during my years at the Rockefeller Foundation working with movements like the SDP. I’m in the right place now at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform trying to launch an effort called “School Communities That Work.” It’s a national task force on the future of urban districts and something I care very deeply about. More importantly, all of you are in the right place to do what needs to be done and to go to the next level in this long, slow movement to make America's schools serve all of our children well.

For a few minutes I want to try and shift your perspective a bit. Marcel Proust said that the real voyage of discovery lies not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes. So let's try that for a minute or two. There's a book out from the Harvard Business School called The Innovator's Dilemma. It's about how companies can go under even if they have a track record, good products, and loyal customers. Paul Hill from the University of Washington, who is himself an innovator and very good at looking at the problems of public schools with new eyes, recently wrote about The Innovator's Dilemma in Education Week. The book talks about the effect of disruptive technologies on organizations. Disruptive technologies are simply ways to get something done that are easier, cheaper, and more user friendly. The performance of these disruptive technologies isn't necessarily better than those of the established company, but they fill a niche or they serve a need that might have been ignored. They can even get to the point of pushing more established providers. So, as Hill describes, nurse practitioners can take some business away from doctors, corporate universities can threaten graduate business schools, and in a comparison that I can relate to, catalogue shopping can hurt retail stores. You get the idea.

Established organizations see no need to focus attention on marginal customers so disruptive technologies make for this innovator's dilemma: "The logical, competent decisions of management that are critical to the success of their companies are also the reasons they lose their positions of leadership." You can see some eerie parallels to public education. Are there disruptive technologies in public education today? How about charter schools, or tutoring and test preparation centers, or home schooling, which is actually the fastest growing segment of the education market today?

So far, school districts have found ways to keep disruptive technologies under control. They keep them in the corners of the existing system. They open a couple of Edislon schools. If they can't fight the charter school, they make sure it obeys the rules, even the rules we know should be changed for the benefit of kids. They might move some new technology into their classrooms but don't really change the way they do the business of teaching. These are little safety valves that let off the steam, so the reasoning goes, nothing explodes, nothing really
changes the established ways that most of the schools in the system function.

I would argue that disruption isn't necessarily bad. In fact, I'm willing to bet that many of you in this room are partners or founders of disruptive technologies. A lot of principals that I know can only succeed for their students and their communities if they subvert the system from within. If the system isn't working for your kids, you find ways around it. Ways of engaging parents who may not speak English, or have 9-to-5 jobs, or any jobs at all. Ways to bring in new sources of teaching expertise, maybe from the community itself. Ways of making a deal with the union rep to tweak the contract so that your Comer teams can meet when they need to meet. You find ways of doing things that need to be done, and you don't necessarily advertise how you did it.

The challenge of the innovator's dilemma for school districts is to harness disruptive technologies, to create them and nurture them, to embrace and learn from solutions that subvert the system. Why? Because the alternative is to surrender the dominant position. In this case the dominant position of public school systems to organizations that will do things simpler, cheaper, and maybe even better for large number of families that aren't getting what their kids need. The challenge for all of us is to move from subverting the system to changing it. Now you may be saying "I don't need any new challenges, thank you. The one I've got is quite enough"--especially if you're a principal or a building-level educator who gives so much of your heart, mind, and soul to creating the schools that your students need.

Even if we could magically create more people like Patrick Daly and Patrick Daly award winners and more principal like to ones who attend the SDP Principals’ Academy, it wouldn't be enough. Why not? In the words from a book called Improving Performance, because "ineffective systems hinder potentially effective people. If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time." You can't sustain positive change at the school level without effective systems and supports that come from some place outside the school. Right now, that place is usually a school district.

School districts are fiscally and legally accountable for the delivery of most public education in our country. They're the gatekeepers that implement, interpret, and monitor an array of national, state, and local reforms. Those reforms are often conflicting and sometimes they are downright contradictory. Districts have lost some power to schools through decentralization and devolution and to states through high stakes accountability systems. Despite all the disruptive technologies and the new experiments, in most cities districts still dole out the money, hire the teachers, and make the rules. In fact, they're the bureaucracies that people love to hate.

Most reformers and policy makers trying to improve school and teacher practice only think of districts in terms of their potential to do harm. In fact, school districts
are central to the problem and solution of education improvement in America, and they have been largely ignored. When I start to talk to people about school districts, their eyes do not light up. I just don't know why that is. Sometimes when I talk to people about school districts after dinner it actually has a narcotic effect.

Here's my point: If we set our focus just on the level of the school alone and not the district we do so at our own peril. I say that for two reasons that can be expressed in two words. Those words are "efficiency" and "equity." The thought of improving efficiency does not really get me out of bed in the morning. I suspect it doesn't get you out of bed in the morning either, but think about it. The thousand largest districts in the United States-1/15th of the total of 15,000 districts-educate 55% of the children. Now there are about 100,000 schools in this country. You shouldn't have to reinvent the system 100,000 times over, for example, to build teachers’ capacity to teach all kids to high standards. It just doesn't make sense. School improvement is also both inefficient and ultimately unsuccessful if you can't keep it going longer than one individual's tenure.

I don't know if you have the same ad in your media markets that we have in New York, but there's a bond company called Lebenthal, and the woman on the ad says something like: 'With Lebenthal the issue is not making money, the trick is holding onto it.' With education improvement and making positive changes for kids, it's not making the improvements, the trick is holding onto them. The trick is keeping reform thriving long enough to lead to lasting changes in students' lives.

In an era when the economy is on fire yet proposals to increase public spending for public purposes get greeted with a wet blanket, efficiency is a pretty good card to hold. But the most important reason to shift our unit of analysis from the school to the district is equity. The single most important function of school districts, in my view, is to ensure equity in access to good teaching because that is the most precious and scarce resource in education today. The Annenberg Institute, the organization that I work for, created a task force on the future of urban districts to address these challenges of moving improvement throughout a community, raising the achievement ceiling for all schools, reducing the performance gap between schools, overcoming the barriers faced by schools with persistent poor performance, and learning from and spreading successes.

The focus on districts is a means and not an end. The end is widespread and equitable availability of good schools. Failure thus far to achieve school improvement at scale has perpetuated and exacerbated the inequities in school outcomes. The people on the losing end of those outcomes are disproportionately minorities, the poor, recent immigrants, and those who can’t speak English well. School systems have to look very different to reduce those inequities, and we are going to have to make those changes.

Don't kid yourself. Debates about education reform are not about strategies, about one whole-school design being better than another, about whether
focusing on teaching is better than focusing on leadership, or about whether comprehensive reform is better than a schools of choice system. Debates about education reform in America are debates about race, class, money, and power. So changing individual schools, as important as that is, is not enough if you care about equity—enough good schools to go around for all the communities' children. The only way to reduce the existing inequities in school outcomes is to improve the system's capacity to meet the needs of all children. If we allow the national debate about improvement to stay at the individual school level, we are accepting that some children, the children all of us in this room are most concerned about, will always be left out.

My point is not to criticize in any way the wonderful work that you all do, nor is it to say that there isn't district reform going on in some of the places where you work. My point is to celebrate the work that you do and to challenge those of you in schools to openly disrupt the system, not do it behind closed doors. My point is to challenge those of you in districts and central offices to embrace and learn from disruptive technologies. None of us can afford to think only one school at a time. Those wonderful children who were up here singing certainly can't afford for us to think one school at a time. The stakes are so high. While the interest in education reform is strong, the national debate is not favoring those who place collective good on equal footing with individual choice. I want to end my part of this lovely evening with a quote from a 19th century Scottish lord. What he said rings true for me in 21st century American education. His name was Lord Brougham and he said, “Education makes people easy to lead but difficult to drive, easy to govern but impossible to enslave.” I want to thank all of you for all that you do to make the promise of education possible.