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Hello. I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

There's a common phrase that we use in North Carolina schools which describes our expectations of students as they go through our classrooms on their way to graduating on time, prepared for the future. The phrase is "21st-century learning" -- and as we approached the end of the 20th century, talking about 21st-century learning made intuitive sense: we wanted to prepare our students for the complexities of tomorrow's world.

But we're ten years into the 21st century, and we're still talking about making sure our students are 21st-century learners. So I'd like to take a minute to explain what that phrase means, and why that is an ongoing aspiration for our school system.

For years now, we all have recognized that the educational system many of us grew up with prepared students for an industrial economy and a narrowly-defined career path. The time has passed where someone spends 30 years and retires from one organization. In fact, according to the US Department of Labor, our children will have had 10-14 different jobs by the time they are 38 years old. The simple fact is that the high-demand jobs of tomorrow don't even exist today. Our students will have to be information workers to thrive in our global economy and need to be globally competitive. They will need to be flexible, and they will have to continuously adapt to a world that we can barely imagine.

21st-century learning and teaching prepares a student for lifelong learning. Yes, it means learning fundamental information in a core curriculum, but also how to apply and expand their knowledge -- adopting a practice and habit of thinking creatively, critically and scientifically. We must also -- as educators and partners with our community -- help our students develop life and career skills; learning and innovation skills; and information, media and technology skills.

Our children must compete on a global playing field. Being globally competitive is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Our Board of Education recognized this fact when they made it a part of our academic goal.

As with so many other aspects of the Wake County Public School System, I am proud of the progress our students have made thus far in becoming 21st-century learners. Using data from the UNC system, Queens University recently released a study showing that our students experience greater success in our state universities than other districts around the state. As another example, for the last several years more than 73 percent of our seniors have taken the SAT -- a much higher percentage than the rest of the state and nation. Our students are seeking higher education because we as a community recognize our children must be prepared to adapt to change.

While we see progress, our school system needs to continually test whether we are adequately preparing our students for the future. Tools such as our curriculum management audit and professional learning teams help us accomplish that.

And so does our use of the phrase "21st-century learning" -- because when we do that, we challenge ourselves to assess whether our schools are providing our students the strategies to prepare them for the world as we know it today -- and for tomorrow.

Thanks, and I'll talk to you again soon.