

Jonathan F. Fanton's Remarks For Principal For A Day
At The Washington Irving High School
Thursday, May 16, 1996

Thank you Bob for that kind introduction. Thanks also to the Business Advisory Council and Principal Durkin for allowing me to return and be part of this year's Principal for a Day program.

I would like to take a few minutes to share what I learned from my experience last year and to reflect on the LDC's work with Washington Irving.

Let me start out by saying were it not for the intervention of the LDC and the Business Advisory Council I might have been principal for more than a day!

Even a day in the life of a New York City high school principal is a sobering experience that raises my admiration for dedicated professionals like Bob Durkin who have one of the toughest jobs in the business.

Last year, I had the privilege of serving as Principal for a day with Gene McGrath, the Chairman of Con Edison and my Co-Chair on the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation's Board of Directors. It was both an uplifting and somewhat jarring experience.

Gene and I encountered a good number of students and teachers that day who are committed to receiving and providing a quality education. They clearly saw the value of education. For such students, it was a means to an end, a door that would open up to a roomful of possibilities. For such teachers, it was the ability to help shape a young life, to provide it with direction and the knowledge necessary to conquer the challenges ahead.

There was a flip side to our visit, however. On our walks through the hallways and visits to the classrooms, it was clear that students, teachers and administrators were not well equipped with the tools necessary to educate our students properly – to prepare them for high-skilled jobs, and further educational opportunities that this city offers in abundance. Outdated textbooks, old maps that showed the world as it used to be, scant access to computers and other modern technology, tired physical facilities – just a few of the obstacles that the talented students and faculty of Washington Irving face.

Going into our day as Principal Gene and I told each other we wanted to do more than roam the halls and pose for a couple of pictures: we wanted to contribute something tangible to Washington Irving and to build a continuing relationship between it and the New School.

For its part, the New School committed to a series of initiatives and activities, which included providing 12 scholarships to Washington Irving students over the next 4 years; offering courses at the Adult Division to Washington Irving students (18 actually enrolled) and staff (20 actually enrolled); offering free admission for students and faculty to New School cultural events and providing guest lecturers for classes at the high school.

Con Edison, for its part, has initiated scholarships for students; organized an annual book drive to increase the school's library offerings; provided employees who volunteered their time to paint in classrooms; established a resource room to help increase literacy skills; and provided technology consultants.

Finally, the Local Development Corporation serves as the glue that holds these many programs together. Last year, the LDC hired a full-time staff person to coordinate the various activities at the high school and to develop new ties between the business community and the school.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity today to introduce the new LDC Education Director, Charlotte Hanna. Charlotte is a graduate of New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. She has a master's of public administration in public policy and brings to this job considerable experience in the management of non-profit programs. We are confident that Charlotte will provide to the education initiatives at Washington Irving the leadership and the vision to build upon the successes that have been achieved in the past year. We expect her to help us further strengthen the relationship between businesses and institutions in the community and Washington Irving, which have the potential to benefit every student and teachers here.

We are particularly proud that last summer over 100 students were provided with summer jobs through the LDC. An unprecedented number of tutors and mentors were provided to students. Over 300 volunteers helped paint and clean the school as part of New York Cares Day. New programs – like the Wish List – were launched in an effort to bring more resources to the school.

These accomplishments were not due to any single organization or individual. Rather, they were the result of the energy, devotion and drive of many. However, it would be unfair not to make note of the longstanding, intense commitment that has been provided by Clearly Gottlieb, FPG International and Guardian Life Insurance. It is because of their work and the work of other groups on the Business Advisory Council that the prospects for the education initiatives at Washington Irving look so promising for the upcoming year.

And while we have been helpful to Washington Irving there remains much more to do. Here is my personal choice for a focus next year; let's build a computer center. Fancy distance learning equipment should not, cannot, obscure that fact that students in this school do not have easy access to enough computers. And without computer skills they will be handicapped in getting the best jobs and indeed will have less information about the world. We do not want to see a new kind of apartheid take root in this country between those who are computer literate and those who are not.

So let us make technology improvements an priority as we work to advance the very real progress that has been achieved at Washington Irving in recent years.

Now, Bob Durkin will introduce our three Principals for the Day.