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Remarks at the Great Expectations Forum

This brief speech was delivered at the Hilton in Short Pump on April 5, 2012.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, Great Expectations students, good afternoon. It's a pleasure to welcome you to our 5th annual Great Expectations education forum. We created this program in 2008 to make a difference – and today is a remarkable reminder that we are making a difference as we honor the largest graduating class in the program's history. Of course, we couldn't do that alone. The recipe for success today requires strong connections and strong partnerships.

Rising up from 2%

We began Great Expectations to end what too many people know is the two-percent club. Across America, young people who are, or have been, in foster care go on to graduate from college at a rate of less than two percent. It's a national tragedy. Two percent should describe the milk we pour into our cereal, not the success rate of the children in our community.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, since we began Great Expectations in 2008, we have grown bigger and better every year. We began by serving students at five of Virginia's 23 community colleges. We will soon be opening a Great Expectations program at our 16th college. We began by having to find foster youth to serve in our program. We knew there were probably some enrolled in our colleges, but we didn't really know who they were or what we needed to do to help them succeed. We have served more than 1,000 students since 2008 and we are actively serving more than 500 Great Expectations students across Virginia today.

We began with Virginia, like every other state, as part of the two-percent club. We are now in the ten-percent club and rising! The 53 graduates we are honoring later in today's program are part of the more than 100 foster youth that Great Expectations has helped become college graduates. If that doesn't make you proud, nothing ever will.

What change looks like

There is a focus today on convincing more young people – from all walks of life – to pursue and complete a college credential. That thrust is the centerpiece of the strategic plan, called Achieve 2015, for Virginia's Community Colleges. That thrust is the centerpiece of Virginia's governor, Bob McDonnell, who is focusing his administration on creating 100,000 additional Virginia college graduates. And that thrust is the centerpiece of the Obama Administration, which is focused on creating five million more college graduates across the nation.

Those are big numbers, aren't they? They sound almost hypothetical, don't they? So how does it all happen? Well, you're looking at it. Take a look around the room. See the talented, smart, promising young people who are becoming college graduates. That's what it's all about.

As I said, the recipe for success today requires strong connections and strong partnerships. Great Expectations, my friends, is making a difference.