Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to be part of the UNA-NCA Forum on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and how they may affect the United States, especially at the local level here in the DC, Maryland and Virginia area. Your theme for this forum, “Thinking and Acting Locally and Globally on Common Social, Economic and Environmental Goals, could not be more timely.

Last month, September 2015, the United Nations adopted a new set of goals: the SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS—and have set the target date of 2030 to achieve said. The SDG consist of 17 goals including goals regarding gender equality, peace, zero hunger, quality education, good health, and numerous more. And, yes, it will take all of us coming together, working together to achieve these goals, just as previous generations joined forces to ensure that each of us in this room had the right to live a quality life. I am reminded of a quote from Deuteronomy, which says:

“We build on foundations we did not lay. We drink from wells we never dug. We profit from persons we did not know. And we stand on the shoulders of those who pioneered, paved the way, and labored for all that we enjoy today.” (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)
Allow me to speak specifically about education and the challenges we face in assuring every child not simply access to education, but a quality education. We must continue moving forward with efforts to guarantee every child’s right to learn, to be educated. Unfortunately, today, 750 million people in the world are considered to be illiterate. Of that number, approximately 100 million people worldwide, mostly women and girls, still do not have access to education. When I share that statistic with my students, they find it difficult to believe that in 2015 there are still people in the world, who have never been inside of a place called school; who do not have access to education.

When thinking about the SDG goals, a key factor to keep in mind is that the quality of education we provide our citizens will determine whether or not we achieve not just one or two goals, but all 17 of the goals and help sustain the quality of life of every man, woman and child. Why? Because education is the foundation that will determine whether we succeed or fail in our efforts to ensure every person the right to dream and realize their dreams, to live in a civil society.

Some may ask why it is so hard to provide every child with a quality education. In some instances, it is because of abject poverty—the lack of resources to build schools or to be able to find, hire and retain enough teachers. I think that economically and politically it is also because maybe local, state and the federal governments need to reorganize their budget priorities. They need to understand that for every dollar spent educating a child the return is six dollars ($6), or 600% return to the fiscal viability of the community.
But, in too many cases I think the basic truth is that people are denied the right to be educated not simply because of their race, gender or socio-economic status, but because it is easier to control people who are illiterate. When people are educated, they are more empowered to stand up for their rights, to be free, and to dare to dream and to realize their dreams.

And, by the way, we, the United States, the richest country in the world are not immune to issues such as poverty and inequality. A study by the Southern Education Foundation in 2013 found that 30% of all children in the public schools in the United States come from families living in poverty with the highest concentration being in the South and West—concentrated in our cities, but also in our rural areas. Even here in the DC Metropolitan area, the rate of poverty is increasing (i.e., DC (51%), VA (39) and MD (43%). For example, schools not only provide free lunch, but many also provide free breakfast and dinner, because children will not concentrate on learning if they are hungry.

Studies also show that students from families living in poverty are more apt to be unprepared for schooling. That’s why I think the Obama Administration’s proposal of free, universal pre-school for all children beginning at age four is absolutely critical to ensuring that these children have a better chance of being successful academically and developmentally.

I want you to keep in mind, however, that being poor does not mean a child cannot learn. How do I know that? Because I am from a family that was poor. My nick name was “SEE-MO”—See More Holes than you do clothes. However, poverty did not stop me from learning. I remember my mother insisting that I earn a good education. I remember her
telling me, “People can take away your car, they can take away your house, your material
belongings, but they can’t take your education away from you.

In addition, studies show that the majority of school age children in America today are
minorities. As we deal with these two demographic changes (more diversity and more
poverty), we must also ask ourselves how can we ensure that children regardless of race,
socio-economic status and/or gender, in all countries, including the U.S. A. receive a quality
education?

Allow me to share another statistic with you. Today, there are 7.3 billion people in
the world. 317 million of those people live in the United States. That’s 4.4% of the world’s
total population. If the U. S. is going to remain a world leader in the future, we cannot afford
not to educate every child and educate them well. If we hope to overcome poverty,
inequality; ensure peace and sustain a civil society, we must educate every child to be able to
be a part of our democratic society, to be part of our global society.

A recent study by UNESCO entitled, ‘Women’s Education and Women’s Political
Participation”, found that in countries where people are denied the opportunity to be
educated, they are far less likely to participate in the political process. However, the study
showed that “educating women even at the most basic level has the potential to raise
women’s participation in democracy both as voters and as legislators.” Raising the share of
women in government is associated with improvements in education, health, prevention of
crime (especially against women) and other issues. This also applies to our political process
here in America.
What that study and others like it says to me is “no more excuses. It all starts with making sure that each state, each community lives up to its commitment that every child will be guaranteed equal access to quality education. In doing so, we need to guarantee that all children—regardless of gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, race, or ethnicity—have access to quality education by guaranteeing that each child is taught by qualified teachers, teachers who have a repertoire of pedagogical skills and knowledge to effectively teach our diverse student populations.

This brings me to the second challenge I believe we face in trying to achieve the goal of quality education. World-wide there is a shortage of teachers, especially teachers who have been professionally prepared to teach. Even here in the United States we are facing a significant shortage within the teaching profession; the worse we have faced in over half a century. On the one hand, 52% of teachers in the U. S. are eligible to retire within the next 5 years—that’s 1.7 million teachers. On the other hand, 50% of all new teachers leave the classroom within 5 years of becoming teachers. This creates what I call the “teacher shortage hour-glass dilemma”—the stability within the teaching profession is that small section between the retirees and the early leavers. At the same time, the student population is growing, becoming more diverse and society is placing higher academic demands on our education system.

Guaranteeing students are taught by effective teachers is the most influential, the most powerful factor in assuring quality education for all children. It means making sure all children attend schools where they have a well-defined curriculum and where the schools
have the resources necessary to implement said effectively. And, yes, it means assuring that schools are safe.

As the 21st century continues to evolve, it is becoming more obvious that those nations, those communities that invest in education will not only survive, but thrive. Our politicians need to be educated to understand that by investing in quality education for all of our children—not 50% or 75%, but 100%; not just the rich, but also the poor; not just boys, but girls as well—communities instill in them the knowledge, understanding, skills, and values we need to have a more stable civil society, to cooperate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the 21st century and to live in peace. Yes, we have made progress, especially as we move forward in this evolving technological, knowledge-based global society. But we still need to scale up our efforts exponentially. Our actions must measure up to our ambitions. This will require a greater commitment from all of us.

Achieving these goals, especially as they relate to equity and excellence, requires educators, especially teachers and professional organizations that represent them, to be key players—locally, nationally and internationally. We must be key players in defining what should be done to acquire educational excellence and equity. We need to continue to reach out beyond our classrooms—whether K-12 or higher education—to the broader community, to work together to achieve the goal of educational equality and, thus, not simply one or two of the Sustainable Development Goals, but all 17 of the goals.

Again, I thank UNA-NCA for hosting this discussion regarding the Sustainable Development Goals. It has been an honor and a pleasure to be here with you.