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## Ramos rallies for 'great things' in Bridgeport

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BRIDGEPORT — As a youngster beginning seventh grade at Lincoln School in the East End some years back, John J. Ramos encountered a teacher named Mr. Arnold.

"He taught math — my least favorite subject — and he caused me to like it," Ramos, the city's new superintendent of schools, recounted Tuesday.

"He was firm, but engaging. He cared about us. We knew how much he cared. Finally, I could do math."

Seeking to set an upbeat tone for a new academic year — and the administration of the state's largest public school district he took over in June — Ramos recalled the difference that Mr. Arnold made in his life, addressing an unprecedented convocation of the city's 3,000 school employees. With a theme of "Bridgeport — Expect Great Things," Ramos and other speakers addressed not just the professional staff usually on hand for such assemblies, but also clerical workers, custodians and security personnel. The crowd was so large it had to be convened in the Arena at Harbor Yard.

"Each of us is uniquely positioned to have a profound and lasting impact on the students that we serve," Ramos told them.

"We all count — that's why we're all here," he said.

Ramos acknowledged his goals would not be reached overnight. But, he said, the school system must work toward twin objectives:

I all students achieve high levels of proficiency, and eventually mastery, of subject matters.

I all district graduates be college-ready.

But Ramos takes over a district with immense challenges. Connecticut Mastery Tests for Bridgeport fourth-graders show that 62 percent of the students lack proficiency in reading, 45 percent are not proficient in math and 37 percent don't reach proficiency in writing, said Associate State Education Commissioner Frances Rabinowitz.

Still, the convocation's keynote speaker, Eric Cooper, president of the National Urban Alliance, told the Bridgeport staff that all youngsters could succeed if they are given hope rather than dismissed — sometimes unintentionally.

"Hope actually enables the brain," he said, citing work by Harvard researcher Jerome Groopman.

For the most part, school staffers appeared enthusiastic about the message they took away from the convocation as most of the district's 23,000 students return to classes today.

"It was very well planned and developed," said Aleida Alfonso, a literacy coach at Barnum School.

"I like his vision," said Tom Wilber, a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher at Dunbar School, whose father was a superintendent of schools in Watertown, where Ramos also later served.

But Columbus physical education teacher Jim Kuhn wondered how Ramos could meet his goals without a larger budget. "I'm always a little skeptical," he said.

Still, many staff members said they were inspired by the event.

"It puts everybody in a good frame of mind," said Sharon Beardsley, a teacher at Roosevelt School.

Ramos said the "great things" theme was his attempt to flip the more typical reaction, "It's Bridgeport — What Do You Expect?" when problems beset the city's schools and local government.