

OPENING DAY -- September 2, 2009

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Probably the easiest part of giving an opening day of school speech is what traditionally comes first--the acknowledgements. So let me begin with these. Let me first thank the members of the Cambridge School Committee for giving me the opportunity to be standing before you today. There is no place I would rather be this morning. And for being able to meet you in this wonderful place, we thank Paul Parravano and President Susan Hockfield of M.I.T.

Also, after meeting them last week, I am delighted to introduce the newest members of the Cambridge Public Schools. I would like to ask all new faculty and staff to stand for a moment at this time. Welcome.

If you have worked in the Cambridge Public Schools for 20 years or more, would you please rise for a moment? Everyone else... look around at who is standing. Everyone else... find these people in your school for they are the ones who can help you understand what makes this city so special.

Now I would like to tell you a brief but illustrative story. Many of you know that in my former life I was a high school English teacher. One year, out of a spirit of adventure as much as anything else, I decided to try my hand at eighth grade teaching in one of Brookline's K-8 schools. During my years in the high school I had developed a fairly extensive repertoire of body moves that enabled me to communicate silently with my students. For example, when my juniors were getting a little too rowdy in class, I would fold my arms and stare like this... After a while, my students learned what that and other poses meant, and we got along quite well. I remember so vividly my first few days in eighth grade English. Eighth graders were nothing like juniors and seniors; in fact they did not even remotely resemble the ninth graders I knew. In class, I used my best high school teaching methods--I asked

penetrating questions, raised provocative issues, and utilized my perfected body language. The kids ignored me. When they whispered, or yelled, to each other, I folded my arms thus. . . . They kept talking. When they shot tiny spitballs at each other through hollowed out Bic pens, I stared them down like this. . . . The barrage continued. Those of you who have taught 12 year-olds know what I am talking about. It was quite humbling.

For two weeks, at the end of the school day I would retreat sadly to my home and wonder what in the world had led me to leave the safe environs of the high school. I questioned my own power as a teacher and wondered whether I had ever made a difference in anyone's life. I began to feel rather small.

Even today I can recall a feeling I sometimes had when I was teaching: as one group of students left my classroom in June and I began thinking about the next batch who would arrive in September, I figured that I had imparted some knowledge about the correct use of commas, how to write an essay, or Shakespeare's use of metaphor. I imagined that a certain percentage of these departing students would even remember some of what I had taught them, but I was never quite sure that I had made a real difference in their lives.

Perhaps they would be able to recall someday that Charles Dickens was a 19th century British novelist, but would they have internalized any of his sense of social justice so that it might inspire them to strive for a better, more humane society? One of the paradoxes of our profession is that we can always test our students' knowledge of the facts and information we give them, but it is so hard for us to know if they have learned the most important lessons we all try to teach. Can an individual teacher stand out in a child's life any more than an individual star stands out in the universe? Are we significant or insignificant?

I will answer my own question in simple, certain terms: we do make a difference. Let me tell you how I know this.

I can think back to one of my teachers in elementary school, Mrs. Cherlin, telling me to always reach for a star and that even if I did not get the one I was reaching for I would get one near to it. I remember my wounds from being thrown out of the 7th grade chorus for bad behavior and being made to walk down from the risers during a rehearsal and trudge out of the auditorium forever while my musical classmates watched in astonishment. It was Mrs. Green, my eighth grade teacher, who told me that she liked the way I wrote stories. Once when I was upset about something, my high school Spanish teacher, Mr. Batjiaka, put his arm around me and told me it would be all right.

These small acts have combined, with countless others, to make me who I am. Most likely, these teachers did not think they were marking me indelibly for life with their gestures, but they were. All of you can tell similar stories. Think of the teachers you remember today, and ask yourself why you remember them. By interacting with students in hundreds of ways every day we are, for better or worse, giving shape and character to their lives. And when we add together the hundreds or thousands of students whose lives that each of you has touched, you can begin to see how your values and your influence truly help shape our society. More broadly--and please bear with my abstraction here--with even our tiniest acts we change the character of the universe.

In this respect, education is the most optimistic of professions. The very essence of our work is founded on the belief that we can influence the future. We are in the business of preparing people. What we give to children will stay with them as adults, and in this way our ideas, our words, our values live on in young people long after they have left our charge.

It happens in schools every day, in the interactions between students and all adults, including secretaries, para-professionals, family liaisons, support staff, custodians, and administrators. Students learn from our body language as well as from our

assignments, from our vocal inflections as much as from the content of our lectures, from our smiles and stern gazes as well as from our corrections on their homework.

Don't let the opportunity for this kind of instruction slip out of your consciousness because it never stops affecting the kids who share your classroom and your school. How we teach is what we teach.

As educators, we are both inclined and trained to believe that the future can be better than the present. Allow me for a few moments to tell you about my optimism and vision for the future of this school system.

Simply stated, we can make the Cambridge Public Schools the best urban school district in the nation. By this I mean we should strive to be a place that synthesizes two overarching imperatives—academic excellence and social justice. In fact, I would argue that you can't really have one without the other. We must stand for excellence for all students, whether they are struggling to learn the alphabet or needing additional challenge in Calculus. Our most vulnerable students need your courage, your belief in them, and your commitment to justice. All students should be challenged and supported as they discover who they are and what kind of chance they stand in the future.

Without question our greatest goal is to promote student achievement and development. The most important interactions that occur in this school system are those that take place daily between teachers and students in classrooms. In classrooms every day, we strive to give our students the knowledge and skills they need in order to make the future their own. We need to intervene swiftly when we observe a student at risk. Our educational programs must be constantly improving, if not always growing, and our instructional methods must be subject to ongoing self-scrutiny. One hallmark of a good teacher, I believe, is that he or she asks himself or herself daily: Am I getting through to my students? Are they learning what they need to learn? To those of you who feel ready to take a risk in your own professional

development and self-awareness, I propose that from time to time you ask your students the same question I will ask you: “How can I do better?”

A minute ago I observed that how we teach is what we teach. Let me extend that thought and suggest that who we teach determines how we teach. If we are truly going to focus on the classroom, then that means we are focusing on the children. So who are the children of Cambridge?

Nearly half of our students are considered low-income. For about 30% of our students, English is not their first language, which is roughly twice the state-wide rate. Our students represent around 80 different linguistic groups. Approximately two-thirds of our student body are persons of color.

I can think of no single issue that defines yet divides our nation as much as race. While schools certainly cannot solve all of society’s problems, we remain the institution best situated to address some key concerns, raise consciousness, and equip the next generation with the attitudes and skills to make the world a better place. The focus, as I say, needs to be on the child. Try thinking about it this way: picture a 5 year-old girl or boy you know and imagine that you had the power to design a plan to educate that young person for the next thirteen years. Can you picture that child in your mind’s eye?

Not only would you want that student to be excited about learning, challenged at every turn, and supported in each moment of need, you would also want him or her to progress through a coherent, organized plan of instruction where what happens in one year connects to what happened the year before and foreshadows what is to come the year after. The very word “curriculum,” from the Latin, means “a path to be followed.” We should clear the path, for the students’ sake, so they and we understand that there is a beginning, middle and an end to their public school education.

The second goal for the future is to involve the community in the life of the schools. There is no shortage of educational research or plain common sense that says that when parents participate actively in their children's education, those kids will soar. Moreover, one of the distinctive features of this community is its passion for education; people expect the very best from us and we will continue to enjoy their support as long as we strive to meet those expectations. I am asking all of you to make a special effort this year to reach out to parents and community members, to make them feel that they are valued partners. Help them understand the kinds of things they can do to support your work with their sons and daughters. Everyone wins when teachers and families work together.

My first goal focused on improving things for students; the second goal emphasized improving things for parents; my third goal involves improving things for the staff. I envision our thirteen schools as workplaces where adults will feel challenged, appreciated, and happy. The old saying is true: "He who enjoys his work is a joy to work with." We ought to spend some time this year thinking about our school culture and looking for ways to make schools more satisfying workplaces for the adults who inhabit them. Our schools should be places where students are expected to put forth their best effort to learn, where parents are welcome partners in the educational enterprise, and where faculty and staff come to work with a sense of anticipation and leave at the end of the day with a feeling of satisfaction.

We must build on the excellence that already exists within our schools, and push for continuous improvement. If we expect our students to reject complacency and strive to be better, we adults need to model that behavior for them. Let's face it—none of this is easy. Nonetheless, I want you all to know today that I am with you. My job, as I see it, is to create the conditions under which the best possible teaching and learning can occur.

This is the future I envision for the Cambridge Public Schools. Today I invite you to help shape this and work with me to make it a reality. I believe it can happen, and I think you do, too.

Let me conclude with a reference to English literature. The poet William Wordsworth described the profound significance of what he called the “little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness.” In a universe as incomprehensibly large as ours, your classroom in Cambridge, MA is a very small place. Within that room, countless “little, nameless, unremembered acts” occur every day. Many of them may be forgotten with time, but some will be remembered forever. When they are, they change someone’s life. These acts create our future. The time is now and I ask you to share my sense of urgency to do the right thing for every child who will enter one of our schools next week. The power, friends, is yours.