

Back to School Address
Darien High School
August, 2015
Dr. Dan Brenner, Superintendent of Schools

View videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxPZh4AnWyk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnLVRQCjh8c>

Faculty Address after viewing videos:

I once read an article that was circulating on an education list serve that was titled "Sum up Your Leadership in Six Words. The article began with an anecdote that said that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story using only six words. Many thought it wasn't possible. Hemingway instead produced the following: "For Sale. Baby shoes. Never worn." The article continued by citing the noted Wall Street Journal Columnist Peggy Noonan, who once told President Kennedy that "a great man is one sentence." She demonstrated that concept by summarizing Lincoln's life by writing, "He preserved the Union and freed the slaves." Needless to say this topic generated quite a bit of chatter on the web.

All of a sudden teachers and principals weighed in from all over the country. "What are the six words that define your leadership style?" became the buzz... Some samples included: "Inspired teamwork makes the dream reality "Inspiring others to do meaningful things" Lead with heart; others will follow" A couple of my personal favorites were: Oh, sugar. Not another state assessment. And from a mom/administrator who wrote: My leadership style at home with my teenage kids goes something like this: "You all better listen to me" My leadership style at work goes more like this: "Let's hear your ideas and see..." The article made me pause as I tried to define my own leadership style and how I want to lead a school district. I think one of the best ways to reflect on this is to ask the following questions: How do I want to be remembered when I leave Darien? And Will I leave the District better off than when I came?

Which takes us to the two videos we just watched. Several years ago The Journal Phi Delta Kappan encouraged superintendents to show the first video on the first day of school because of its relevance. Part of what I say now reflects some of the thoughts expressed in their article titled "Looks Deceive". For the few of you who don't know, the first video is from Britain's Got Talent and is of Susan Boyle, the then 47 year old Scottish woman who took our country by storm, thanks to You-Tube. Millions of people have watched this performance. So, what exactly is so entrancing about Susan Boyle and how might it apply to us this morning. Well you see Susan Boyle doesn't fit the mold. She is not what we think about when we visualize great singers. Quite frankly she's frumpy. There is no glitz about her. When she entered the stage the audience was giggling; cackling; expecting a dud. She even had the audacity to dream publicly about being another Elaine Paige, one of the most famous theatrical singers of our time. But in the audience's eyes, using the English vernacular, she is a commoner. And after all, what can we expect from a commoner? And in truth it is all about our expectations: whether it's how well Susan Boyle will sing, or what a bus driver expects from students when they get on the bus for the first time, or what a coach sees when they step on the athletic field for the first practice, or what an orchestra teacher hears when they sit for the first rehearsal, or, finally, what a classroom teacher thinks when their children walk into their classroom on the first day of school.

We all make assumptions about our kids; whether they drive to school in a BMW or walk in carrying last year's backpack; whether their name is Maloney or Gomez, or walk with a limp, wear thick glasses or have a lazy eye...we all make assumptions. Here is what we know for sure...no research study has demonstrated that holding high expectations ensures student success. However, there is an abundance of evidence that suggests that having low expectations impedes student learning. Susan Boyle, the woman who described herself as someone who "had never been kissed," somehow found the inner fortitude to surpass the low expectations. All are not so fortunate. And now think about the dancers portrayed in the second video and the expectations that would normally exist for those facing similar challenges. Who

would be so bold to think an amputee could become a ballet dancer? And I ask you now to think about the people who must have encouraged these extraordinary dancers to excel in such an incredible manner; their parents, their teachers, those who love them. This concept is important to me for lots of reasons. Expecting the most from people, students and adults alike, is something that is deeply embedded in my character. In fact one could argue in my case it is genetic. You see, 34 years ago my mother started Community Mainstreaming Associates, an organization that provided a home for developmentally disabled adults. She did so because my now 61 year old autistic brother needed a place to live that would honor his independence. 34 years ago that place didn't exist. Had my mom listened to the low expectations of the doctors when my brother was growing up, he would have moved into infamous Willowbrook Hospital and been institutionalized for the rest of his life. Instead CMA now happily houses my brother and 58 other residents living in homes and communities as good neighbors to you and me. That's what high expectations can bring.

Six words that define my leadership style:

Expectations: Because we should never lose sight of what our children are capable of achieving and because when challenged appropriately we know that children will always rise. We must expect the high performers to fly higher than even they could dream, and we must encourage and nurture those who have difficulties learning by letting them know we believe in them.

Compassion: because my favorite expression in education is "long after a student forgets what you taught them they will remember how you made them feel."

Excellence: because what we must never lose sight of is that we are obligated to bring our best every day, and model it for the students and adults we interact with.

Passion: because life is all about passion. The enthusiasm we bring to every situation becomes the benchmark for how we interact with our world and how our world interacts in return with us.

Work: because I believe what we don't know, we can always learn through determination and hard work. **Honesty:** because we must always interact in an honorable, honest manner because it is from there that trust is built and meaningful relationships are formed.

I would argue that if we all embody these six words we will create an environment that will leave a long-lasting legacy for the children we work with and the district we so proudly represent. No matter where you work in the school district or in what capacity, I would ask you to join me now to create a legacy in Darien we can all be proud of.

Thank you, and I wish all of you a great day and a year full of high expectations.