WESTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Honoring Tradition, Inspiring Excellence, Shaping the Future

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Good morning! Welcome back!

I am very excited to be standing here as the Superintendent of Schools. As I thought about today, I reflected on what I always wanted when returning for a new year when I was a teacher. I think it came down to 2 things: I wanted time in my classroom to prepare for students -- and so today this gathering will be brief. And, I wanted to have a few minutes to reflect on and feel good about why I choose to spend my days in schools -- and so in the brief time we are together this morning, I want to talk about purpose and why we're here.

You may or may not know it, but American public education started here. Right here. Before Westwood was established as its own town in 1897, what is today Westwood was actually part of Dedham. Dedham was incorporated in 1636 and a few years later in 1643, by unanimous vote, Dedham authorized the very first tax-supported, free public school. A couple hundred years later, in the early 19th century, Horace Mann - the education reformer who considered public education as a great equalizer -- was a member of the Dedham school committee. So, I'm going to go ahead and draw a straight line from the founding of American public schools to all of us in this room today who continue to sustain this amazing democratic institution. We are part of a rich history.

A fundamental purpose of public schools in America is to prepare kids to become good citizens and to participate meaningfully in their community. Right now, as educators, we find ourselves part of a *difficult moment* in the long arc of history, in our nation's continual struggle to make our stated ideals our lived ideals. The current divisions in our country and the difficulty that we are having as citizens navigating the civic discourse, for me, bring into sharp focus the purpose of public schools and the unbelievably important job educators have in ensuring the viability of democracy. That might sound grandiose, but I believe it's true.

Clearly, this work is complex. At the beginning of my career, I was a high school social studies teacher. When I taught U.S. History, my essential question for the whole course was: *To what degree does the United States live up to the promise of its ideals?* We are, of course, a nation that was constructed around principles of equality and participation, and a nation that often points to the strength we derive from our pluralism. We are also a nation with an inescapably imperfect past that nonetheless, I think, valiantly continues to try to find our way. And, so this question, "*To what degree does the United States live up to the promise of its ideals?"* seemed worthy of exploration with kids on the verge of adulthood.

As perhaps some of you can relate to, it didn't always go well. I remember clearly a particular day in my U.S. History class in 1994 when I was teaching a lesson to 11th graders about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Seneca Falls Convention. If you know even a little bit about me, you might guess that I am a fan of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and that I get animated when discussing the women's suffrage movement. On this particular day, I was on a roll, when a student in my class raised his hand and asked me, "When are we going to study the "men's movement?" I replied, "You mean, other than the other 179 days of the school year?"

This, of course, was a stupid thing for me to say. I remember that interaction 20-some years later because I am not proud of it. My response did not promote exploration or dialogue. In fact, it did the opposite; it shut it down. It reflected my frustration with the question, instead of reflecting curiosity about why he

was asking it. It failed to honor the fact that my frame of reference was much bigger than his, and that my job was to guide him through the long and messy process of widening one's perspective.

And, that, of course, is the long and messy and incredibly important work that we are all engaged in. In public schools, regardless of the discipline we teach or the role that we have, we educate people to become citizens in a democracy. We develop in students the essential skills -- asking critical questions, taking perspective, demanding evidence -- that citizens need for democracy to thrive. We provide students with new experiences and put things in front of them (texts, images, dilemmas), so that they are able to engage in challenging conversations and consider their place in a broader world. We help them acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for moral reasoning, while remembering that our job as educators isn't to moralize as I, unfortunately, proceeded to do in my U.S. History class in 1994. It's clear to me now that the role of public schools is a particular one, one that is different from, say, a family or a place of worship. In schools, we exist in the tension between a set of important, core values -- a respect for human differences, a commitment to the well-being of every child -- that are broad enough to honor the diversity of beliefs that come through the door and an obligation to care for and teach kids whose beliefs may not align with our own.

We won't always get it right. And, that's OK provided we are then able step back, reflect, and regroup. Undoubtedly, in the coming weeks, kids will have questions about recent events in our country, like the demonstrations and violence in Charlottesville, and we will need to help each other figure out how to respond in ways that help them try to make sense of something that we are also trying to make sense of. Though I wish I could provide the clarity of a perfect strategy, I don't have one perfect answer for how to respond when confronted with a difficult or complicated question other than to inquire, rather than tell. I wish in 1994 I had just asked that kid to tell me more about why he was asking that question so I could have found a better entry point into the conversation. I acknowledge that doing this is really hard.

However, I do know this with total clarity: One of the most powerful ways that we teach is by who we are. As important as the knowledge and skills that we teach, this is what schools do: We provide an example for kids of what a functioning community looks like. We model how to work through conflict and disagreement with civility. We demonstrate what it looks like when people have respectful and caring relationships. We show kids what it means to be guided by values, to think beyond oneself, and to stand up for each other. In our microcosm, over time, and with an awareness of what kids are ready for developmentally, we allow students to observe and to practice citizenship before they have to do it in the world beyond school. From the moment that kids arrive in preschool, from those very first discussions about what it means to be a friend, a neighbor, a community, to the thorniest class discussions with teenagers about important questions that have no clear answers, the seeds are sown.

At a later time, in the Monday Memo, I will share my entry plan to spend the year listening and learning as I transition to my new role in the district. And, I will share what you can expect from me as I consider how best to support the work that all of you do. For now, though, let me say simply: Our work in schools really matters. Kids need us right now, we're all up to the task, and the Westwood Public Schools stands committed to being a safe, welcoming, and inclusive community for all of our students and for our staff.

I am grateful for your commitment to the students in this district, for the energy and good humor you bring each day. I appreciate that rather than getting overwhelmed by the role you play in kids' lives, you find joy in it. As Annie Dillard said, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." And, I feel quite sure today that spending one's days in schools makes one's life quite wonderful. I hope you feel the same way.

Have fun meeting those kids next week! I look forward to a great year!