

OPENING DAY SPEECH

September 5, 2006

Good morning and welcome to the 2006-2007 school year.

A number of you regularly tell me about your families and ask me how my grandchildren are doing, so I welcome this opportunity to tell you all.

My grandchildren, Noah and Talia, age 2 ½ and 15 months respectively, are well on their way to successful school lives. Like all North Colonie students, they understand the importance of sound bodies to create sound minds. Here you see Noah doing his morning stretches, Talia lifting weights, and Noah and Talia training for the high school swim team. They also understand the importance of role models. Noah often selects the look of one of his favorite role models, Grandpa Ron, and here he is seen emulating Ron's standard dress fare, blue blazer, blue shirt and tan pants – affectionately known in the family as “The Look”. Although Noah dresses like his grandfather, fortunately his favorite person is someone else. Like all good North Colonie students, his family members understand the importance of reading to him at home. Noah uses the skills he learns in math and science classes to design construction projects. He also participates in moving things around in real life. Also note Noah practicing for our driver's education program; he is nothing if not precocious! Talia is preparing to participate in an art class that will involve photography. And, in the final picture, she is packing her lunch to go to school.

Last year was another great year for North Colonie. I want to take a few minutes to celebrate the work done by all of you on behalf of our students. A number of these accomplishments are listed on the screen:

- Physical Education leadership awards program
- “Once on this Island” at Shaker High School
- “Oliver” at Shaker Junior High School
- Hosting NYSSMA solo festival in our district
- “Study Circles” work of the Globalization Committee
- Latham Circle Art Exhibit
- 100% of our students passed Foreign Language Regents Exams
- Jack Malloy's state championship win in the 800-meter event at this year's New York State Track and Field competition

- Two Russian foreign language students earned trips to Russia, based on their performance on the Russian Olympiad
- Shaker High School was identified as one of the 75 promising high schools nationwide
- Grace Huang and Arun Pattachi won \$20,000 scholarships for their individual work on breast cancer
- Eight teachers attended a Gross Anatomy Workshop at Albany Medical College
- Science Bowl Club was formed
- Science Olympiad Team was in its second year
- Elementary Art Explorers Program field trip to the NYS Museum and Empire State Plaza Art Collections
- Junior high school art students participated in the state's Olympics of the Visual Arts competition, winning first place in many of the categories entered
- High school art students exhibited work at the Colonie Town Library's new Teen Art Gallery and several were accepted into the Annual Regional Juried Exhibit held at Union College
- New Physics lab was fully operational
- Success of 8th grade students on mathematics and ELA exams
- Success of Shaker High School students on Regents required for graduation
- "Universals for writing instruction" were established by a K-12 committee of teachers and administrators
- District-wide celebration of the lives of Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King
- Exchange programs with Costa Rica, France, Germany and Russia
- Jazzaret Night
- Science Enrichment Days
- Authors' Visits
- Wonderful Summer School Programs
- Work of our K-12 Curriculum Committees
- Work on Differentiated Instruction
- Outstanding NYSSMA Festival Successes
- Veterans' Day Celebration
- 164 teachers participated in 35 curriculum workshops
- Creation of an anti-bullying, anti-harassment pamphlet

And to add to this list, 97% of our graduates earned Regents diplomas, and 72% of our students with disabilities earned Regents diplomas. These are wonderful accomplishments, and they are the result of all of the efforts of staff members at all grade levels. I applaud you.

It is now with great pleasure that I introduce our new North Colonie faculty members. I will call you by groups. Please hold your applause until all names in a group are called. As I call your name, please stand and remain standing. I also want to recognize our graduate interns, master level special education teacher interns and psychology interns.

I would like to thank all of you who are serving as mentors for the 2006-2007 school year, those who participated in the August skit, as well as those of you who have participated in the mentorship program in past years. Would you all please stand and be recognized? Special thanks go to Joe Corr, Bob Bedell and Dimitri Vasilakis for their leadership in this program that is jointly sponsored by North Colonie Teachers' Association and the district.

District focus continues in a number of key areas. We are working to meet the wide range of needs of all our students. To this end, our differentiated instruction initiative is serving us well. Also work is progressing very well on our K-12 reading and writing initiatives. Technology is being infused in all curriculum areas, and this year we stand committed to reinvigorating technology throughout the grades and subject areas to an even greater extent.

The work of the district Globalization task force is now in the form of "Study Circles". One of the ideas that grew out of our Study Circles is the creation of a globalization literature group. The goal of our work is to better understand one another and to help sustain high expectations for all students. The first book selected for study this year is Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom, by Lisa Delpit. I will be participating in this book discussion group and invite you to do so too. Information can be found in the district's Staff Development Resource Booklet.

Our new district website was launched in late August, and we have high hopes to use it as a strong communication tool with our community.

I think that our job as educators is one of inspiring, inspiring the young students in our charge to be all that they can be. This summer I was inspired by a speaker and by a book and in my desire to inspire you, I share both of these with you. First, the speaker:

Howard Gardner's work is familiar to all of us. This summer I heard Gardner speak about his forthcoming book called Five Minds for the Future. He stated that an alternative title could have been: "Might NCLB Morph into American Public Education Left Behind?" Gardner speaks of five minds:

- The Disciplined Mind
- The Synthesizing Mind
- The Creating Mind
- The Respecting Mind and
- The Ethical Mind

Given the vast changes in the world, and the shifting responsibility for education across the life span, Gardner discusses the kinds of minds that will be at the greatest premium in this century and how best to cultivate them. Each mind is necessary, needs to be developed and nurtured.

1. The Disciplined Mind. Students need to learn the ways of thinking in the major disciplines. Students must have at least one area of expertise. Also students must have those habits of continued application so that learning can continue through life.
2. The Synthesizing Mind. We live in a world with scads of information. This information is largely undigested and unevaluated. We must teach our students to synthesis. They will need to be able to decide what is important and how best to organize it for themselves. Then they will need to know how to best communicate it to others.
3. The Creating Mind. Students need to master one or more disciplines and synthesize what is known. Then they must go beyond the known and begin to think outside the box. This is an imperative in the information age. They must be taught to ask good questions, new questions. Such a mind cannot be constrained by what has been thought or done before.

4. The Respectful Mind. Quite simply, diversity is a fact of life at home and abroad. Our students need to go beyond mere tolerance. They need to truly understand others, their perspectives, their motivation and their emotional and interpersonal intelligence. They must cultivate an atmosphere of openness and reciprocity.
5. The Ethical Mind. This requires moving beyond the respectful mind and conceptualizing oneself as a good worker and as a good citizen. It means acting appropriately in both roles. It requires teachers helping students to want to do good work.

Ethical good work is:

- excellent, expert, high quality
- socially responsible
- meaningful, exciting, intrinsically motivated.

Many of our students know the right thing to do. Some do it. But too many students everywhere deceive others and themselves asking: “Why should I be more ethical than my peers seem to be?”

As Gardner states, “To nurture good workers who are respectful and ethical, we must imbue our students with early value systems. They must have positive first work place experiences (internships). They need vertical supports (mentors) and horizontal supports (peers).”

Gardner feels that ultimately to nurture The Five Minds, we must create the right atmosphere and expose students to exemplars of good work and tell them the cautionary tales of bad/compromised workers. We must give them courses/experiences in at least the major disciplinary families and expect them to demonstrate appropriate understanding.

He concluded his remarks by giving his audience of educators the ultimate challenge. Realizing the tensions between these five minds, we must work with our students to synthesize the Five Minds into one integrated human being, who can work effectively with others. This challenge is why education will always be, in part, an art.

The book Wink, by Ed Hotaling, is the biography of a black jockey named Jimmy Winkfield. Winkfield was the youngest of seventeen children born in Kentucky in 1880. His parents died when he was young, and he had

to support himself at an early age. He went from jobs shining shoes and carriage driving to riding racehorses. He rose to great success in this country, all the while fighting jealousy and racism. Then, at age twenty-three, he was forced from American horseracing by racism and difficult economic times.

“Wink” spent the next several decades in the capitals of Europe, going from the splendor of Czarist Russia to the upheaval of the Bolshevik Revolution. During the Revolution, he was forced into an eleven hundred mile trek to Poland, surviving on horseflesh. Twenty years later, on top in France, he then fled to protect his family from the Nazis.

As I thought about the qualities that Jimmy Winkfield demonstrated throughout his extraordinary life, I realized that these qualities have an importance for all times. These are attributes that we need to develop in our students, just as we must work on all aspects of the five minds that Gardner discusses. Winkfield accomplished what he did against all odds through hard work, perseverance, resilience and creativity, in spite of huge constraints. He was adaptable to changing circumstances that included racism, poverty, revolution and war.

Our students need to know the stories of those who have shown incredible strength during times of adversity. In this manner, they will become stronger individuals themselves. The lessons I have taken from both Gardner’s work and Wink’s life suggest to me how challenging our tasks as educators are. There are so many things we need to accomplish. All are required by our students to survive and thrive in the world.

Best wishes for a joyous and fulfilling year for you and each of your students. And now I ask you to sit back and enjoy “For Good”, from the Broadway musical Wicked, sung by Michelle Geisler and accompanied by Mr. Ned Fleisher. This song is dedicated to you, my heroes.