

Superintendent Suttmeier's Opening Day Message to Faculty/Staff, September 2012

Let me begin the theme of my message today by calling on the words of one of America's renowned songwriters and poets, Bob Dylan, when he sang, "You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing." Well, we are all keenly aware that the winds of change have been howling around our district for a long time now. We seem to be returning to school each year with some sort new mandate or improvement status imposed upon us from the State. It is easy to allow ourselves to be tossed around by the ever changing winds and become discouraged if not desensitized to the idea of failure. This happens to us and it happens to our students. If we as educators and they as students enter each school year, expecting to fail, we and they will. As Henry Ford advised, "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't...you're right." Our focus this morning will be on how we can use these winds of change to our benefit – to allow it to inflate rather deflate us. After all, we are Bluehawks and Bluehawks need wind beneath their wings in order to soar to new heights. We will capture that wind, use it to our advantage and we WILL soar! How is this achievable? Once again, the ageless Dylan provides a clue, "The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind."

You may have noticed something different as you drove onto our campus this morning. Banners of character grace all three of our campuses with the words pride, safety, respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, caring and citizenship proudly and prominently billowing in the wind thanks to the generosity of the JLE PTO, IS HOPE, Investments in Youth, and the Greater Hudson Promise Neighborhood. The banners can be perceived as just words, or they can be a symbol of unity of what Hudson stands for as a district. They will be a message to our community and all who pass by that not only have they entered Bluehawk territory, but that something great, something important is happening inside our walls.

As many of you know, my love and passion for our profession runs deep. I am a teacher first in habit, heart, and soul. Even though I serve as an administrator, I never stop teaching. I am simply teaching a different what and how. You have heard me repeat many times my belief that next to parenting, teaching is the most difficult job there is. I have never stopped being inspired and in awe of the hard work you, my colleagues do, day in and day out. 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 difficult 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 a galaxy?

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

I can think back to several of my teachers who helped to shape me into the person I am today. My first teachers of course were my parents, but my school teachers are the ones who inspired me to want to be one of them. They were and continue to be my own personal heroes. I understood early on that education was the great equalizer and I witnessed how teachers opened the doors of opportunity for students. They showed me the nobility of the profession, and the great joy—both given and received when knowledge is shared and futures are shaped and planned. Most likely, my teachers did not think they were indelibly marking me for life with their gestures and style, but they were. I am sure all of you have 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 giving shape and character to their lives. And when we add together the hundreds or thousands of students whose lives each of you have touched, you can begin to see how your values and your influence truly help shape our society.

In this respect, education is the most optimistic and promising 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 for life. 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, custodians, aides, and support staff. Students learn from our body language as well as from our assignments, from our vocal inflections as much as the content of our lectures, from our smiles as much as our stern gazes, from our words of encouragement as much as our corrections on their work. In a sense, how we teach is what we teach. 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.

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, together we can make the Hudson City School District one of the better small city school districts in the State. By this I mean we should strive to be a place that synthesizes two overarching imperatives – academic excellence and character development. 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, seeking to be challenged, or simply figuring out who they are. Our most vulnerable students need your courage, your belief in them, and your commitment to help shape their character. All students should be challenged and supported as they begin to discover who they are and what kind of chance they stand in the future.

Without question our greatest goal and challenge 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. 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 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?"

Earlier, I said 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 Hudson?

Over half of our students are considered low-income. For about 6 percent of our students, English is not their first language, and those students represent approximately 13 countries of origin. Approximately one third of our student body includes persons of color, and nearly 20 percent are students with special needs.

Our diverse student body is one of our greatest strengths; but, as we all know, it also presents many unique challenges. I can think of no other issues that define yet divide our nation as much as race and socio-economic status. While schools certainly cannot solve all of society's problems, we remain the institution best suited to address some key concerns.

The focus must be on learning and 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? What will that child's thirteen year journey and final walk across this stage as a graduate look like?

Not only do we want students to be excited about learning, challenged at every turn, and supported in each moment of need, we should 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," in Latin means "a path to be followed." We should clear the path, for the students, so they and we understand that there is a beginning, middle and an end to their public school education - and, the promise of a greater future.

The second goal is to involve the community in the life of the schools. There is no shortage of educational research or plain common sense that says when parents or just one caring adult participates actively in a child's education, that child will succeed. 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, because they are. Help them understand the kinds of things they can do to support your work with their sons and daughters. Everyone wins when teachers, families, and the community work together. This is where the Greater Hudson Promise Neighborhood can assist the district with breaking barriers and building bridges.

My first goal focused on improving things for students; the second goal emphasized improving things for parents; my third goal involves improving things for staff. I envision our 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 education of their children, 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 to know today that I stand 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 Hudson City School District. 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 Hudson, NY is a very small place. But, 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 this week. The power to become a hero in a child's life, my dear colleagues, is yours. It is indeed an awesome power and responsibility.

Are the Bluehawks ready to rise to the occasion?

The answer my friends, is blowing in the wind... I can hear it and as we work together throughout the year, I hope you will come to hear it too.