

Introduction

Today we celebrate you, graduates, not only for achieving your degrees, but for your commitment to a profession that meaningfully changes the trajectory of a child, family, and community. Each of you has a personal story and you enhance the stories of others. As you move forward, within this influential educational profession collectively, you will continue to develop a powerful narrative in schools and communities throughout California.

Last week I was asked to participate on a panel for the National Superintendents' Academy. I was asked, "As a leader, how important is this idea of one's story?" I responded, a student's story, a teacher's story, and the collective story we create as educators, are the passion and engine behind our work. My belief was validated by a gentleman I met at the event.

Jerome shared the story of his life and educational journey. He was born in Sri Lanka during a time of Civil War. Planes would frequently drop bombs by his home. Violence and crime were rampant. As a refugee family and after many years of struggle, his family was sponsored and moved to the Bay Area when he was 11 years old. The family experienced great apprehension and fear, given they were not educated nor spoke English.

Five days after moving to the United States, Jerome enrolled in the 7th grade. Jerome was placed in a special education class, and one year later, it was acknowledged that he was inappropriately placed. He transitioned into general education classes with support as an English learner. In his first two years of high school, he had no plans or goals. Through the encouragement of a Physics teacher and the support of AVID, Jerome's goals sharpened. After graduating from high

school, he attended UC Davis, John Hopkins University, and UC San Francisco, he is now an OB/GYN medical doctor.

When I listened closely to Jerome's story, it was clear that each individual teacher relationship was influential. While I thought he may have harbored anger for being inappropriately placed in special education, ironically he shared that it was the best thing that happened to him. During such a vulnerable time of transition, the special education teachers and students were kind and supportive. In class, small attempts and victories were celebrated, from word pronunciation to completing sentences.

I was moved after my conversation with Jerome. The story may have had a very different ending if his first teachers hadn't read his potential, listened to his progress and believed in the vision of who he could be. What a powerful profession you are in. Remember to listen.

Every student, educator, and community has an important story.

I learned in the most formative stage of being an educator, that the dream of a child is of great value. When a student's aspirations are articulated, by the student and parent, it can become a driving force for the school community, if we are attentive. In my first year working in education at Bret Harte Elementary, I integrated into my practice, home visits, where I spent time **listening** to the dreams and hopes of the students and parents, their stories. School-community meetings that we facilitated started with students sharing their goals and aspirations. While this may seem like a simple activity, maintaining this practice is invaluable as an educator and as a profession. The benefits are many: belief, commitment, vision, passion, and love for students grow. When a student feels that they are heard, and

senses the commitment of a teacher and community behind them in a real way, a “sense of possibility” comes alive, regardless of their circumstances. Listen with purpose.

A student's story...

Last week, I attended Golden Sierra High School’s graduation. As I sat on stage, I witnessed a resilient young lady receive her diploma to a cheering school-community. Her name was Faith. On Faith’s mortarboard it stated, “My father would be so proud. 5.30.17.” These words were a part of Faith’s story. You see, three days before Faith’s graduation, her father passed. Her mother wasn’t in the home, so her father’s passing left her alone. After the ceremony, I spoke with Faith. She shared her determined plans to attend college in the fall and major in Kinesiology and how, without the presence of her mother or father in her life, the students, faculty, and the community have lifted her up, creating a collective support network of commitment, and love around her. Faith’s story is one of grief, resilience, and hope. As I share with you Faith’s story, I picture Faith nestled into the hands of her community. They are attentive and committed to her. This community is now an important part of Faith’s story. They listened and made a choice to walk along side of Faith until she writes the final sentence.

An educator's story...

If time was not a factor, the opportunity to hear each of your stories would be a privilege for all of us...

What experiences have most shaped your life?

What do you really get excited and passion about?

What are you trying to create in the world?

Who are the people that listened, heard and supported your story?

Here is one of your stories.

This colleague of yours was raised in a working class single parent home in Vallejo, California. Life was challenging. In her 11th grade year of high school, she took 12th grade English. In her senior year, her counselor did not place her in a 4th year of English. As a result, she did not meet the requirement to attend her graduation ceremony and walk. Ironically, she was informed that she was a National Merit Scholar.

Following high school, and for 20 years, she had nightmares that she did not finish school. Life beyond high school was filled with great struggle: drug addiction, homelessness, a challenging marriage. A pivotal point of change occurred spiritually and in a time of homelessness, rather than focus solely at her own problems, she began to focus on caring for and serving others.

As a parent of four children, career goals began to sharpen, and higher education would become a critical path to achieve her goals at Contra Costa Community College and UC Davis. A significant experience for her at UC Davis was in her relationship and work with Dr. Paul Heckman and Dr. Gloria Rodriguez. She shared, "They encouraged and challenged me to express my authentic voice. I would hear them say to me, 'You belong here and WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR VOICE.'" Your colleague felt that her voice and her story was of great value.

For this graduate, more education means greater power, and with greater power, a greater responsibility to make a difference in the lives of many.

Lorraine Wilkins, please stand up!

Why is this idea of a “powerful story” relevant and important to the

educational profession today?

Students, teachers, and communities are experiencing exponential change in education. The changes are occurring at the federal, state, and local levels. In just the last few years, there has been a convergence of reforms altering California's educational landscape. New standards for English, Math, and Science, a new assessment system, the California Assessment for Student Performance and Progress, a new accountability system, the California School Dashboard. And if new standards and a new accountability system were not enough, the school finance system has been overhauled. This new system has shifted greater decision-making authority to local school districts and to the communities they serve.

We have shifted from a climate of punitive accountability to a climate that emphasizes local control and engagement, listening to the community.

A significant piece of my own story was as an urban high school principal that partnered with students, parents, teachers, and community leaders to transform a challenging school. During this time we were under a punitive accountability system. Basic safety and academic achievement were struggling. Attendance and achievement were low, and I personally dealt with a shooting inside a classroom. But, on a daily basis, the school community listened to the stories of our students and heard the hopes and dreams of our community for their children. This connection energized us to work long and hard for change. With focus and collective effort over the years, the culture of the school positively transformed, and 4-year college acceptance rates increased from 25% to 95%. With my colleagues, we acknowledged that our time, energy, and focus felt divided. We had to keep our eye on the performance of standardized tests to avoid punitive consequences, while

listening and honoring the aspirations of an urban high school to become a strong college prep system and community.

In the current climate, schools, districts, and communities are engaged in developing local goals and aspirations. Changing their community's story. For example, in West Sacramento, the City aspires to implement quality preschool for all, access to a guaranteed college savings account entering kindergarten, a paid internship in high school, and one-year free tuition at a local community college at the point of high school graduation. The opportunity for educators to be bold locally for students is at hand, but being attentive and listening to the stories, dreams, and aspiration of students, parents, and communities is critical.

Not long ago, I recall sitting in your seat with my colleagues. We had individual stories, but we knew together, we would create a new story in California education. UC Davis graduates are impacting students at all levels: directly in the classroom, schools, districts, County Offices of Education, the California Department of Education, the State Board. Graduates are positively impacting practice, policy, and research in our region.

Now you join us. This is your time to actively listen to those you will serve. To hear their authentic stories and take action to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of students, parents, educators, and communities. Congratulations graduates!