

Commencement Address
Sunday, May 13, 2018
UMSL College of Education and SUCCEED Program

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Good afternoon faculty, friends, family... and graduates and Happy Mother's Day to all moms!

I am so honored to stand before you as you celebrate your achievements and prepare for the next step in your lives as professionals in what I consider the greatest profession on earth – education – whether it be in teaching or administration, or research in the field. And, as you may have noticed from the bio the university provided to you, I have over the years engaged with all three.

On a personal note, this is a special time for me. The month of May, 2018 -- though it is just short of half way done -- has been one of the greatest for me. I am just finishing my second full academic year as superintendent of the School District of University City, and we are excited by our own commencement coming up tomorrow. But it is special as well because I have gotten to stroll down memory lane. On May 2, I spoke at a student safety summit at Lafayette High School in west St. Louis County – my alma mater. And now today, I am speaking at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, my doctoral alma mater. What a privilege!

Lafayette and UMSL are like bookends for me. In between I found the volumes that provided me with so many lessons for learning, teaching, and leading.

When I arrived at Lafayette, I was a shy, petite teenager riding a bus 45 minutes from an all-black north city neighborhood to a largely white school district in hopes of gaining my purchase on the American dream through a quality education.

Lafayette High did not let me down; it was both challenging, yet quite rewarding. As you may have noticed, I'm still petite. But not so shy. Because I found my voice at Lafayette High and it got louder and stronger and more forceful as I continued my educational journey to Harris-Stowe State College where I earned a B.S. Degree, Saint Louis University, for a master's degree, and then here where I completed by doctorate in 2014.

My first teaching position came in the St. Louis Public Schools district where I learned to use my voice with a principal who took a look at all five-foot-zero inches and 100 pounds and 23 years old of me and decided I didn't have what it would take to walk into an inner city classroom and do what needed to be done to help children learn.

"I just don't feel like you can handle this," he said.

I begged him to let me stay. Begged him to let me walk into a classroom with 12 special needs students and help them learn to love learning. He relented.

I taught my students and I taught them well. They thrived. But I longed for them and other learning-disabled children to be in a more inclusive environment. They felt labeled, and they were teased and taunted. I believed with all my heart that they could thrive in a mainstream classroom.

Growing up, I knew what it felt like to be labeled. I wasn't learning disabled. But I often felt different. Sometimes it was my size, my color, my unusual name, the neighborhood from which I came.

My own struggles forged within me a passion for students who also struggle, for those who feel different, or labeled or judged. I knew in my heart everyone of them could succeed as I did whatever mistakes they might make. They needed only to have people in their lives who would step up to say, "I believe in you. How can I help you take the next step to be the kind of person you want to be?"

This is what I call my WHY. Today I am asking you to think about your WHY.

WHY you took this educational journey. WHY you are sitting here today.

Your WHY will help keep you motivated when faced with adversity as you surely will be. Education in these times, in this region is not for the faint-of-heart.

Your WHY will provide you with your focus, your purpose. It will impact how you "show up" to support children.

Your WHY will minimize distractions because you will know it's the work that's important, not the brickbats, the catcalls, the second-guessing, which, of course, all comes with the territory.

And as you find your voice, your WHY will become apparent to all those who come into contact with you – students, parents, faculty, stakeholders and constituents. Your WHY represents your actions and behaviors that you consistently display.

Your WHY will encourage you to take risks on behalf of your kids. You will dare to fail on their behalf. And, no doubt, you will fail some of the time.

But your WHY will encourage you to learn from those mistakes; to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and get back in the game.

And in doing so, perhaps without even realizing it, you will serve as a role model for your students. They will see you as Teddy Roosevelt once put it to "dare greatly."

Let me read you the entire quotation:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the

deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

If you dare greatly, so will the children you serve. This I do believe.

In 2007, at age 27, I became a school principal, one of the youngest ever in the St. Louis Public Schools. My superintendent at that time, Cleveland Hammonds, told me lots of people were going to be watching me as I was taking on an under-performing school that was reopening after being closed for 12 years. He didn't exactly put it this way, but his message was this: “Don't blow it.”

And so I had to tap into my WHY and use my voice. Our day at Adams School started not with the first class, but with breakfast where I would greet students and talk to them about current events, from what happened across the globe to what went on down the street. With the staff I talked about being a “yes, yes” school. A school where you would want to work and where you would want to send your child.

We created a virtuous cycle of improvement by taking the stigma away from falling short and celebrating everyone who made gains.

We encouraged students to find and use their own voices. We started developing their WHYS.

And now just over a decade since my work at that school, I am superintendent of the School District of University City. University City is where I live with my husband James, and where I send my own daughter, Charli, to school. They are also my WHY. And everyone in U. City knows that. They know I have skin – my flesh and blood -- in the game.

We are a fully-accredited school district, which is good but insufficient. Our scores are not where they need to be and we know we need to be turning out graduates who are more fully-prepared for an increasingly competitive, challenging and complicated society.

But let me say right here and right now, test scores are not our WHY. If you want to motivate students, you DO NOT tell them how important it is to perform on a TEST. The TEST is life, not filling in bubbles on a piece of paper. The TEST is finding your voice, speaking up, creating change, using the gifts God has given you to positively impact your community. And to do all that you have to learn, to read, to do math, to apply all of that to real world issues that complicate our students' lives. And once we have achieved all that, the test scores will follow. I have no doubt of that.

My time is nearly up. But I would like to end with a message from an African tribe, the Masai. I hope you will find this message useful because when you stand up and walk out of here, you will begin to swim in sea filled with people who don't yet know their WHYS. They may be unfocused and distracted.

The Masai tribe have a traditional greeting that ends with these words: “And how are the children?”

The traditional answer is "All the children are well." This means life is good, for there is nothing more important in our world than the children.

And as you well know, in our time, in our region not all the children are well. But we cannot stop asking that question. "And how are the children?"

Leave here with that question on your lips. Keeping asking it of yourself and others. Relentlessly and, if you do, someday we can answer as the Masai do:

"All the children are well."