

Good Evening Graduates! Let me start by saying, congratulations on your accomplishments, and everything you have done to get you to this day.

Giving a graduation speech is a lot of pressure. I've got a short period of time up here and at the same time, I want to share a message that is meaningful and impactful that people will remember as they sit here and not just scroll through their phone halfway paying attention.

So when I was tasked with this, I thought a lot about my experience as a social worker and an educator for 10+ years. I started off as a social worker and I chose to be an educator and it's probably one of the best yet hardest decisions that I've made in my professional life. Over the last eight years I dedicated myself to helping foster and create an educational community that valued equity for all children in the classroom. Ensuring that each child that I worked with knew that they were seen, loved, supported and welcomed. Not only with adults that served them every day but also with the curriculum that they learned from. And somehow in the past year those things became something that was worthy of me being racial harassed and trolled by community members to the point where I decided I no longer wanted to stay in the role that I had grown to love so deeply.

You see, for me, being an educator (and social worker) has always been rooted in love - a love of learning, a love for the kids, community, and justice. And also an acknowledgment of all the sacrifices (rooted in love) that have been made for me to get to this point. Because what I do know is that I didn't get here by accident. While I would trade some of the things that I have experienced and racial trauma that I've endured I know that I am exactly where I should be. And as I look out at you all I know that you all are exactly where you should be. That none of this has been by chance that there have been many sacrifices made in your life and even the lives of those who came before you to get you to this point and it's important that we acknowledge those things as we walk along our journey.

And this journey is full of moves and counter moves. Make no mistake, this is not a game of checkers, this is a game of chess. And your ability to win - however you determine your win or end goal based is on how you move. Too often in the sector of education and in the space of helping others we focus on how we help in the now, which is a game of checkers. But the real question becomes how do we help in the now and the future. Chess is a game of long term moves and strategies.

The best advice I can give is to stop playing checkers with yourself and those you serve - and ask yourself what is your next move in the game of chess?

What I realized in the past year was that there were many times I thought this was a game of checkers. And that my hypothetical opponent had many faces. It's all the inequalities that exist in education (and society) when it comes to funding, access, racial and social justice and more recently Covid. And with some opponents it's almost impossible to play chess.

I've spent probably the last six months rethinking my moves and I think in any period of upheaval in your life there are lessons to be learned. And if you don't stop and take a moment to think about these lessons you will continue to repeat them. There have been times where I've been a pawn – one of the most overlooked pieces on the chessboard - yet my moves were complex & simple. As a school social worker who created book drives so I could ensure I could give every kid on my caseload a book that they could see a reflection of themselves. In my pawn days my moves were sometimes small but always calculated on equity. As a first year administrator, I was a Rook, still making simple moves but always moving forward. Focused on learning, and bringing others along with me in a journey towards equitable outcomes for all children. And then I became a bishop, as the highest and only black woman in a district level role, I was the most forgotten piece on the board. So I realized for me to best serve myself and the children I had to become a knight, a defining piece/player in the equity journey for the district - I valued being unique by always having an empathetic lens when it came to making decisions that impacted over 20,000 children each day. And once covid began, I started playing like a King, being aware that any moves I made had to be game winners – because our most vulnerable children required only game winning decisions to be made on their behalf. Finally, probably in May/June of this year, I decided I was going to be the most versatile piece on the board, a Queen. That my moves didn't have to just be straight forward or even diagonally, that I would move in any direction that allowed me to continue to educate, be an empathetic leader and vessel of justice and equity. What I've learned is it takes being a versatile player in order to make an impact.

So the message I want to leave you with is actually a couple of questions – what piece are you right now, and what's your next move? I want you to know that every move won't be great or even well received. There'll be times where you feel like maybe I'm not sitting at the right table - there really isn't a seat for me. And

every time that happens you need to remind yourself that you didn't get here by accident and this is a game of chess.

I want to leave you with the words of recently departed bell hooks, love is an action, never simply a feeling.

Be anchored in love, let it lead your actions.
Thank you so much for your time, be safe and well.