

Convocation Speech 2019-20

Good morning everyone and welcome to the official start of the 2019-20 school year in Scarsdale. I have said it before, and I will say it again: this is one of my favorite days of the school year as it is a time to connect with returning colleagues, to welcome new ones, and to dream about the year ahead without the clutter and stress that descends on most of us once the year is underway.

As we think about individual and collective goal-setting in advance of our students' arrival, I encourage you to be very intentional about how you will create a safe and inclusive community in which all students feel welcome.

In my back to school letter last week, I spoke about the power of belonging as a basic human need—one with powerful implications and potentially significant ramifications, both for the disenfranchised and those around them.

I'm sure most of you would agree that this is an important issue for consideration, but also perhaps question how important, particularly when leveraged against all the pressing issues that educators in Scarsdale confront on a daily basis.

According to a recent poll from YouGov, 30 % of all millennials say they feel lonely. Disaggregating this data, we learn that 22% of respondents say they have “no friends,” 27% say they have “no close friends,” and 30% say they have “no best friend.” These are the highest percentages of all generations surveyed to date and suggests a disturbing trend that our society's young adults feel more isolated and unwelcome than ever before. And when we look at GenZ'ers, our students' generation, we find that they similarly report high levels of loneliness, even at an age when they are surrounded by family, peers, and numerous support networks.

As a subset of generational groupings, underrepresented individuals particularly struggle for validation and inclusion. Research has shown that minorities utilize “masking” and “code-switching”, for example, to hide or conceal their full identity in order to fit into the perceived mainstream. In fact, nearly 79% of African Americans and 83% of LGBTQ individuals use these practices regularly to assimilate into work, school, and community norms. And perhaps the most concerning aspect of this need to hide in plain sight, is that more often than not, it happens unintentionally and unconsciously, suggesting that our need to fit in is somehow baked into our DNA or, at least, into our survival instincts.

Beyond the wear and tear on the soul and psyche, isolation and exclusion are deeply destructive forces to both the individuals affected and the communities in which they live. In the most Draconian examples, we find desperate lashing out in the form of disturbing acts of violence, like school shootings or suicide attempts. More pervasive though are the inward, self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, bodily harm, and promiscuity that individuals use to find temporary relief from chronic unhappiness, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance.

Intensifying this issue is our current socio-political environment that not only allows for, but in fact seems to encourage, divisiveness and the demonization of otherness. When stereotyping and marginalization regularly comes from our highest governmental office, it legitimizes and normalizes objectifying and dehumanizing differences, making our work of creating open and welcoming communities all the more difficult.

However unfair as it may seem, like so many other societal issues, it has become the responsibility of schools and educators to reestablish the norms of acceptance and inclusion on which our democratic society truly depends.

Educators have always been heroes of mine; one of the biggest reasons is that they have been and continue to be at the forefront of positive social change. Let's be honest, though, this is not easy work. According to an *Education Week* survey, 80% of educators said they thought a sense of belonging in the classroom is important for student success, highlighting how integral teachers are to building a positive learning environment and school culture. And yet, 41% of teachers say it is *challenging* or *very challenging* to make students feel like they belong in their classroom, particularly when it comes to concerns that students express about their sexual orientation, gender, race, socioeconomic, ethnic, and disability identities. Feelings of inadequacy when attempting to address all of these issues within a classroom context are, of course, perfectly normal and expected.

And yet, there are things that all educators can do to create learning spaces that are open to all. When we cull the research on this topic, it should not surprise anyone that these actually align closely with practices that can be seen on any given day when visiting Scarsdale classrooms. Even so, I encourage all of us to re-focus on these some of the most impactful efforts:

1. Making introductions a priority both in terms of getting to know your students, and having your students get to know one another is a great way to

start. Storytelling, particularly, is a powerful tool for developing relationships, empathy, and understanding.

2. Prioritizing high-quality, authentic, teacher-student relationships is another. This typically requires creating space for students to discuss their needs as learners and some formalizing of plans to accommodate those needs.
3. Creating supportive and caring learning environments by modeling vulnerability and resilience is yet another strategy. Talking about our own stories of failure and how we overcame them are powerful motivators for children and young adults alike.
4. Being sensitive to students' needs and emotions is also key. Our students' parents and past teachers are often great resources to help us to better understand their internal emotional landscape.
5. Setting standards and expectations for discourse is another helpful technique. Having early conversations about the inclusion of diverse points of view, and how you or your students might challenge stereotypes in respectful ways will, no doubt, help to more effectively navigate difficult conversations when they arise in the classroom setting.
6. Showing interest in students' lives, family histories, and other experiences also signal a desire to know them as individuals and full members of the classroom community, and finally,
7. Fostering a sense of community by establishing norms for respect and fair treatment speaks to the importance of these values around equality and accountability for all. For example, many Scarsdale teachers already brainstorm classroom ground rules with their students to ensure student voice and commitment in creating and maintaining classroom culture.

In addition to bolstering classroom practices around inclusion, curricular implications might also be considered. In a *Learning & the Brain* blog post entitled "The Psychology of Belonging (And Why it Matters)," Myra Laldin explains:

"Research has shown that having academic material mirror students' home life and culture helps them relate to the curriculum and take ownership in learning...Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) aims...to create an environment where there are no subtle or overt pressures for students to disavow their own culture and assimilate to the majority culture." This can be true of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and many other marginalized groups. Even among the most rigorous of our courses, providing students with a choice of texts, research topics, and ways to demonstrate content mastery, encourages students to authentically engage in work that is also personally meaningful.

Now, some would argue that educators' responsibilities in this arena are limited to that of subject matter. In fact, during our strategic planning process this past year, I was taken aback by a community survey response that said, "Stop social engineering our students, and just teach!" Sadly, this was not a singular outlier. But, one of our mottos in Scarsdale has been to provide "A classical education taught in a progressive fashion." This reminds us of our progressive roots, and, particularly, John Dewey, who fervently believed that education is a social contract with an obligation for educators to address moral and ethical issues aimed at making our society a better place. Personally, I can think of no more pressing issue today than that of creating a sense of belonging and affiliation.

I want to leave you with one last thought. Marina Keegan was a beautiful, energetic, and vibrant young woman. She was also a 2012 graduate of Yale University. While still in school, she published a book of essays, entitled *The Opposite of Loneliness*. Marina said that, "We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life." An excerpt from one of her essays further clarifies this sentiment, "It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team."

Marina died tragically in a car accident five days after she graduated *magna cum laude*. But her legacy and her call to action are very much alive when we choose to be that abundance of people who are here for one another and, even more importantly for those who need us most. As educators and unapologetic agents of social change, we must embrace one another as we create spaces for our students to be their best, authentic selves.

I recognize that this is a little more serious than some talks I have given in the past, but I also believe these words needed to be said out loud today. What I know is magical about this place, and about each of you, is that you care deeply about one another, about our students, and about the community we have created here.

Social Science validates what many of us already know, the greatest impact that you have as a teacher comes from the power of personal conviction. What you are passionate about and what you believe in is contagious and undeniable to those around you. I am confident that we share the ideal of preserving the best parts of what Scarsdale has been, while being committed to making it even more welcoming and inclusive as we move into the 2019-2020 school year.

I pledge to make this even more of a priority, and I ask you to do the same.

Thank you...I know we are all looking forward to a great year ahead with all of you.