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Superintendent Dan Brenner's 2017 Graduation Speech: Be Passionate and Curious

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Here's Superintendent Dan Brenner's speech, as delivered, at Darien High School's 2017 graduation ceremony:

Members of the Board of Education, parents, friends and relatives, and most importantly the Darien High School Class of 2017, I am truly honored to be able to congratulate you on this momentous day.

Early in my career I had the good fortune to watch a group of students share their English essays all titled, "This I believe." In their honor, I thought I would borrow their writing prompt and begin my talk by saying:

I believe ...

Passion and Curiosity

When people are interviewed for a job there are several character traits that are essential for employers to evaluate. Possibly the most important are embodied in the following question:

“Is the person passionate and curious about what they do?”

Let me explain what I think that implies.

I would suggest it means we are looking for a person who approaches all situations with enthusiasm, regardless of the task, and that they possess an inquisitive mind that prompts them to question.

It means if they are a doctor or a lawyer, they have a keen sense of commitment to provide each and every patient or client the best service possible, and they are forever seeking new ways to do so.

It means if they are a teacher, they love to be around kids and are enthralled by the content area they teach, as they constantly seek new ways to challenge their students.

What makes this such a complicated task for employers is that this is not typically a trait that is uncovered in an interview, nor is it one that can easily be taught. It is one that individuals must embody because it is who they are, not who they are told they have to be. There is nothing that substitutes for passion and curiosity. This I believe.

Teaching and Testing

The world of education is changing. It's a changing landscape. In many ways we have fallen prey to a test-driven culture where everything must be measured by a number. State testing now occurs for children as young as eight years old. This is all done in an effort to supposedly get them “college and career ready.”

That's right, we are being told eight year olds need to be preparing for college and career readiness.

Unfortunately, in an effort to increase standards and inject more rigor into the curriculum, many of our educational policymakers have lost their way.

Teaching children to think, to question, to seek out information is our true task, not teaching to them ask the age-old question, “Is that going to be on the test?” — knowing full well that if the answer is ‘no’ they stop listening. Teaching to a test squashes the passion to learn. This I believe.

I have had the good fortune to visit China twice in my career. While there I was able to speak with many Chinese educators, hoping to learn from them about what they were doing to inspire educational excellence. After all, China is ranked among the leaders in the education world, a country the U.S. has been cited repeatedly as lagging sadly behind.

See also:

- [Darien High School's Class of 2017 Graduates, Spirits Undampened](#)
 - [DHS Principal Ellen Dunn to Class of 2017: Overcoming Your Struggles Will Shape You](#)
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Here is what the Chinese educators surprisingly shared: They're not universally proud of their educational system. Instead, they explained they were envious of our teaching practices in the U.S. Time and again, I was asked how we teach creativity. How do our teachers instruct students to be creators of information and not simply receptacles of data?

They indicated they were upset about the phrase, "Made in China." They are actively seeking ways to change that to "Created in China." As an example they cited that the U.S. imports cars from all over the world, Japan, Germany, Korea, but very few from China.

They are fully aware that their test-driven culture does not support creativity, but instead fosters a sense of indifference as it applies to learning for learning's sake. In China, if it is not on the test then they are likely not learning it.

So the answer to how to teach our students to be creative is simple:

- We start by teaching young children to be curious about what they study.
- We encourage them to ask questions.
- We want them to get excited about what they learn.
- We want them to be passionate about learning.
- We fend off indifference and hopefully the temptation to teach to the test.

A Clean Slate

In a few short months this graduating class will be faced with exciting new opportunities. There will be an incredible moment that will allow many of you to redefine who you are. As you move off to places away from Darien, you will encounter others who have no prior knowledge of who you are, or for that matter who you have been.

Gone is the history of being the quiet student in the middle school or the top athlete, or the lead in the play, or even the president of the class, all of which somehow defined who you were in high school.

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Instead you are entering the land of *Tabula Rasa* — a clean slate. You literally have the opportunity to take who you are today and evolve into the person you would like to be, and to do it without the baggage of a <http://darienite.com> have made this difficult.

Implied in what I am saying is that everyone wants to shed their current Darien character traits to become some “new person.”

But in fact I am not saying that at all.

Today is a day to be proud of you — and that we truly are.

We are proud to have you in our lives.

We are proud of all of your achievements.

We are proud of the people you have become.

Take the Opportunity to Reflect

But when we hit milestones such as graduation it gives us a chance to reflect, and through reflection we often can learn and grow.

I would ask that you think about who you are and the person you want to be.

I would ask you to think about the passion you bring to life and what positive effect you have on those around you.

I would ask you to examine where personal indifference has invaded your life and how it has impacted you in day-to-day functioning.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

“Isn’t it funny how day by day – nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different.”

I believe Lewis is saying when we *reflect*, we will remember our passion and not the details of the day.

I believe DHS has prepared each of you to be a success academically. My wish is that you bring your passionate self to your everyday life because that is the key to happiness and success.

This I believe.

Thank you and congratulations.

Editor's note: Changes have been made to Brenner's text with the addition of subheadings and Darienite.com's editorial style. The speech is as he gave it rather than the prepared text.