RETURN TO SCHOOL SPEECH

FOR

PAUL WEBER

Hello everyone!! Well, It’s that time of the year again… the excitement is palpable and so is the fear…. tensions are rising, and so are expectations. There is a collective question mark in the air as hundreds and thousands prepare to march towards the great unknown in order to learn… and that would be **US**… the teachers and administration!! (**Wait for the laugh**). What about the students?!?! I think you might agree that part of the thrill of being an educator or working in the school system is the anticipation of the beginning of the new school year. As the air turns crisp and as we return to our classrooms, studios, and labs, the slate is clean and possibility is ours. Even as we face the challenges we all know too well, it’s so important to bring a willingness and enthusiasm to the task. We have been entrusted with very precious cargo. The lessons we teach… and learn have the potential to have a tremendous impact on the future. It’s been said that the true teacher is the lesson itself. As curricula and changes to the educational standards are set and updated by the New York State Department of Education, it is our mandate as passionate learners, to find the place within ourselves that inspired us to teach and to recreate that excitement for the next generation. It is our job to reconnect with the thirst to learn and to feed that thirst within us as well as in those who look to us for guidance and mentorship.

Years ago I remember hearing the phrase, “**If you want to be interesting, be interested**.” As teachers who have to instill knowledge in the minds and hearts of today’s youth, we have to be in touch with what ignites **our** curiosity. We have to translate those sparks into concrete points for the student to grasp, and it all has to be done with dedication, focus on educating “the whole child” and finding the sparks within ourselves that spread enthusiasm **virally**. (**If you want to** make a joke you can say) Hey, let’s face it… a powerful lesson can and should be more potent than a mean stomach flu!! (**Or name whatever virus tends to spread throughout the school annually and wait for the laugh**).

For those of you that may not know, today signifies the beginning of my nineteenth year of teaching and although I may not be considered that “long in the tooth” by professional standards, throughout my years within the NY State educational system I have been a teacher as well as an administrator. Currently I am a high school band teacher and Chairperson for the Art and Music Department grades K-12 in the Bayport-Blue Point School District. I am fortunate to have a unique vantage point in that I interact with students within the full gamut of grades. I have the privilege to witness the soul of a young child awaken in a music class as well as being able to see visceral reactions to great artworks and what they can evoke in young people that might otherwise be apathetic. For a moment, think back on when you were a high school student. What piece of music caught your attention? What great or simple work of art found it’s way into your soul? What will it take within each one of you to recall what really got your interest and how will you use that sense memory to inspire your students? Of course the examples I mentioned earlier are the idealistic ends of the spectrum and offered as a point of reference, but to me it’s so important to always retain focus on where we are, how we can empathize with the entire teaching process and why we do what we do. We also cannot lose site of the fact that the world is getting more challenging and complicated to navigate. It is up to us to address the urgency of educating the “whole child” regardless of age or level of past participation.

Granted, we all begin the new school year with plans and dreams and all good intentions, but as Pablo Picasso said, “ What one **does** is what counts and not what one had the **intention** of doing.” Is there anything more annoying than a friend that says, “Yeah… I was **gonna** but then I….. “ … Fill in the blank with the most creative excuse. Don’t you want to say, “Then **JUST DO IT**?” Today I propose that we look at our jobs and our mission with new eyes. **Intention must equal effective action**. As we get into the school year we need to find the ways and means to constantly return our focus to our purpose. It’s so important for us to dedicate and rededicate our attention and Intention to inspiring the student to **WANT** to learn. And that isn’t easy. We’ve got **ALOT** of competition!! And in order for our intention to manifest successfully, each one of us must be all in with regard to our commitment and concentration. From adapting to the challenges of teaching with regard to the Common Core Standards and APPR imposed by the New York State Department of Education and then in addition, learning to deal with distractions and new patterns of concentration… or NON-concentration based on the proliferation of technology in every facet of our lives, now more than ever we as educators must “up our game” and navigate new and unique paths to learning within the benchmarks provided. A very smart person once said, “Adapt or die.” If you ask me, there’s one clear option and we have to make the new order work.

I would like to share some thoughts about Common Core. Whenever new methods of teaching enter the vernacular to challenge the prior status quo, it stirs the pot. But let’s try to place this in perspective. If we take a quick look back at a brief history of education throughout the years, let’s pause and reflect on what was, how it evolved, and how we somehow got here…

* In an article published in Psychology Today entitled “A Brief History of Education: To understand schools we must view them in historical perspective” the author reminds us:
  + In the beginning, for hundreds of thousands of years, children educated themselves with self- directed play and exploration. (**You can add**) Nope!! No teachers needed here!! (**And wait for the laugh**)
  + With the rise of agriculture and later industry, children became forced laborers. … Eh… they probably weren’t needed here either…
  + The idea and practice of compulsory education developed gradually in Europe, starting around the 16th century.
  + In the 17th Century, Massachusetts became the first colony to mandate schooling for the stated purpose of turning children into good Puritans.

And to ad some more perspective… few years ago, a “Common Exam” from 1912 that was routinely given to eighth graders in rural Kentucky was discovered. It was posted on a website and if you’re curious you can find it here (**Here is the link if you want to refer to it:**) <http://bullittcountyhistory.org/bullitthistory/bchistory/schoolexam1912.html>). Reports mention that few people in this day and age can ace the test that was originally intended for an eighth grader!! And who can forget the tailspin caused by the “New Math” of the 1960’s? Didn’t **THAT** cause a little uproar!! My point is that as education adapts with the times, we must adapt with methods of education in order to discover what works and what concepts work to standardize and prepare our students for their adulthood. Every generation has its inherent idiosyncrasies and challenges. It’s up to us as leaders in the field to embrace changes in order to support the future, and make no mistake, these students **are the future** and they must be fully educated and properly prepared to navigate the world they will inherit.

As we go off to our classrooms to face the hordes (**Can you say this for a laugh?)** …. I mean meet our new crop of eager students I invite you to think of the words of the late Andy Rooney, a pundit with an irrepressible talent for being a keen and witty observer of life, who said, “Most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have **thousands** of people who remember them for the rest of their lives.” Think about the teachers **YOU** remember throughout your lives from when you were students. Think about what got to you in their manner. Was it humor or compassion? Was it a strict but certain knowing way that instilled confidence in you? Think of the mistakes you made as a young student and how that certain teacher turned your errors into priceless life lessons and taught you to be responsible for your actions.

Every day as we arrive at school, each one of us has the opportunity to make a difference in dozens of young, impressionable, and hopefully eager lives and minds. That’s done by keeping an open mind, really focusing on sharing the knowledge and meaning of each lesson, and partnering with the students. In fifteen or twenty years, what will they remember that they learned from **YOU**? This new beginning of the coming school year is our chance individually and as a collective to learn with our students as we teach them. The learning really doesn’t stop… ever…. but we know that.

(**If you want to tell a joke as you finish, you can say**) In conclusion I want to say that we cannot underestimate the importance of giving and getting a quality education. We also cannot underestimate the importance of technology in our lives and even young children have their own phones- whether that’s good or bad is debatable, but look on the bright side. If you ask Siri to tell you a joke she’ll give you an English lesson. It goes like this. “Past, present and future walk into a bar. It was **tense**.” (**Wait for the laugh**). …And with that, I wish everyone in the Bayport- Blue Point School District a productive, insightful, effective, and successful school year! Thank you all!