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CGCSC Teacher of the Year 2014-15  
Opening Day Speech

So, today....today is all about being exceptional. When I started thinking about what it meant to be exceptional, I must say that it was much easier to think of the opposite because the media does a bang up job of bombarding us with example after example, real or imagined, of ways that teachers fall short. From jokes implying our apathy, shows that glorify the “worst” of our profession, and onto newspaper articles that emphasize and sensationalize the negatives.

But exceptional – what does it really mean and who really measures up?

I don’t know about you, but I think with all of these things in the present educational climate that thinking about being an exceptional teacher has become physically and mentally exhausting. Many days, being exceptional seems like a goal that I can never reach.

Sometimes the thought of taking risk or stepping out on a limb to try something new or share something with others just doesn’t seem worth it. But I say, in supporting this season of being exceptional, we need to adopt a new attitude.

So what does it mean to be exceptional? The oxford English dictionary defines exceptional as being “of the nature of or forming an exception: something out of the ordinary course, unusual, or special.”

When I listen to that definition, I can’t help but automatically think of teachers!

Every day we get to positively impact the future of our world. We have a direct impact on nearly every person in our society. We train and equip students with skills necessary to be successful in whatever capacity they serve.

Every day we get to live with a deep sense of purpose. We are exceptional because we possess a great power to influence and clearly shape America’s future. In a 2012 study, the RAND Corporation, a leading research nonprofit, found that “teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling.” They said, “When it comes to student performance on reading and math tests, a teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor, including service s, facilities, and even leadership.”

Every day we get to be compassionate. Teaching is emotionally hard and the emotional investment you put into it really costs you. I just think about all those circumstances in which kids live that make you want to just pack them up and take them home with you; or, make you pack an extra granola bar in your lunch just to be sure a student gets breakfast; or, making sure a child has clean clothes to wear to school each day; or, that the size six pink sparkly coat that you just happened to find in your closet suddenly appears in your classroom for that little girl

who is always cold at recess; or, just the fact that we are willing to give up our precious minutes before or after school or during lunch or our prep just because a student needs someone to listen to them. In so many cases, we ARE that ONE caring adult that research says separates individuals who succeed in life from those who fail.

Every day we get to give and receive unconditional love – well at least in the elementary. We get the opportunity to create a positive learning environment, and try to develop a relationship that makes each student feel loved. We know that comfortable students participate, ask for help, and strive to do their best. We know that when students sense genuine interest, they are motivated and strive to challenge themselves academically

Every day we get to be creative. We are creative in adapting and developing learning activities, and to use technology in our classroom to allow our students to experience the world.

Every day we get to inspire students. We influence students to think in creative and productive ways. Sean Maguire, from Good Will Hunting said: “Some people can’t believe in themselves until someone else believes in them first.” –We are exceptional because we believe in our students every single day.

Every day we get to experience the joy of working with kids - which means we are automatically exceptional because we have to be so flexible. We understand that even when we do our best, some students will misbehave, technology will not work as expected, and unexpected interruptions will occur. Nonetheless, as exceptional teachers we only focus on what we can control, instead of what we can't, and we keep doing our best.

Every day we get to be a student – I mean really who doesn't love a 2 hours delay. But we also get to learn the latest technology, implement best practice, and watch the spark of understanding occur in those around us from kids to peers alike. And if we are really tuned in, our kids can teach us a lot too.

And what truly makes us exceptional is that no matter what we experience, how crazy the day gets, or how we feel, every day we get to keep coming back.

Today we look to the year ahead with hope and optimism. We expect great things from our students and we expect great things from ourselves. I think we need to “shake off” the negative aura that is surrounding our professions. We need to speak out for our profession, take risks in our teaching and sharing. We need to keep striving in our teaching and learning because we are exceptional and we have an exceptional impact on the lives of children.

To be truly exceptional we need to stop listening to the negative voices regarding our profession and instead we need to identify the experts that are down in the trenches with us.

We need to actively collaborate, share our expertise, share our weaknesses and own our exceptional status.

One of the kindergarten teachers in my building has a t-shirt that says “I teach. What’s your superpower?” And I love that! We are superheroes of the educational world! Teachers have one of the most important jobs. We are intelligent. We are compassionate. We are accomplished and we work hard beyond the range of normal human ability to protect, teach, and impact the kids of society for the general good.

I know that every day isn’t awesome (Lego movie song), but it should be our goal. We are responsible for developing a community of learners in our classrooms where students are happy, safe, and willing to take risks to learn and grow. A hard job for sure, but we are teachers, and we are up for the challenge! So when the negatives that are bombarding our profession start to get you down, remember your superpowers, embrace being exceptional, and have a great year!

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