

CAS SCHOLAR-LEADER BANQUET REMARKS

By Catherine Freeman, Math Mastery Teacher, Sage Park Middle School
2011 Connecticut Teacher of the Year and Finalist for National Teacher of the Year Award
CAS 2014-2015 Middle Level Exemplary Educator

I've spent my entire career at Sage Park teaching middle school students in **my hometown**, and I can't think of a place that I'd rather be.

Tonight, I am so honored to be here among all of you students, to recognize and to applaud your selection as Middle School Scholar Leaders. As a middle school teacher myself for almost 30 years, I know what kind of **student** and **school citizen** you must be, to have been chosen for this prestigious award. I want to give a special shout out to Sage Park's own Scholar Leaders, Cameron and Sage – if all of you here are like Sage and Cameron, then Connecticut has a lot to be proud of!

Tonight, however, I am going to speak to you not as a teacher, but as a mom; for 12 years ago my eldest son sat here in these seats as a Middle School Scholar Leader just like you. I think back to when he was here, and what I would have said to him then. The first thing I would have said is, "You should be **so proud** of this recognition." I know for a fact that your families and your teachers are proud of you. You are special, all of you – for as a Scholar Leader, you have both the **intelligence of a scholar, and the character of a leader**. But what really does that mean? Do you know why were you selected? What *is* a scholar leader?

In my view, a scholar is not one who knows all the answers. Instead, a scholar is one who continuously wants to - and is willing to - learn. A scholar is not searching for the right **answers** as much as **trying to ask the right questions**: Why? Why not? What if.....? A scholar is curious, always seeking to learn and explore new ideas. It's that curiosity, those questions that will lead to the next great innovation of technology, science, or medicine.

And a leader? A leader does not instinctively know the best solution or the right path to take, but a leader knows when to listen – to **truly listen to others** and consider their advice or position, even when it differs from their own. A leader also **inspires others** to act together for the greater good. Did you know that you have inspired your peers? A leader acts not for personal gain, but for the benefit of those he or she leads. I agree with John Quincy Adams' view of a good leader: "**If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.**" And you all are being recognized as both scholars and leaders. Pretty impressive! So now what?

"To whom much is given, much is expected" – a sentiment I've often quoted to my own sons. As I look at all of you here tonight, I know that you have been given much: the love and support

of family and friends. The encouragement and advice of teachers. You have gifts. You have talents. You have the **intelligence** needed to have excelled in your academic studies so far. But more than that – you have the **character** to be a leader and a role model for your peers. That is difficult to do in middle school – I know. So then going forward, what should we expect from you, and what should you expect from yourself?

We, your parents, your teachers, and your family – see in you such **potential** to develop your talents not only for scholarship but also for leadership. I encourage you to develop that potential not by playing it safe all the time, but by **taking some risks**. Yes, risks. The risks I'm suggesting are not unhealthy risks, but rather ones that will help you grow. Let me explain.

Over the next 4 in high school and then more years in college, I urge you to take challenging academic courses, open yourself up to **exploring new pursuits**, new ideas, and new interests – who knows, they may become your passions. Develop your leadership skills – not to grow a resume, but to grow your mind and your character. Tonight, I suggest that each of you take some time this summer to **research some of history's great leaders**. Choose a leader whom you admire, and get to know what made him or her great – then strive to be like that person. And then others will aspire to be like you.

And finally, **don't be afraid to make mistakes**. Up 'til now, I'm sure the path to success has been relatively easy, at least as far as school is concerned. Yet with new challenges ahead, I urge you not to take the easy way. In fact, new brain research has revealed some intriguing ideas. Research shows that a brain actually grows and changes in response to challenge. We now know that in failing, in making mistakes and then learning from those mistakes, your brain actually grows **new synapses** - more even than if you had never made a mistake in the first place! So failing is growing, and when you fail, you learn.

It won't always be easy, and it shouldn't be. In school, as well as in life, **you must have something called grit to succeed**. Yes, grit. No, not the stuff that stays in your mouth after a dentist's cleaning. The grit I'm talking about is something made famous by Angela Duckworth, a 7th grade math teacher who decided that there must be something more to learning than intelligence. She became a psychologist and did much research to identify what characteristics made successful people successful. She identified one characteristic called grit. She defines grit as **"a passion and perseverance for long-term goals"**. Her research clearly shows us that having this kind of passion and perseverance leads to long-term success. We must be gritty to be successful.

Now at 13 or so years of age, you may not have many long-term goals. But with middle school ending in a few weeks, I'm sure that high school is on your mind as you look forward to the next

four years and beyond. In those years as you work towards your goals, whatever they may be, I want you to remember that in **your** future, what will be valued most is not the highest score on every exam or even the highest GPA, but those characteristics that brought you here tonight. We call them 21st century skills– the **5 C's: curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration.**

These are the 21st century skills that are increasingly valued in our world today and in your future. As you no doubt realize, our world is changing faster now than it has in any time in our history. At this point, we **can't even predict** what some of the jobs in your future will be. So how do you prepare for a world like that? The skills that brought you here tonight – that's what you'll need to continue to develop. You'll be entering a truly global society where both scholarship and leadership will be critically needed. For many of you, the challenge is going to be moving beyond your comfort zone. But as President John F. Kennedy said, **"Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly."**

Each of you has that **potential to achieve greatly.** I urge you to explore that potential, but don't be afraid to make a mistake or two along the way.

So enjoy tonight, knowing that you have the gifts of both talent and character to meet the challenges of the 21st century world that awaits you. Congratulations, 2015 Scholar Leaders, and good luck!