# Huntington School District
## Convocation September 4, 2018
## Address by Superintendent James W. Polansky

I tried to find at least a few moments to gather my thoughts and do some reading this summer in the face of considerable busyness in district, with one child home with a college degree, another preparing for her sophomore year, and, oh yeah, an eight, now nine month-old Greater Swiss Mountain Dog puppy. Twenty-eight years in education – so many things have changed since I first set foot in the classroom in the late '80s – instructionally, technologically, politically, etc.

Change is a constant in our world. Nothing stays 100% the same; nature makes sure of that.

(*Entropy* is the tendency toward chaos - pure scientific logic. If you leave things unattended and put no work or effort into them, they will become more disordered. The concept can apply to any system, although one could make a case that in the context of education, it has worked a bit differently – the federal and state governments keep touching things, leading to considerable disorder. Those touches do not count as work or effort, however, so I'll make the case that nature continues to prevail.)

Regardless of the certainty of change, my brief focus this morning is on a few big ideas that qualify as constants – things that are as significant today as they were when all of us were in elementary school. Although the context associated with the things I am about to highlight continue to evolve, I don't think they'll ever (or should ever) be forgotten or pushed aside for the sake of

the "brand new" and/or the flavor of the day.  They will always be an important part of the foundation of education and critical to our school community.

1.  Relationships

I think we would all agree that they are as important today as they have always been.  The teachers who treated me as an individual and cared about me first were those whose classes in which I shined – not just in terms of a grade, but in terms of my positive presence in the classroom.  This might come as a shock to you, but I could be a bit of a handful, particularly if I wasn't challenged.  Let's put it this way, I still categorize student "incidents" into one of two general categories – "what I would have done when I was 13" and "what I wouldn't have done …".  And I am not going to tell you which box is more full.  As I told the new teachers just the other day, you know are in the right profession, you know you've "arrived" when that kid comes into your room on a bad day for him or her and doesn't want any part of doing work and is generally not interested in anything.  But they engage simply because they don't want to disappoint you.

Relationships.  Rapport.  Connections.  I'm going to stop for a second to share something that emphasizes the way in which the positive nature of those relationships, rapport and the connections with students, can help them find their voices.  And this is a time when those voices are genuinely needed. The beginning portion may seem like an extreme to us in Huntington, but it drives home the point.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxyxywShewI

While that piece focused specifically on relationships between educational professionals and students, the same ideas can certainly apply to relationships with colleagues, parents and/or anyone else for that matter.

Let's focus for a brief moment on relationships and the impact of technology. Technology has created opportunities for learners at all levels to share a voice that might have been silent in the past. The ubiquitous access to technology should, in theory, allow us to build better relationships than before.  For example, software allows clear face-to-face communication between people who may be on opposite sides of the globe; quick video creation and sharing allows people to feel like they are "there" (wherever "there" is), even though not physically present in that location.

Nonetheless (and this is a big "nonetheless"), in this age of web blogging and social media, it is all too easy to purposefully avoid face-to-face contact.  While technology and social media may have the potential to contribute productively to relationship building, we have all witnessed instances where it does just the opposite.  The cloak of anonymity really empowers no one.

There is a reason that education hasn't and will never turn into an online enterprise.  Again, it goes back to the power of and value in collaboration and relationships.  Along those lines, my powerful advice … make a phone call or better yet, have a face-to-face conversation when there is a concern or disagreement.  Encourage our kids to do the same.  E-mail, Facebook, Twitter, etc. rarely (or never) serve as media through which concerns can be addressed or disagreements overcome.

If at any point, technology takes away a human connection that we believe is crucial for the overall development of our students, it's just not worth it.

Using technological tools can add to a conversation under certain circumstances, but this can never serve as the conversation itself.

## 2. The importance of content and skill

Remember that the focus here is things in our profession that have withstood oceans of change. Use those positive relationships to help build your students' content-related acumen and skills. Haven't knowledge and skill always been the brick and mortar of education?

To quote Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author Thomas Friedman, "Your boss doesn't care what you know, because the Google machine knows everything. Your boss cares about what you can do with what you know. That's the only thing your boss will pay for."

While the "what you can do" element is the highlight in that quote, I'll argue that "what you know" is just as essential. You can't do anything with what you don't know! A good example of this – I'll paraphrase something from John Medina, author of *Brain Rules*. (John Medina is developmental molecular biologist who possesses a fascination with how the mind reacts to and organizes information.) Medina said, "Creation without knowledge is the equivalent of playing the air guitar; you might know the motions, but you still aren't able to play."

Content is not unnecessary in education nor has it ever been. But what has changed is the array of media through which that content can be delivered – many more sources than in the days of yore. In those days, school *was* the place that you went to gather knowledge. Today, information comes from all

different directions, yet "good information" is as vital and maybe as scarce as ever.

Although content knowledge has always been valuable, today we clearly recognize that the focus of our instruction should not be on helping students retain, but on fostering their development of deeper understanding and critical thinking skills. I think it goes without saying that information only retained but not thoroughly understood may, by chance, work briefly in the short-term but offers little, if any, long-term benefit. Add the monumental task of helping students to evaluate the validity of hordes of information available from a multitude of less-than-valid sources … education and our efforts as educators have never been more important!

### 3. A focus on lifelong-learning

I have heard the term "lifelong-learning" in education as far back as I can remember, both as a student and as an educational professional. The new context, however, includes the broader opportunities available for engagement in learning and the rate at which change is happening. I'm wondering if the term should be modified to "rapid-fire-lifelong-learning," as even the things you to which you become accustomed seem to change when you least expect it. Think of what can happen seemingly overnight during a legislative session or within the walls of the State Education Department. And once again, there is technology. I mention Facebook to my kids and they look at me like I have a third eye. And they are 22 and 19. For those with younger kids, I can't even imagine. Kids are more into communicating with software applications that can make them or others look like a cat. If anyone can explain that to me, I'd appreciate it.

The point, lifelong learning is something that never go out of style, although we might have to keep up a little more quickly than in the past. And it's not going to happen effectively, for our students or for us as professionals, without engagement or interest. One's personal investment is a valuable thing!

In closing and with these three things in mind (relationships, content and skill, and lifelong learning), I implore you to modify the question from "What has changed and what has stayed the same?" to "What has stayed the same and how has it changed?" There is so much to learn from the great foundational work done in education throughout the years. The names John Dewey, Horace Mann, Booker T. Washington, Margaret Bancroft, Howard Gardner (and many others) will never lose their places. The goal is not to rid ourselves of the keystone components of education, but to create something better with them. Let us make a commitment, individually and collectively, to do just that in 2018-19.