
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

2017 National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony

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Keynote Speaker: Sydney Chaffee, 2017 National Teacher of the Year

Celeste Rodriguez Jensen, Director of Educator Engagement: Good afternoon. My name is Celeste Rodriguez Jensen and I'm the educator liaison at the US Department of Education and I'm a former seventh and eighth grade reading and language arts teacher. I am thrilled to be here to honor your accomplishments as the 2017 National Blue Ribbon Schools. I can't tell you that this is an amazing group. I was honored to read for the Bell Awards earlier this year as well so big props to all our Bell Award winners and can't wait to meet you all tomorrow. And lastly, I'm truly honored to be able to introduce this year's National Teacher of the Year, Sydney Chaffee.

Sydney Chaffee is a passionate educator committed to risks for all her students and I can't think of a more appropriate speaker for this group of amazing educators. As a humanities teacher at Codman Academy Charter Public School in Boston, Sydney takes risks every day to improve learning for all of her students. In the classroom she strives to create lessons that demonstrate how education can be a transformative tool for social justice. As she encourages her students to see themselves as having the power to make change in the world based on the lessons from the past. From the first day of class she plunges her students into historical controversy. With scaffold assistance as needed students learn to analyze historical texts, they question assumptions, and construct new ways of thinking about and teaching history. Informally known as justice and injustice, Chaffee's class revisits popular accounts of pivotal historical events. To understand the larger political, racial and cultural context of those events, connect them with to current day issues and find the language to contest received history and articulate new possibilities for social change. She infuses the hard work of learning with joy, not only in her classroom but throughout the school.

Sydney is a bridge builder in other ways as well. She led a successful effort to create a student led community circle where students celebrate achievements and grapple with issues in their lives. She developed a school wide initiative with a nearby health center to engage students and health center staff in book study and dialog. She recruited the Huntington Theater Company to assist ninth graders in acting in and staging a full-scale play. Chaffee extends her mission of social justice as a teacher of the Boston University School of Education and mentors pre-service teachers from Boston and Tufts Universities. She earned her BA at Sarah Lawrence and her Graduate Degree at Lesley College. She will be presenting now and then taking questions afterwards so if you've got anything burning to ask Sydney she will be doing that shortly and ladies and gentlemen please give a very warm welcome to Sydney Chaffee.

Applause

Sydney Chaffee, 2017 National Teacher of the Year: Hi. Good afternoon. Thank you for being patient with me. The airport was not cooperating in Boston, I had two broken planes, two different gates, and I'm finally here, so thank you for waiting. I'm excited to be here. Congratulations to all of

you: your work makes a difference and it's an honor to be able to be here and celebrate with you today.

At my school in Boston, we start the year, every year, by asking the new ninth graders to tell us what their grand passion in life is. And the answers we get are illuminating. Some kids are passionate about playing video games or basketball or piano. Others are passionate about fixing things or helping people. It's a fascinating question to open a door into kids' minds. A few years back our head of school realized that it would be interesting to ask the staff the same question so at a staff meeting I found myself thinking what is my grand passion? Saying that it was teaching, while it was true, seemed like it was a little bit of a cop out, so I dug a little deeper. And I realized that for me my grand passion in life is storytelling. I see teaching as a form of storytelling. The times that teaching feels most electric to me are when I'm working with students to help them understand and tell the stories of people who made history happen. And there is this one story telling framework that I really like and I'm sure many of you know it as well and maybe some of you teach it. It comes from a book written in 1949 by Joseph Campbell called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In that book Campbell described what he called a monomyth that he discovered in the Mythology and the stories of cultures all over the world. This monomyth is also called 'The Hero's Journey' and basically the protagonist in the monomyth is living in the normal world, is called into an adventure in the unknown world or the unknown realm, crosses over the threshold between the known and the unknown world, encounters a whole bunch of obstacles and trials culminating in the abyss and then comes out on the other side of it having grown or learned or gained something. The cycle ends with the hero crossing back into the known world and going back to their normal life, but of course they are no longer the same person that they were when they started. And Campbell argued that this pattern, this monomyth could be found in tons and tons of stories from tons and tons of different cultures through different time periods all over the world.

So, The Hero's Journey is a way of understanding mythology, storytelling and obviously in our own lives, real events don't always fall into place so neatly. Sometimes we encounter challenges and they don't change us. Sometimes we face things alone without a mentor to help us and sometimes we never return home. But at the same time humans are master story tellers. We make sense of our world and our lives by telling stories. And so inevitably, even though real life doesn't conform neatly to Joseph Campbell's monomyth in our memories and in our retellings, we sometimes shape the events of our lives into that circular pattern. We hyperbolize and turn people into monsters. We tie things up neatly. We reflect on what we have learned after years of distance from an event and school is so important in that mythologizing. School becomes the setting of some of our most pivotal moments as young people. We grow up at school. We learn who we are there. School becomes imprinted in our memories. Which means, whether we like it or not as teachers and administrators and school leaders we will figure in our students' stories in their myths about themselves. We will become characters in their stories of how they became who they are. And so, the question is what kinds of characters do we hope that our schools and we become? How do we want to feature in our students' memories, in their stories of their lives? Will they remember us as people who helped them on their journeys? Will they see us as mentors who helped them become heroes?

As students each new school year represents another chance to cross over that threshold between the known and the unknown realm. And we know as educators that our students bring everything into the classroom with them. Whatever our students are facing outside of school comes through the door with them. It's sits at their desk with them. The weight they carry becomes part of the landscape of school for them. So, what is that weight? What may it look like for some of our students? Some of our students will be falling into an abyss caused by their parents' divorce or a parent's death or incarceration or absence for some other reason. Some of our students will be

learning English, struggling to synthesize new academic skills and content with new language. Some will go home to food insecure houses they will rely on school lunch to nourish their bodies and their brains. They will come to class hungry or in the same clothes they wore the previous day. Some of our students will bring memories of trauma, abuse, accidents, loss. That trauma will have actually altered their brain chemistry, making harder for them to distinguish actual danger from everyday adversity, revving their systems into fight or flight at the slightest perceived threat. Many will have learning differences diagnosed and undiagnosed and they'll be working hard to access to grade level content and battle the shame that too often accompanies receiving special education services. And of course, all of our students will also encounter challenges by design in our schools. We'll set up problems for them to solve, we'll design difficult tasks that will help them get smarter. School isn't meant to be easy. I always tell my students when they complain that something that I ask them to do is too hard that if everything were easy we wouldn't ever learn anything. So yeah, our students will face lots of different challenges every year and some of them the challenges that we plan will hopefully be purposeful and thoughtfully designed to help them grow. But others, the ones that life hands them will be random and senseless and sometimes cruel. But regardless of where our students' challenges come from those challenges will manifest in our schools. And despite or maybe because of all the myriad challenges our students will face this year, they all deserve to feel like heroes. So that's our responsibility and that's our privilege as teachers and as school leaders. We have the power and the influence to ensure that every single one of our students feels like a hero. We have the opportunity to help our students through some of the most difficult things that they have ever encountered. We have the great honor of telling our students every day out loud and quietly that they matter that they are important that they can triumph. But let me be clear, when I say that I want all of our students to feel like heroes I don't mean superheroes. She (Wonder Woman slide) is cool but we are not talking about her. I don't mean save the day super power phone booth heroes I mean Hero's Journey heroes. Which you will remember are ordinary people who are called out of their ordinary lives into an adventure. They travel into the unknown, they face challenges, they fall down, they make mistakes, and eventually with help they overcome. So, I'm talking about that kind of hero, like my students. All of our students deserve to come out of our schools feeling like that kind of hero.

So that's all really easy to say. But how do we do it? How do we make sure that when they look back when they arrange the careful mythology of their lives we end up as mentors and helpers and not as challenges? How can we make sure that when they think about the challenges they faced within our classrooms those challenges feel affirming and transformative for them and not oppressive and impossible and scarring? So, let me give you an example of what I mean.

In 2005 I looked like that (picture of Chaffee on the slide) and it was my first-year teaching. I was teaching at this program called Citizen's Schools in Boston where I was working with eighth graders from all over the city and I had planned this lesson that I thought was really amazing and this kid named Chris came in, so he's in eighth grade he's maybe 13 and he refused to participate. Which I cannot understand because I've designed this amazing lesson and so as a new teacher this is a real threat to my identity and my authority I've never been taught or taken any classes on what to do if a student just won't participate. I took all kinds of classes on how to design great lessons but nothing about what to do when that goes wrong. So, I pulled Chris out into the hallway and I drew a hard line I said, "Chris you've got to participate". He said, "that's stupid and I'm not going to do it". There were alarm bells going off in my head. I had no idea what to do, so I doubled down, "Chris you are being disrespectful. You have to participate, this is inappropriate" which I've learned now to say to a kid that something you are doing is inappropriate is just an invitation for them to absolutely not do what you are asking them to do. So, we were at an impasse we were having one of those sort of classic new teacher power struggle moments and so I did what any self-respecting clueless panicky new teacher would do I went to my boss, who went to his mom, and Chris got in trouble.

And that was the end of it. Chris didn't make it through the end of our program that year, he transferred and went somewhere else. I pretty much forgot about that incident.

So fast forward five years later I was teaching at Codman Academy which is the school I still teach at now, and a lot of the students there were former Citizen's Schools' 8th graders including Chris. So now Chris was a senior. And one-day Chris and I found each other in the hallway and he started to talk to me about that day. And he said to me "you were so mean to me, I hated you." And I was shocked, "Me? I wasn't mean, I was holding high expectations." He was mean in fact because he was really making my job very difficult which was just not fair at all. And so, it took me a really long time to realize that I had severely missed the point, twice. First, I missed the point on that day when he was an 8th grader because I thought that I just needed to bend him to my will, if he would have just done what I asked we would have been fine. And then I missed the point again when he was a senior because on both of those occasions I denied his account. I denied his story. But of course, actually his memory of what happened that day was valid, just as valid as mine. He thought I was being inflexible. And I thought I was being firm. I thought I was holding high expectations and he thought that I was being unfair. I thought it was no big deal and he remembered it vividly for years. I came to see that what Chris needed in both of those moments was for me to actually listen to him. But instead I assumed that I knew what he was thinking and I knew what was best for him and I didn't need to listen. And it took me even longer even more hours of painful self-reflection to get that there were layers and layers to my interaction with Chris who was a young black man in my classroom, a young inexperienced white teacher likely one in a long line of young inexperienced white teachers who hadn't bothered to build a relationship with him before demanding that he do what I decided was best. And that's not to say that Chris didn't need to participate that day. It's to say that I could have gone about that in much different way. I could have spoken to Chris like he was actually a human and I had some empathy. I could have asked him what was wrong instead of starting out with demands. In my mythology, that incident with Chris hadn't even made the final draft. But in Chris' version of *The Hero's Journey* that moment represented one of the trials or challenges that he had to endure, and the worst part was I realized later, I was the challenge. He cemented it into his mythology and remembered it years later that I was the monster, I was the thing that was holding him back, the challenge that needed to be overcome and if that's not the worst thing that we can realize we are to a student I don't know what is. Despite my idealistic visions as a new teacher of the kind of teacher I thought I was, I missed an opportunity to live my values. And students like Chris sit in our classrooms every day. Chris wasn't an extraordinary troubled student. He was just a normal kid having a normal bad day. And it turned into a very big deal because I didn't know how to handle it in a compassionate way.

In *The Hero's Journey* there is this notion of a helper or a mentor who guides and supports the hero as they encounter the period of trials and challenges. And that's where we come in as teachers, as educators, as school leaders we may be not able to prevent or extinguish a child's pain. We may not always understand our Chris', we may not always get it right the first time, but it's our job to keep working at it, to be our students' helpers and mentors as they work through challenges and come out on the other side stronger and smarter for it because every student deserves to feel like a hero. And none of that work is easy or simple, you all know that, especially when the school year is in full swing and we all have a million things to do and the copy machine is broken again. It's easy to rationalize all of this stuff away because it requires collaboration and trial and error. And it's a long game. I actually got lucky that Chris confronted me as a senior because he could have just written me off and then I never would have really truly understood what I had done wrong and how I needed to change as a teacher. We may never see the result of our work with some of our students, but doing the work is worth it and it's not worth it because we might get awards, this is a perk and it's really really nice to get recognized for the work that we do, but the work that we know is worth it because we are making a difference in a child's life. For the one time a student says thank you. For

the one time a student says you gave me what I needed, you made me realize that I didn't have to give up, you made me feel like I wasn't stupid, like I was powerful, like you saw me, for the one time that happens. And the countless times it doesn't, it's worth it.

And so, when I think about helping my students triumph and become their own heroes, when I think about ensuring that their journeys are transformative, I have been thinking about 3 qualities of effective teachers in schools and I would be willing to bet that the people representing schools in this room, I bet your schools show these qualities, so for me those three are relationships, relevance and equity. To me relationships are at the core of our work as teachers and as school leaders, we've got to work to build and maintain trusting, mutually respectful relationships with students if we want them to take the kind of risks that learning and growing require. Relationships can start with something as simple as asking kids what's your passion? If we start there then we can build until we are able to sit with a kid like Chris and ask, 'what's going on?' in those really hard moments.

And second for me is relevance. We've got to be sure that what we are teaching in our schools connects to kids' real lives, that they can see how the books we're asking them to read or the problems we are asking them to solve matter in the larger context. Relevance can feel overwhelming, but we've got to remember, like with everything else that we undertake in this work, it's always ok to start small. Sometimes all we need to do is build in time for kids to think and talk about how their schoolwork connects to their lives. And just like with relationships if we can start from that one question we can build to better things with time.

And finally, we all know that we've got to be working towards equity in our schools and in the broader educational landscape. And equity sometimes becomes a buzz word in our conversations so we have to ensure that we're having real conversations about what it means to us, what it looks like in our schools and for our students. We need to ask are our discipline policies equitable, or do they disproportionately affect students of color or students with special needs? Are we providing equitable access to education for all different kinds of learners in our schools? Are we using an equity lens in our hiring practices? The adults of tomorrow are sitting in our classrooms today. Relationships, relevance and equity are three factors to constantly evaluate in our own practice to ensure that our students can write their own stories and be heroes.

So, I want to tell you one more quick story. I have a daughter now. She just turned three and the other day we were reading this new book called 'Splat the Cat'. So, the idea of the story is that splat the cat is about to start school for the first time and he is not having it he is not excited, he does not want to go to school and he's trying everything in the book to get his mom, his cat mom, to let him skip out on school. But of course, being a cat mom, she's like 'no, no, you are going to school'. So, she forces him to go and he shows up on the first day and his teacher is there and all of his cat peers are there. And the very first lesson the teacher teaches, and she puts it up on the board with some examples for the visual learners is cats are amazing. That's how she starts the year. And Splat is a little confused because he thinks school is maybe supposed to be harder than this so he's like 'me too?' and she says 'yes, you too. You are amazing!'. And a bunch of other things happen in the book. There was a moral. I don't remember what it was because to me that was the most important thing in that book. That was so cool. That for that teacher the lesson of 'you are amazing' was more important for her students than anything else, so important that she had to start with it, it was more important than the rules and it was more important than their behavior and it was more important even than any other content of standards she had to cover that day. She wanted them to know they are amazing. Each of our students deserves to feel like a hero. So, who are your students? What are your hopes and dreams for them? And how will you tell them and continue to tell them that they are amazing?

If we took on this challenge to see ourselves as the ones who will help our students transform into heroes to see ourselves as the ones who will help our students understand they are amazing. If we took on that challenge with courage what might the year look like for our students? What kinds of obstacles might they overcome? What might they learn about the world and about themselves? It's not just our students who will take on a heroic journey this year, that's the real magic and the secret of working in education. As long as we do this work, as long as we commit our lives to helping students on their journeys, we too will be transformed. We too will plunge into unknown realms and overcome challenges and come out on the other side more amazing. In this work we have to remind ourselves even when we are carrying the awesome honor and responsibility that comes with being named one of a handful of excellent teacher or excellent schools which you are all, we don't have to be perfect in this work. We don't have to get everything right the first time or all the time. We just have to be brave enough to try. To reflect on whether we are seeing our students as heroes on whether we are doing everything that we can to ensure that their journeys are transformative. So, I want to thank you for leading the way in this work. I'm so excited for all of you and I'm even more excited for all of your students because I know that you are going to continue to do this work and you are going to inspire others to do this work too. So please count me among the newest members of your fan clubs. Thank you for inspiring me. Thank you for waiting for me today. And thank you for letting me tell you some stories today.

Jensen: Ok so, Sydney's not done. She is patiently waiting for your questions either about what she just presented, her year-long experience. So, while we are waiting for a couple people to join either Melody in the back next to the microphone or here with me you can come up to one of these two mics. Sydney, I'll ask the first question.

Chaffee: I finally found you. It's been really disconcerting I did not know where you were. And can I also just say before we start, these signs, I thought people were holding signs up during my speech and I was like “what are they trying to tell me?” (Laughter). Sorry. Go on. I'm ready.

Q1: I felt like you were speaking directly to me about “you don't need to be perfect, you need to be brave”. What do you suggest all the all the amazing educators in this room and moms do to for self-care because we give a lot to students in schools and communities? How are you balancing that?

Chaffee: I'm not. (Laughter). No, I mean I think that is a great question and I'm really glad that you asked it. Because of course whenever you are in a room of amazingly accomplished teachers, educators and school leaders, what you are actually also in a room of is perfectionists that will drive themselves into the ground if we are not careful, right. And so, I am battling that in myself too. And I think one of the things that I have come to realize since I had a child was that I was always striving for that work-life balance, we talk about that all of the time in our schools and in our staff meetings work-life balance. But I realize that it's not balance what we are striving for because some days it's going to look like this (shows unbalanced scale with hands) and then that other days we have to give ourselves permission for it to look like this. So, I think that one way that I am trying to think about self-care is really drawing some boundaries for myself and saying I'm not going to work all of the time because it's not the only thing that is important about me or who I am or important to me. And that is not super helpful in terms of a thing that you can just write down and do. But that's like a mindset shift that I am trying to do and I'm trying to remember, my kids are going to be ok, my school kids, not my kid kid, my school kids are going to be ok if I don't stay up until midnight to grade that one paper. If I show up the next day and I am a healthy happy person and I can be joyful and I can bring energy to my class with them because I have taken care of myself, that's actually going to be better for them. And they can wait another day for the papers. So that's, I'm trying to, in my old age become more realistic about balance. (Laughter). (Listening) Yes please, please do.

Q2: Ok. Thank you. I was just wondering, I know we talk a lot about incorporating educator voice into schools and decisions, but I would like to know what you do at your schools or what you suggest to incorporate more student voice in decisions.

Chaffee: Great question. So, I think we have to be advocates for our students and we have to be brave enough to sort of pave the way for them and then give the mic to them. So, ok, here's an example. This past weekend or a week or so ago I gave a speech and my own principal happened to be in the audience. Part of the speech, I was talking about policies, school policies and school rules, that are perhaps not always the best for our students, and I was a little nervous about giving that speech with him in the audience because I thought I might get in trouble. But I wanted us to sort of have that conversation about certain policies. I found out later, I'm not at my school this year, but I found out later from some spies I had in the audience that he went back to the school and he actually started a conversation in our community circle, which is sort of all school assembly that we have every week, where he invited the students to start to talk to him about policies that they thought that maybe they wanted to see changed. For me, my speaking on the topic was able to open his mind enough that he then was willing to hear from the students. And I don't want to paint him as someone who doesn't like listening to students, he does, he's a great, great guy, but I think there are certain things that if an adult says it first or a teacher leader says it to us first, then we might be more willing to say oh, I wonder what the kids say about that. So that's one way I think we can be advocates for our kids is we can sort of pave the way for some of those conversations. And then I think the other thing is, community circle is an awesome thing that we do at our school. I didn't invent it, but I did sort of re-vamp it and I would love to talk more with folks who are interested about how that looks but it's basically a weekly assembly that's run by the kids with facilitation by adults and they can decide what topics they want to talk about or what speakers they want to bring in and I think it's a really great way to model for all of the people in the community that student's voices are important and we care what they think.

Q3: Hi Sydney. First, I'd like to thank you. I've heard you now two weeks in a row because I was at the conference last week and I love what you have to say. And secondly, ideas for school leaders from a teacher perspective and the ways that we can best support our teachers - you just sort of gave one idea right there, but what more would you have to say.

Chaffee: Yeah so. I think that teachers and school leaders have this idea that there is this certain kind of teacher who can be a teacher leader. And I think it varies depending on who you are so some people would say it depends on how long you've been a teacher at the school or some people would say it's how effective you are. But what I've been trying to sort of promote as I go out and talk to folks to teachers and school leaders is that every single one of your teachers has the potential to be a leader in your building. And so, for school leaders what I really want to encourage you to do is to figure out how you can cultivate that leadership and the confidence in your teachers to be leaders. That might look like setting up some sort of mentoring, where one of your teachers you think has a lot of leadership ability but isn't actually doing it yet or doesn't have the confidence works with someone who is more senior to plan professional development, right? I think there are ways we can pull people into leadership who are reticent to go there and see amazing things come out of them so I think that's a responsibility of great teachers in the room is to identify now that you are sort of receiving recognition and you are veteran enough or whatever enough that you are seen as the leader figure out who you are going to pull along with you and identify those people and say I see you as a leader and here's how I want you to step into that role. And then for school leaders, just to make openings for your teachers to step into those roles in different ways. Maybe you have teachers that come and meet with you on a monthly basis to share how things are going in the school and it's sort of like a little cabinet that you have or maybe you let your teachers plan PD opportunities for their peers. I think there are lots of ways you can do it in a creative way but I think

the first thing that you've got to do is just remember all of your teachers can be leaders and some of them just need a little bit more training in how to do that.

Jensen: Anybody else, questions?

Q4: Thanks for this opportunity. It's great to be in the room with such great educators and all your passion, thank you. In our district, we are working now in a new system to provide time for collaboration for teacher, because we know teachers can be inspired most by fellow teachers who are doing extraordinary things in their classrooms. I'm just curious what kind of system exists in your district or in your building that allows you to share those great ideas and inspire each other?

Chaffee: Yeah. That's a great question. And I completely agree with you, I think collaboration is so key in everything if we want our teachers to get better and to feel empowered. So, we have a few systems but I will say too, that our systems are imperfect. But we have grade teams and we have departments and so teachers within those groups, those groups are really small, because my school is really small. But teachers in those groups sort of become teams with one another and we have meeting time once a week set aside where we can get together and talk for an hour and set goals with one another. I would say that one way that I can see us improving that system is actually making sure that there is one person on each of those teams who has some training in how to facilitate a small group or how to be a peer leader because again I think that people have really great leadership potential but we don't always give them the tools they need to do it really well and be really effective in it. The other thing we do is, instead of having teachers' desks in classrooms, we have teacher offices that are a whole bunch of desks in one room and all the teachers sit in there together. We had the luxury of being able to do that because we built our building, but it's sort of this funny thing where you will go in and it's this little hive of teachers and so you end up sort of informally collaborating with one another and wheeling the little chair over and saying 'hey, what do you think about this' or just talking to one another that way which I think has actually been really wonderful and the side effect of it is if you are having a really bad day and you just want to cry alone you can't because there is always other teachers there (laughter) and so you have to reach out and get support, going back to that idea of balance. But yeah, I'm really, really invested in figuring out how do we make those department and team structures that we have more effective and more efficient. What kinds of training or what kinds of scaffolds do we need to give the teachers that are in those leadership roles in order to make those meetings work really well.

Q5: Hi Sydney, how are you? **Chaffee:** Hi. I am good. How are you? **Q5(cont'd):** At the ripe age of 40, I've had the last 18 years I've been a teacher at Woodland School in Warren, NJ and it has been the thrill of my life. The community had meant a tremendous amount to me and I was just wondering, you have had the ability to travel all along this country, what's a common thread you might see of the most transformative schools. I mean you are in a very unique position where you are able to see so many different schools, so many different leaders, so many different students, what's something that you can maybe share with all of us that you just see over and over again as that common thread that just really, really wows you on a daily basis of what we are doing in this country to show the world how great the US is and what we do?

Chaffee: That's a great question. So, I will say although I have been in this role for several months, I actually haven't been to that many schools yet, because the school year just started, so in the next week, I'm going to a bunch more schools, and I'm really excited about it. But I can tell you that for me, and it's sort of an obvious answer coming from a teacher I guess, but for me the common thread for schools that are amazing is that the teachers are super passionate about what they are doing. They have great relationships with kids and there is trust from school leadership that the teachers are experts and that the teachers have the skills and have the expertise to make magic

happen in those classrooms. And they don't always know exactly how to do that, it's not always working perfectly but here's a central sort of trust in the teachers that they can do amazing things if we give them the room to do it. (Applause). And I will say some of my colleagues, the state teachers of the year got to go to Finland to study education there and that was the big thing they brought back. They said, 'you know, in Finland, teachers are really seen as experts and professionals and they are given a lot of autonomy to do their jobs really well because they have had training on how to do that'. So that to me felt really heartening because that is what I believe too.

Q6: Hi Sydney. Thank you for being such a motivational speaker. When you mentioned community circles, I am interested in how we as teachers, who may have a different back ground from our students. What are students telling you or what advice are you finding from the schools that you would give to us, to our teachers, to have empathy and relationships with their students?

Chaffee: Yeah. That's such a beautiful question. So, I grew up as a middle class white person in a town that was mostly middle class white people. When I went to high school I learned the history of white men and then I came to teach at my school. And my school is very much not a school of middle class white people. Most of my students have a very different lived experience than me. So, when I got to the school they said "you're going to teach this class called *justice and injustice*" and I said "that sounds great", and they said "yeah, you are going to teach the *Haitian Revolution*" and I didn't know what it was because I had never been taught it. It had never been considered an important enough event in history for this middle class white student to learn. So, it was really humbling for me to understand my own ignorance and just to sort of get a taste of how my privilege had impacted my education. So, I guess the best thing that I am working on and that I would suggest to other teachers to cultivate that empathy and I love that that's the word that you brought up, is just to humble ourselves to what we don't know and be willing to admit and go open-armed into the fact that we have so much to learn. And there are so many amazing resources out there to help us learn, but I think unless we sort of admit that that's work that we've got to do then we are not going to get anywhere. I think honestly the number one thing we can do for our kids, and the number one thing that if I could go back in time and replay that moment with Chris, the number one thing we can do is to ask them what they are thinking and what they are feeling and to give them space to actually be honest with us. Then I would say the number 2 thing we can do is, if you are a white teacher and you are teaching students of color you have to read the book by Christopher Emdin called *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too*. (Laughter). It has a very catchy title.

Which is why I first picked it up, it is an amazing book. He is an educator and he does this really nice balance of theory about what it means to be a white teacher teaching students of color in America's schools system today and really practical step by step advice for different things you can put into place in your classroom and your school to develop the kinds of relationship and empathy and understanding that you need to so that would be one that I would definitely recommend to everyone.

Jensen: And I think we have time for one last question in the back.

Q7: Good afternoon Ms. Chaffee. Thank you for being here and congratulations on being named teacher of the year. I wanted to follow up on the discussion of student voice, I think it's an excellent method as you noted that we can model for these students that their opinions are valued especially I think it's great that you are inviting their opinions on school policy. Practically, I'm assuming that not every student's suggestion can be implemented so, I'm wondering what you can tell us about how you have been able to handle that without diminishing the students' willingness to share their opinions.

Chaffee: Yeah. Absolutely. That's a great point. Because if we ask our students what policies they want, we may not always get the most realistic ones. But I think again, I'm a broken record but, I think it also goes back to those relationships so if our students believe that we're actually hearing them out and if they trust us enough to believe that we are actually listening to them I think we have conversations with them as reasonable human beings and say well, I hear where that suggestion is coming from and here is the reality on the ground so how do we work together. So at my school we have the school lunch regulations, like the federal guidelines for how much salt can be in something and how much this and how much that, and it's been a real bone of contention between the students and the food services staff because the food services staff say look we are doing everything that we can; here are the regulations that we have like here is the meal that we made it's healthy it meets the guidelines and the students are saying well we want salt, or whatever. But I think that we've seen a little bit of a turning point in that when we've stopped having that conversation as sort of well 'you don't understand everything about it and you just have to listen to us and we know what's best and we know what's healthy' and we've turned the conversation into 'ok come to the table and look at these guidelines, right, here is the basics and let's hear your suggestions and let's actually see if we can problem solve together' and it doesn't always work but I think that the students are much more willing to sort of understand where we are coming from with those policies if we talk to them like they are reasonable human beings and we actually we show them that we are listening to them and sometimes the things that they say do become policy or do effect the way that we think. So, it's a long road but I think that's the first step.

Jensen: Sydney, thank you. Can everyone please join me in giving her another round of the applause. (Applause).

Chaffee: Thank you!