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# National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

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EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

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## 2019 National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony

November 15, 2019

Keynote Speaker: Frank Brogan

**Frank Brogan, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education:** I've had some really bad introductions in my day, I got to tell you, and have suffered through them. First of all, I freely admit that that resume indicates a man who just simply cannot hold onto a job. It's hard enough to get through the resume without people going, "Well, can't wait to see what comes out here." But I am so privileged and honored to be back this year at the Blue Ribbon Ceremony. Last year, I had occasion to come and help present the Terrel Bell Awards to that very, very important group of principals. I know that many, if not all of you, are still in the room. And I hate to do this to you while you're probably eating that incredible dessert, by the way ... I would like you, the principals, winners of the Terrel Bell, could you please stand and let us once again congratulate you on that massive honor?

Having been a school principal, I know a little bit about what goes into that job ... more importantly, that responsibility. To also know how many principals there are out there around the country, and to be identified and ultimately awarded that achievement says more about those wonderful individuals than anybody will ever know. But most importantly, it is what it means to the people back in their home communities, and specifically in their schools. They already know they have a great principal. But it's nice of them to share those great principals with us for just a little while, so that we can pay tribute to them, but also through them to the great work that they are doing with everyone in their schools and in their communities.

I also want to right now take the opportunity before I'm finished to acknowledge all of you who will, in a few moments, be up on this stage since I'm the only thing that separates you from the only real reason you came here. But let me tell you the story of my life. It started ... No. Ashley took care of some of that.

This award has evolved over the years. One of the things that occurred in the evolution of the Blue Ribbon commendation was a higher emphasis on academic achievement. Things change over time. Things evolve over time. And I think decision makers decided during the evolution of the award that there probably, from its original iteration, needed be a greater emphasis. Not to the exclusion of other things, but in cooperation with other characteristics as to what goes into acknowledging Blue Ribbon status.

That was not a small nor an unnoticed evolutionary change. Because it is important to acknowledge that it should be impossible to become a Blue Ribbon school if first and foremost academic achievement is not at the heart and soul of what it means to be a Blue Ribbon school. We want happy students. We want happy teachers. We want people who are fully engaged as parents. It's all critically important. But as every day in a school, what matters most is are we in a safe and disciplined

environment? Are teachers able to teach, and apply their trade? And most importantly, are children better off having been there one more day? That especially includes academically.

It is amazing in a country this large ... I don't know if you're aware of it, but there are in America some 50 million school students. That's a lot. Take it from me. I've met almost all of them, and it is remarkable that in a state ... in a nation as massive as we are, with that many students, with the thousands and thousands of classroom teachers, and principals, and assistant principals that are out there ... the fact that what the country needed to be careful that it did not do was to start to believe that you could create a one size fits all approach to something like that.

America is a massive patchwork quilt of education. It is different one place from the other, because everything in America is different one place from the other. It's what makes the tapestry so beautiful once it's assembled is the difference that lies on that tapestry. And there can be no one way to meet the needs of 50 million school children who stretch from the Hawaiian islands to Puerto Rico, from Alaska to Florida, and everything in between. It is incumbent upon our nation, even though we've started there, to remember always. It's the people who look these children in the eye every single day, who know their strengths, who know their challenges, who know their capabilities, and if given the opportunity will find fascinating ways to reach not just some of them, but all of them. And make certain that as a result they enjoy a high quality educational experience and ultimately can grow and are able to live, not just dream, the great American dream.

It is complicated out there, but we should revel in the complications. We should revel in the creativity and the innovation that is really, in some ways, beginning to be respawned around America with the passage of ESSA, and the knowledge that people are in the position at home to make the best decisions, not Washington D.C.

It is about empowering parents to become a part of all of that, and welcoming them into America's schools, and actually asking for their opinions and their ideas. It's about challenging at a school site all of the basic assumptions. Why do we do it this way? Especially, if in fact, we're still not reaching a significant population of our students in the school. You all may not be aware, but a part of ESSA, which is implemented this year, is the identification by each state of the lowest performing 5% of schools in every state around the country. What you may not be aware of is that's playing out right now. And more that you may not be aware of is that could be anywhere up to or over 5,000 schools in the aggregate, when all is said and done.

It's easy to identify schools. But right now, there are schools all over America who have been identified by their states who are now doing the important work of asking the question, "Now that we've been identified, what do we do about this? Do we hang our heads? Do we ring our hands? Do we, worse, perhaps turn to our students and say, 'Well, you just have to understand it's the demographics. It's the socioeconomics. It's the family challenges,'" as we have been inclined to do in education for far too many years. Knowing that the amount of money someone pays for their lunch every day should not and cannot be used to determine what we believe they are capable of learning.

Now that ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds has passed, now that a big part of it is a return to that local control and that local authority ... thank goodness, long overdue. Now is the heavy lift. What are we going to do with it? The gauntlet has been hurled at our feet. Now, the question goes back to local

communities, local school systems, states. What are you going to do with this new found flexibility? Do you have the courage to make change, especially when you know change is an absolute necessity in a school? If you attempt change, will you first be able to navigate the hurdle of permission that you have to receive, because change means different? And sometimes, people run into immediate roadblocks with 'different' before they even leave their school campus.

We don't do different here. This is the way we've done it for a long time. This is the way we should continue to do it. Even if a significant number of our students are not achieving at the level of their potential, we will continue to stay the course of status quo.

Will it be the district? Will the school board, or the superintendent, or both say, "No. We like when all of the schools in this system do it the same way. See, we've got bus schedules to keep. We have responsibilities to make sure that we can handle everything, and it's easier to handle what we've known for a long time. We can't have an outlier doing it differently. How will we explain that to everybody else? And Lord knows, other people may decide to ask for change too."

Will it be the state? Would it be the state commissioner or superintendent of education? Not in Maryland, right, Dr. Salman? Will it be people you didn't even imagine? Would it be your parents? Where a father like me says, "They didn't do that when I was a boy in school. They're not doing that with my son either." You know, it doesn't matter from once it comes.

If the need for change exists ... and in some places it not only exist, it's urgent that change be made. I'm not talking about tinkering with the margins of change. I'm talking in some cases about whole sale change, because what is happening is not getting it done. It may even be getting it done in the school over there, but it's not happening in this school. We've got to change it. We in education, who aren't always prone to do so, must begin to embrace change for this reason. The young people in our charge are going to inherit a world as adults vastly different than the one we inherited. Information while we're sitting in this room is doubling. Yet, you know what? We still go to school 180 days. Teachers still work 194. Information continues to snowball.

So now, we're trying to pack all of that additional information into exactly the same agrarian calendar, because it's been around for 100 years and was created when most students had to be home in the summertime to work the farm, or work the ranch. We got to start thinking differently about this. We have to see what the other possibilities are, and what we have to do to prepare the children in our seats today. Not a hundred years ago. Not even 10 years ago.

The move to career pathways ... and some people who are a lot younger than I am believe this is a brand new concept. I was there as a middle school principal. Every student in my middle school, before they left as an eighth grade graduate, took one or more exploratory classes in culinary arts and other vocational technical opportunities. Not because we wanted to make sure that's what they became, but the idea was to start to talk about different pathways. What are the possibilities out there? And to put their hands on different opportunities to see what it was like, and that evolved into high school with a richer degree of vocational technical opportunities.

Again, none to lock somebody down, but to make sure ... and it's still the case today, that when students walk off of a high school graduation stage with that diploma in their hand, they don't look at it and ask themselves the question, "Now what do I do?" They need to be prepared. Whether it is to go to

advanced vocational technical school, community college, college, university. But, "Can they get there," should not be a question to ask at graduation time. Now, we're beginning to get it again.

By the way, what happened to it back in those days? Oh, it went like this. I was there. Schools started to use those exploratory classes as dumping grounds. They started to say, "We don't know what to do with this kid. Put him in that. We don't know what to do with her and she's a troublemaker. We'll put her over there." What happened? It didn't take long before parents were quick to say, "You're not putting my son in any of those classes." And even the students figured it out and said, "I'm not going in that class."

By virtue of that fact, we then took the next step the government is inclined to take. If you got a problem with something, just get rid of the something and your problem is solved. It went away all across the nation. What started as high quality opportunities for students, because it was used and abused, just was eliminated. We aren't doing this for the first time. What we're doing, I call, going back to the future. We just need to get it right this time, and make sure that it is there to serve the needs of the students while they're in our schools. And just as importantly, what they've learned is there to serve them for the rest of their life.

It's an extraordinary day in time and education. The challenges we know though may be stacked higher than ever before. But that just means the stakes got higher in what we as educators do to not only meet those challenges, but defeat those challenges on behalf of the young people in America's schools. It is a moral imperative. When our schoolmates, colleagues get down in the mouth, when they get frustrated, when they get depressed because they can't seem to reach their students, or they're having real difficulty with some of their students ... it's people like you who need to help pick them up and remind them, "First of all, nobody promised you a rose garden when you got into this business. And more importantly, we can't give up on them no matter what. Because to give up on them will doom them to less than their share of the great American dream."

We need to reengage our parents where it's necessary. We shouldn't be giving any parent a pass because they work. Of course, they work. But that doesn't separate you from your child's educational experience. You have a responsibility as a parent, and we need to remind parents of that: to engage and remain engaged. We've got to make certain that the people at the district level give us the room we need to work in our schools the way we believe we should be working to make certain that we're dealing with the children in this school, not the children in the school over there. They will find their own ways. We can do this thing. And here's the joy: you already are, or you wouldn't be in this beautiful room. You have managed to find ways to reach the students in your charge, or you wouldn't be coming up on this stage in a few minutes.

By the way, when you go back to your rooms after this is over to pack, to leave, just remember when the towels are extra thick, it's better to roll them to get them into your suitcase than fold them. You can't get many in if you fold them. I travel a lot, and these are just tidbits I throw out for your assistance. And this is the Gaylord and the towels are pretty good, I think. You know? I've been in hotels where the towels look like the Shroud of Turin.

Sorry for the off ramp. I leave you with this. Not only thank you for what you do every single day ... and again, you wouldn't be here if you didn't deserve it. But you still should hear it. Not just from me, but I know the people back home. Thank you for what you do every single day. Whether you are a principal, an assistant principal, a dean, a guidance counselor, a school psychologist, whether you are on the

school board, whether you are a superintendent, pick your issue. These things don't happen in a vacuum. Schools like yours take a team effort, and everybody is a potential part of that team. It is about creating a vision for a school, and then organizing around that vision, and keeping people excited, and enthusiastic about ultimately hitting the target and hitting the mark.

But you leave here, if you will accept it, with an additional responsibility. I look forward to the day where we have to meet two weeks in a row to get everybody into this same room. I look forward to the day where good, wonderful people like you become apostles, and carry the message to others that you can do this. The only thing keeping you from doing this could be you. That you will share what you do with other schools in your area, other schools across your state. That this is not just a one off where you leave here with an award, take it back to your school, put it in the trophy case, and hope you get it again next year. Don't wait for people to reach out to you and ask, "How did you do this?" Reach out to them.

Check the list of the lowest performing schools in your state and call somebody. Don't think it arrogant. Don't think it presumptuous. Think of it as education should be a collaborative effort. Because at the end of the day, all 50 million of these boys and girls belong to all of us in America. We have a stake in them even if they're in a school on the other side of the state. You're doing it. Help lead the way for others to be able to do it, too.

The hardest part of that is getting people to understand that change just won't accidentally show up. People are going to have to make a conscious decision. They are going to change to meet the needs of the young people in their charge, so that we can report back to Congress that that part of ESSA, that giving back of local control, and local flexibility is working. People are taking advantage of it, and creativity is blooming like flowers in a giant garden.

We can do this thing, but we need your help. You have a wonderful message to carry. Carry it. Do not go back and put it under a bushel basket, and just revel in the fact that your school is in this amazing ether. Go back and help other people, and challenge other people to see what they also can be.

On behalf of all of us with the Department of Education ... and I know the Secretary was here, please understand how those of us from the Department of Education not only want to help, we rely on you to be emissaries and ambassadors of change throughout our country. The proof in the pudding that it can be done. No challenge too great. But you have to organize around it, and you have to make it your primary mission. And what better thing to create a primary mission about than helping to make certain that every student in America ultimately is able to grow up and live, not just dream, the great American dream?

To all of our organizers of the event, thank you so very much. I mentioned Dr. Salman, who is the chief here in Maryland, who is our unofficial hostess for all of this. This is not a bad little property, Dr. Salman. This ain't no Motel 6, baby. I'll tell you that. To all ... and I stay in those frequently. I love them. They're very nice.

But I thank all of you for coming together, and taking time away from your schools. Once again, I really congratulate you on a job very, very well done. Thanks for the chance to be with you today.