

## **Back to School Night 2016**

### **Head of School Speech**

Good evening. Welcome to Laurence's 64<sup>th</sup> annual Back to School Night. I am delighted to see you here.

I hope you know that there is nothing more important to me than my family, and my Laurence family. For me, it is all about providing the best of everything for you and your children. This is my 28<sup>th</sup> year at Laurence, and it is an honor and a privilege to be your Head of School. Laurence is a magical place, where children can come to grow, to be supported, to be stretched, and most importantly, to feel safe and loved.

I hope you can feel the vibrant energy this year. We have such a cohesive, caring, and dedicated administration, faculty, and staff. Let's give them all a round of applause.

I would also like to recognize my father, Marvin Jacobson. You've always been my mentor and guide, and we're grateful that you share your nurturance and wisdom with us all. Congratulations on publishing your book!

No matter where I am, Laurence is always on my mind. I research, reflect, and eagerly look ahead to the new school year. As part of this process, I enjoy visiting schools across the country, bringing back ideas to share with our faculty and staff. In fact, I'll be in New York next week visiting schools, including Horace Mann. Every time I visit a school, I feel like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. I want to click my heels, because truly, "there's no place like home." It reaffirms for me that our school is innovative, and at the forefront of best practices in education.

It is an exciting time to be at Laurence! Finishing the corner project will be a monumental accomplishment for our school. The project means more to us than just parking. We will substantially increase our footprint and presence in the neighborhood, and secure our perimeter. Along with these changes to our facilities, we will be master planning the entire campus, analyzing the most effective future usage of our space.

Also, I am eager to share with you the programmatic vision for the 2016-17 school year. One of the greatest advantages of a K-6 education is that we can put all of our resources into programs for elementary aged students, and the skills your children will need for the future. At Laurence, we are fortunate to have the resources and the talent to create programs that will prepare our students for future success.

I recently read the Bloomberg Job Skills Report, where researchers asked premiere business schools to list the top skills that companies want, that are the hardest to find in employees, and here is what they said: strategic thinking, creative problem-solving, leadership, and communication skills.

We are starting now to develop these skills in the early elementary years.

To further our commitment to developing strategic thinkers, we've hired Eric Hogenson, Director of 3-6 and STEAM Innovation, as we deliberately focus in on integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math disciplines throughout our curriculum. Listen: you'll begin to hear your kids talking about "design thinking."

It is so wonderful for me to see students regularly choosing to work on math problems with their coaches at lunchtime, or plotting their next moves on the chessboard. I'm delighted that we have over 50 students participating in each of these wonderful

programs. Our students compete in math Olympiads and chess tournaments on the weekends. The beautiful part is that these students are well-rounded; they are also participating in the arts and playing on sports teams. Our kids are 100% engaged.

I'd like to share a quick little story with you. You may have heard me say before that when our kids go on to secondary school, you can always spot the Laurence kids, because they are the ones sitting in the front row. I just heard from one of our 6<sup>th</sup> grade parents who was at a secondary school Open House and tour. She reported that, sure enough, the entire front row was taken by Laurence kids, actively participating in a math session. When this parent mentioned to the instructor that all of the kids were from the same school, she said "You must be from Laurence!"

Further areas of focus for this school year are reading, writing, and communication skills. Parents, secondary school admission directors, and prospective families always comment on how articulate our students are. Focusing on written communication is equally important to us. We are comprehensively reviewing our entire writing program, going deeper with comprehension, grammar, and analytical thinking.

Our kids are reporters, editors, and graphic designers of our newspaper, *The Lightning Striker*, and published poets in *Skipping Stones Magazine* and *A Celebration of Poets*. New this year, we are forming a Debate Club, providing our students with opportunities to further their analytical skills and communication development.

However, we are not just about academics. We are dedicated to the development of the "Total Child." It's just as important to us that they be good people who strive to help others. There was such a remarkable response to last year's "Keep Kind in Mind" theme, from our youngest students to our oldest, from teachers and parents, and everyone in between. I heard from so many parents that their children were reminding them to "keep kind in mind!"

Did you know, when you do something kind for someone else, you literally experience a "Helper's High?" The emotional warmth you feel when completing kind acts produces oxytocin in the brain and throughout the body.

This year, we created a sequel to "Keep Kind in Mind" and it's called, "Follow Your Inner Compass." Our students will continue to keep kindness at the forefront of their actions, while also learning the importance of striving to achieve their personal best. At every grade level, students will take a journey to discover who they are as individuals, as thinkers, and, ultimately as leaders, as they find their personal, unique due north.

Even colleges are getting onboard. A new report was released by the Making Caring Common Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. College admission directors, including many Ivy League schools, took a major step in trying to change the college admissions process to make it more character-oriented, and less test score-driven. For example, Yale will be adding an essay to their application that asks students to "reflect on engagement with and contribution to their family, community and/or the public good."

The Harvard project also reported that an overwhelming majority of children chose achievement as their top priority, over caring for others. They believed that their parents were prouder if they got good grades, rather than being a caring community member.

The Project has a few easy suggestions for raising caring, respectful, ethical children.

1. Make caring for others a priority.
  - Hold your children to high ethical expectations, such as honoring commitments, even if it makes them unhappy in the moment.
  - Rather than telling your children that the most important thing is their happiness, tell them the most important thing is their kindness.
  - Ask your child's teachers if they are good community members at school.
2. Provide opportunities for children to practice caring and gratitude.
  - Don't reward your child for every act of helpfulness; rather expect it, and only reward uncommon acts of kindness.
  - Chores should be an expectation; being a contributing member of a family does not require payment or an allowance.
  - Make gratitude a daily ritual around the dinner table. We will be sending home a Laurence Kindness and Gratitude Journal with every family, so you can reflect and record the things you are thankful for.
    - Remember, family dinners are incredibly important, even if it is only a few times a week. And always disconnect from technology.
3. Be a strong moral role model and mentor.
  - This last step is crucial. Our children are very perceptive, and they learn their values by watching our actions.
  - Practice honesty, fairness, and caring in your interactions.
  - Acknowledge your mistakes and flaws.

This is how they will continue to grow into considerate, compassionate young people.

Research consistently shows that empathetic children are more successful in their careers, relationships, and lives. We will continue to work together to develop children with the drive to lead and make a difference in our ever-changing world.

As a community, we aim to provide a strong program for our parents as well. Dr. Richard Weissbourd, Harvard professor and co-director of Making Caring Common, will speak to us about "Raising Caring and Happy Children" on October 20<sup>th</sup>. We have many more wonderful speakers for you this year. More information to come!

As you can see, we have an exciting year ahead! You will hear more about the vision of the year in your children's classrooms. Before I send you off, I would like to leave you with the words of Henry James:

"Three things in human life are (the most) important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind."

Thank you.