

PUBLIC SCHOOLS – 21ST CENTURY STYLE

Sample Text for Back-to-School Columns, Speeches, or Other Communications

For Learning First Alliance members

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Learning First Alliance provides this speech as a service to LFA members and gives permission to use all or parts of this text for public school-based communications.

Opening

Back to school. Few words pack a more positive punch, except perhaps for “graduation day.”

High hopes and expectations abound. The children are excited, the teachers and school staff are eager, and the parents, well, the parents are apprehensive, hopeful, and, admit it, relieved. As one mother wrote of back to school, borrowing freely from Wordsworth, “Bliss was it that day to be alive/But to be a parent was very heaven!”

Yes, the corn is as high as an elephant’s eye, and summer is ending. But for educators, within every student, there is an invincible summer. It is a place of light and possibility and growth. It is a place that educators, more than anything, strive to reach, nurture, and foster. Every child is curious; every child can learn. That’s our starting point every Back-to-School Day.

And back to school also gives educators an excellent opportunity to remind themselves that schools do not exist for the adults who work in them or for the people who set their policies. Schools exist for the children—to give students the very best education we can give them so that they can one day be successful adults and citizens. And every year, when back to school rolls around, educators rededicate themselves to this task. It’s our calling.

But as you are probably aware, public education involves much more than the educators and students.

For the past three decades, a great debate has swirled around everything that matters in our public schools—from what to teach and how to teach it, to how to measure whether students are learning what we want them to learn. Few other nations in the industrialized world have experienced anything comparable to our struggle over what constitutes good education policy. And in few other places has public education been under such a fierce attack. Indeed, public education has been a lightning rod for those who worry about America’s economic future, for those who are convinced America is moral decline, and for those who see a growing number of people disengaging from American civic life.

And yet, throughout these three decades of tumult, 9 out of 10 parents have chosen to continue to send their children to public schools, and this includes the vast majority of well-to-do parents who can afford to send their children to private schools. The mass exodus from the public schools, predicted by public education's most vocal critics back in the 1980s, never materialized.

Public schools, including our school, have improved. Our schools today are far more rigorous than they were in the 1970s or 80s. Academically, much more is demanded of the students. But public schools need to do more, much better for our students.

Acknowledging the Challenges

I want to share what I see, what I hope, and what I believe about the future of public schools. But any such discussion must come with a full disclosure: For all of the innovation, the hard work, and the improvements, public schools still have a long way to go.

We aren't serving all our students as best we can. That is especially true of minority and low-income students. These students have life circumstances that deserve our respect and consideration. Often, these students need extra supports, in and out of school. Too many struggle instead of succeed in school. Too many drop out. That is wrong. A mind is, indeed, a terrible thing to waste. These students have tremendous potential, and we need the talent and skill of every student. They deserve more from all of us.

And students today *do* have to learn more than their grandparents or parents did. Students have to be better prepared to adapt and learn for the rest of their lives. This is the demand of a global knowledge society. Success at even a modest level in today's world requires more education and life-long learning than people had in the past. Students must learn core subject areas, including reading, math, and the sciences. But history, literature, and the arts are equally essential. Also students must master other skills, what some call 21st century skills, including problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork.

To be clear—in our country, a great education is not just about teaching core content and 21st century skills. Public schools have another role to play to prepare our students to succeed. We live in a democracy, and democracy is not a spectator sport. Students have to learn commonly-held values to function in our society. They have to learn their rights and responsibilities. Our public school communities must be places where students learn to work hard, show mutual respect, be honest, collaborate with others, take personal responsibility, and give back. Good citizenship in our nation demands these qualities. It also demands that people get involved in their communities and government.

These new demands stretch the capabilities of old-style 20th century public schools. Today's public schools must reinvent themselves to meet the challenges of a new world.

Now, our young people need many kinds of support—for their health care, nutrition, vision care, and other needs – and clearly not all of that responsibility falls on public schools. It should not. Anyone who has raised a child knows that all kinds of people have all kinds of roles to play to help a child succeed.

But public schools do have to do their part. Our world has changed. And so—just as they have in the past—public schools have to change even more. And parents and educators know it. The public school parents and educators [here in this school/district] get it—we take the challenges very seriously. This [school/district's] educators are talking with one another, with experts, and with colleagues across the country to figure out the very best ways to serve the students in our public schools and to equip them to succeed. Educators, with parent input, have started to do things differently here.

Voices from the Grassroots

And our educators and parents here have sent a message across the country – a message about a new way of organizing schools to help every student succeed.

Wait, wait . . . just a minute, you might say. I want to hear about what is happening differently in our schools here. But first – What do you mean that our district's educators and parents have sent out a national message?

Well, yes, in a way they have. Many—probably most—our district's educators and parents, including administrators, teachers, school board members, and others are members of national organizations. The leaders in those national organizations listen to the voices of their members, such as our educators and parents right here. And on occasion, the leaders of the national organizations get together and share what they are hearing from “real people,” that would be us, back home.

I am happy to say that there is one place where the leaders of 18 national organizations that work for our public schools get together frequently. It is called the Learning First Alliance, or simply LFA. What LFA found out is that all over the country, educators and parents are saying very similar things about the need to change our public schools. In fact, LFA hosted a national summit with hundreds of educators and parent leaders from all over the country and discovered that attendees shared a vision for public schools in the 21st century.

Now, LFA proclaims this new consensus on a vision for public schools on its website, in speeches, in talks with leaders.

An Emerging Vision

So, amidst all the sound and fury over educational policy, a working consensus has emerged among public educators and parents.

Educators and parents now share a vision. Communities like ours – from Connecticut to California—are rolling out innovative, smartly designed strategies to give every one of our students the opportunity for success. And all those innovations are adding up—to a new, 21st century vision of public schools.

This is revolutionary. And it is a reason I am excited to get going every morning. I am the vanguard of a revolution!

Now, this vision about public schools in America—how they should operate and what we should expect the students to achieve—is still a work in progress. But the changes we see pivot around five points.

First, there is personalization. Every student counts. Every student is unique. Educators aim to tailor instruction and give each student individual attention they need to succeed. Right now, educators are using new technologies and techniques to promote students' academic and social progress. And this trend promises to continue—increasingly, public schools will individualize instruction to meet each student's needs.

Second, there are high standards that matter. It is now widely agreed we need high and relevant academic standards to prepare students for a fast-changing world. Standards in math and reading are key, to be sure, but people also are highlighting critical areas such as science, social studies, English, languages, and the arts.

What's more, the curricula should not only reflect these standards but also engage students' minds. I see a future of fewer lectures and more ways students can learn and apply their knowledge to solving problems.

And no, I am not skipping tests! People know tests are important. But we want good tests that accurately and fairly measure what our students know and can do. And those tests should guide educators to help a student – fast – when a student needs it. But they should not become the be-all and end-all of education.

There are now many business and education leaders who believe that students have to learn more than the so-called “three R's.” Students must learn other skills that prepare them for the real-world, such as team-work and critical thinking. Business and education leaders also think it is important for students to learn about skills for finances, the way the media work, and health. Clearly students have to have an array of knowledge and skills to successfully navigate 21st Century life.

Third are community connections. Students have more success when public schools forge a strong relationship with students' families. That means schools have to do more to reach out to engage families.

And public schools should have ongoing relationships with local businesses, service, and civic groups that can offer students real-world experiences in work and service.

Non-school organizations—from health care to social service groups—should do more to help make sure students come to school healthy and ready to learn.

Public schools are... public! So, people deserve more transparency from public schools. Taxpayers and parents should know how money is spent and what improvements are underway.

Next is school environment. It is agreed: every public school should be a safe, welcoming and inspiring place to learn. This is not just about the issue of safety and discipline – which of course are essential to good schools. Safe and inspiring also mean a lively and stimulating school environment, with after-school enrichment and activities to meet student needs and interests.

When you enter a school, you can feel it right away: Is this a place of isolation, blame, and denial where parents and students alike are seen as “a problem,” or is it a place of openness, hope, and possibility where parents and students are valued?

And the final pivot point in the new vision . . . people see public schools with empowered professionals. Public school professionals are not resting on the laurels of that last Masters degree. We continually work to sharpen our skills. We aim to make great decisions about improving our school and helping every student succeed. We cannot do that unless we continually reflect on our practice, learn about best practices, and study new research.

No more being alone behind closed doors! We must redefine school days so we have time to plan and collaborate. We want a school community of professionals who can more thoroughly serve each student. We are entering a rewarding and exciting new era of professionalism in public schools.

That's it. That's our shared vision. This is a vision for change! And I strongly believe it's a vision that will serve us well as we work together to continue to improve public education and our schools. A shared vision is, after all, more than an idea—it is a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power, a force strong enough to transform public education—an American institution with roots in the Massachusetts Bay Colony . . . an institution that in the 19th Century and early 20th Century, when a surge in immigration tripled the American population, educated wave after wave of immigrants . . . an institution that in the 20th Century educated the founders of many of America's greatest innovations – from high-tech breakthroughs and space exploration, to discoveries in medicine and for the world's environment.

Mission

OK! We've talked about great 21st century public schools. But what is our over-arching mission?

When that American flag is raised each morning in front of our school—when we recite the pledge—or play the anthem at a school event—I am reminded of the profound public mission of our public schools.

Public schools are unique civic places. They are the only place that brings together 90 percent of tomorrow's citizens, the Americans who will work in, live in, run, and love our country. It means that our public schools have a huge responsibility to make sure that our individual students are prepared—for economic success, for success in life, for success as citizens. Our future depends on it. John F. Kennedy was right: "Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education."

And for this mission, public schools deserve the expert and dedicated efforts of educators, the passionate involvement of their communities, and the diligent support of our elected officials.

The extraordinary mission of public schools—especially in the changing era in which we live—deeply affects those of us who work in and with public schools and demands that we create a special regard for and relationship with every student.

From the first hour of the first day a student walks into his or her public school, we must respect that student as our neighbor, as our country's future citizen. Our students should know that we value them and believe—believe deeply—in their innate ability to participate in, lead, and uphold our free society. They are on day one the guardians of liberty. The pledge, the anthem, the flag, their studies, their extracurricular activities, their behaviors, their explorations as learners, their wonderful vitality should remind them that they are important. They should revel in the knowledge that with application and imagination they will contribute something meaningful— in whatever way their talents lead.

And they should know that we expect them to take responsibility and work hard to succeed – and that we will take responsibility and work hard on that success.

Local Examples – Changes to Meet Challenges

Just to show you the revolution is real, I want to share with you [one or a couple] of many examples of how we are changing here to meet the new challenges, serve all our students, and improve our schools.

[Examples]

Call for Partnership

I am one out of many agents of change in America's public schools. As a nation, we have not reached and supported *every* student – but we can. As a nation, we have not connected *all* our public schools to the richness of our communities offer—but we can. We have not fully developed the high and relevant standards we need—but we can. We have not made every public school a safe and inspiring place—but we can. We have not supported the professionalism of school leadership or teachers—but we can.

Every student—rich or poor, rural or urban—every student regardless of color, language, or origin—every student deserves our all-out effort to deliver great public schools. This is an American dream we can achieve.

So, today, I make a commitment to every student out there. I'm going to work hard every day for school programs that work for you. I will try my very best to give you every opportunity to succeed in this global society. I will do all I can to inspire you to be a terrific citizen in our democracy.

I know this is a tall order, and I sure can't do this alone. But I know my colleagues in public schools are working with me to make this happen. And I am sure that others in this community will join us in our work to transform our public schools.

I will do my best to stop those who say we have no ability, no support, no more money, no time.

This is not the era of "no." It's the era of "yes." This is about our kids, our community, our country.

So, to the students of our public schools, I am saying: Yes, we have high hopes for you.

Yes, we have the know-how; yes, we will work together; yes, we'll demand the money; yes, we will demand the time; yes, we have the imagination; and yes, together, we will transform our public schools to be world-class because you, our students are the brightest stars in our future.

Welcome back to school.