

Imagine the future if we make our schools a priority

That phrase has been rolling in my head, over and over again. "Imagine the future if we make our schools a priority." What exactly does that mean to me? For my kids? What is my role as a teacher, what is a school? Schools to some are mere bricks and mortar, copy paper, pencil shavings, bells and tests, my husband's first thought was detention. But to those deeply entrenched in education, it encompasses so much more. School has a much less tangible meaning, one that no walls could hold, for it is far too immense. School is the place where dreams are born, where student learning is fostered and nurtured so the vicious cycle of poverty can be broken. School is the concept that no matter what your walk in life, you can achieve it, if you believe it. School is about lighting the fire of education in those students that may not believe in themselves, it is about showing parents and families the strengths in their children that they may not yet see. It is late nights, up reflecting about how to reach that one child that seems barely beyond reach, yet you know is almost within grasp. School is the place where goals are set and the future is born. School is where teachers and those in education lift kids to their full potential, where sweat and tears are the salty catalysts of change.

Imagine the future if we make our schools a priority. I have had many "aha" moments in my life's journey, usually at times and places when I would least expect them. There is

one in particular that holds special meaning when I imagine the future for my students. I'm not really sure why, but I've never gotten overly sappy or emotional when I hear "Our National Anthem." Please don't think any worse of me—I know it may seem un-American or heartless, but it was really just a habit to pause when I heard it, stand, go through the motions, but for whatever reason, it didn't hold much meaning. That changed this year.

The date was January 20th, it was a Tuesday, and my kids had voted to eat lunch in the classroom. We had been preparing for the inauguration—we had been studying the meaning of the words of the oath, exploring Maya Angelou's inaugural poem from 1993, discussing the meaning of Elizabeth Alexander's poem, "Praise Song for the Day," written for that particular Tuesday. As the clock hands pointed towards the ceiling, we began to watch. It started out as nothing really out of the ordinary, 17 children eating mac-n-cheese off of foam treys, sitting in their desks. But then something happened, something transformed us, something magical was born and came to life that afternoon.

As we focused on the t.v., I glanced around my classroom, at the pigtails, mohawks, the braids, the fades—the Star Spangled Banner began to play. Something stirred inside me, something sparked as I soaked in my surroundings and the looks on my students' faces. I saw that at that moment my kids' lives fundamentally changed. From that moment on, they realized, the fact fully manifested that they could do anything. Then, one by one, they came and stood by me,

locked arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. We were a chain of colors, backgrounds, beliefs, a classroom family witnessing history. We were hypnotized in that formation, eyes transfixed, brains dancing with the possibilities as listened to the poem we had been waiting for. And then we heard the line written so eloquently by Elizabeth Andrews, "In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp."

One of my students, Charnai, looked at me, her eyes misty as well, and said one thing that will stick with me for years to come. "Ms. Allen: my sentence is beginning here, at school, right now." I gave her a huge bear hug, the rest of the class piled on, and I thought to myself-yes, Charnai. You are on the brink, on the brim, on the cusp. Now when I hear "The Star Spangled Banner," my chest does tighten and my eyes well, for the meaning has evolved. It is about the hopes and dreams of my students, the look in their eyes when they dream big. It is about that moment we shared together where our lives intersected and changed for the better, it is about imagining the future.

I wrote a poem about one student in particular that afternoon, trying to capture the essence of the moment when he began jotting down his own goals. It doesn't have a title, but it does transfer to many students that we see in our schools on a daily basis.

Caught up in a daydream,
Eyes sparkle, moving to the pulsing rhythm of his heart.
Confidence, courage.
That fire has been lit.

Sadness kept in the reserves,
for another time, another place.
No room for it now.
Hopes and fears entangle,
Blooming into one upward spiraling vine.

Caught in a daydream,
Feet firmly planted in the past,
But arms reaching high,
for the sky,
for the world,
For the possibilities.

One deep breath,
Inhaling cool comfort,
while exhaling the frosts of anxiety,
Hands trembling,
He pauses.
Waivers.
Then, pen to paper,
His daydream appears in letters, words, then sentences.
And daydreams metamorphosize, turning into
hopes of his future.

Imagine the future if we make our schools a priority. That is why we are teachers. We are there to show our students they are on the cusp of change, of possibilities. And we, as teachers, are on the brink, on the brim, on the cusp of change. Imagine the future. For you are the heroes. You have the most powerful jobs in the world—you are able to change the future, change a life, change the world for your children. You are the rocks that they depend on, the one stable force in their lives. And never downplay your power. For you are a teacher. Be that dream lifter. Be that person who teaches creativity and self-expression, who builds the self-confidence of future leaders. Be that person who reaches out to the quiet kid in the corner, going unnoticed. Be your student's voice to your state legislators. Be the person in a child's life who listens, who cares, who motivates. Be relentless in the giving of your love and time, even if your students never tell you they appreciate you, they do. Be unforgiving with your respect, even if it is not reciprocated in a way that you recognize. For you are teachers, having the ultimate power in the world. Ours is not a reward in fortune, in fame, but the rewards are much sweeter. For we are not "just teachers," there is no such thing as "just a teacher," but we are dream lifters. We help give rise to the future. We make a difference in the life of a child. And that is the most powerful job in the world.

Imagine the future if we make our schools a priority. For we are on the brink, on the brim, on the cusp of change. Be

proud of the magnitude of your profession. For you have the ability to shape the future.