You Have Been Called for Such a Time as This
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The following is an excerpt from the keynote address given by Dr. Shelia Evans-Tranumn at the 7th Annual Patrick Francis Daly Memorial Awards for Excellence in Educational Leadership on July 15, 1999 at the Omni Hotel in New Haven, Connecticut. At the time she was the Associate Commissioner of the New York State Education Department.

It is an honor and a privilege to be here. I have been thinking about what to tell principals and superintendents that would help re-energize you so you can return to school in September ready to take risks on behalf of children and move ahead. I thought about a woman from a great book who had an opportunity to save her people. I know this book is the #1 bestseller. This woman had an opportunity to step forward and save her people because she understood that her people needed to be saved. This woman could have continued to be in the administration and the court, and not even let people know who she was. She was asked to go to the king to intervene on her people's behalf. She said she could not go to the king because if he did not accept her, she would be killed. "But you must go," she was told. "Who knows whether you have been brought into the kingdom for such a time as this? For if you don't go, if you don't take the risk, somebody else will be raised up to do the job that you could have done. You and your family might be destroyed in the process." And so this woman with strong convictions understood the challenge before her and said to herself, "If I perish, I perish." She understood that she had been brought into the kingdom for such a time as this. I'd like you to think about this for just a few moments.

You are here this evening because there is something motivating you to do better. Out of some kind of divine order, you have chosen to be where you are. You're in the position that you're in because you have been called for such a time as this. I found something in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi that captures the essence of renewed spirit that I'd like to share with you. Gandhi said that there are some things that will destroy us as a people and as a nation if we don't understand them.

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One thing that will destroy us is politics without principles. If you look around this nation, there are many politicians who are without principles. There is much legislation passed that is supposed to be for our children that fights against the strength of families and schools. There are people who understand the impact of cutting funds for children who are most in need but who do it anyway in the name of politics Gandhi said that this is one of the things that will destroy us.
Another thing that will destroy us is pleasure without conscience. All we need to do is turn on the TV to understand that pleasure without conscience is a part of the fabric of American society. I started teaching in middle school, and it was difficult to keep those raging hormones in a seat most days. We didn't have what we have today on TV and in the movies. Today children are being fed that you can have pleasure without conscience. Gandhi also said that wealth without work will destroy us. Some of you teach in the inner city, and some of your children can run a better business than you can. They have more money in their pockets, drive better cars, and understand how organizations work. They understand the politics of situations. They can walk into a room and scope out who's for them and who's against them. They also understand from what we've taught them that you can get wealth without legitimate work.

Gandhi also said that knowledge without character will destroy us. Knowledge without character allows us to sit back and watch drugs come into urban communities and not cry out in protest. Knowledge without character allows us to build freeways on geological faults. Knowledge without character allows us to think that children fail and we had nothing to do with it.

Gandhi also said that business without morality and science without humanity will destroy us. How can we talk about teaching and raising moral citizens, when we as adults have conformed to the things that Gandhi says will destroy us? And finally, Gandhi said that worship without sacrifice will destroy us. You have to figure out what your worship center is, because children do pick up on what you worship, and then they begin to emulate it. If we teach them to worship riding around and looking good all the time without working, then that's what they'll want to do.

Although Gandhi was talking about a futuristic vision of the world, there are implications for us today. I've taken the liberty of adding to Gandhi. There are some things that will destroy public education if we're not careful. The first of these is teaching without learning. If you want to destroy a system, sit back and allow teaching without learning. I don't know how many times I've been in schools and seen people standing at the board dictating to children. I walked into a school one day and asked the teacher why she thought we had identified the school as low performing. She said, "I don't know what the problem is with these children. I come here every day ready to work. I'm prepared. I've been teaching twenty-five years and some of these lessons I used 25 years ago. I teach every day, but nobody's learning." How can you have teaching if no one is learning? One goes with the other. If no one is learning, then you're not teaching.

If you're brave and strong enough to get rid of those that teach without learning, then you will help save the lives of our children. We have to stop looking at education as an employment system for our friends. A doctor would not allow a friend to be a colleague in a practice if every patient that doctor treated died. My friends know I expect 150% from them because they're my friends. I don't want
anybody to ever say I let my friends slide. We have to understand as leaders that we are some children's last best hope of having a future. You cannot play politics and lose the lives of our precious gems.

I also think that resources without results will destroy public education. How many of you look at your budgets and understand that what you have in your school budget this year is pretty much what you're going to have next year? The resources are few and far between and most states are cutting resources. You have to learn to maximize educational outcomes based upon what you already have. For twenty years in New York City, ten of those years as an administrator, I never depended upon the system to give me what I needed for my children. I understood clearly that I would never have enough money in the school budget to do what was needed, so I went out and begged. I would ask anybody that I could for things like space to open up a new school, or money for books and other things. It was only through garnering extra resources that I was able to do what I had to do. I committed myself to these people to get results. Resources should add value to what you are already doing. Many principals don't understand the relationship between data and programmatic changes. I'm grateful that David Squires of the School Development Program has worked with principals in New York City to help them understand the relationship between data and programming. He has shown them how to align their curriculum with the state standards upon which the tests are developed. Sometimes it doesn't take more money, but an understanding that you can't operate a school in a vacuum.

Another thing that I think will destroy public education is completion without competence. How can children come through our school systems and not be able to read? If there is no severe learning disability, I don’t understand why children are not learning to read. I can't understand how children are with us 12, 13 and 14 years and still can't compute mathematics when they leave. I can't understand it because I believe that children can learn. As the director of an alternative high school with 15,000 students, I saw 15-, 16-, 18-, 20-, and 80-year-olds that could not read after exiting a public school system. I can teach them how to read, to write, and how to compute. I can teach them how to pass a seven-hour exam.

This question puzzled me for so long until I started going into schools identified as a low performing in reading and asked principals what strategies they use to teach reading. Principals would say, "I use Houghton Mifflin." I'd say, "I think you didn't understand the question. I'm asking you what strategies you have developed to teach children how to read." Over and over again they would tell me the same thing: "I use Houghton Mifflin." Some principals don't understand the difference between a textbook and reading strategies. Then they wonder what's wrong with the children. You have to understand that a textbook is material that should be used to complement your strategies. No matter how much staff development publishing companies give, it is still not enough to do the job. You have to have a base from which to operate. Completion without competence will destroy us.
There is nothing that says children cannot read, write, compute math and achieve. I can take you to any district in the state of New York or in New York City, with high poverty, high incidences of single parenthood and alcohol abuse, and I can show you schools where children are succeeding. In the same neighborhood with the same population, I can show you schools that are not succeeding. We have the keys in education. We're just not sharing the successful strategies like you're doing here this week. Go back to your home cities and share successful strategies with others. We can no longer afford to have children completing school without competence.

Another thing that I think will destroy public education is acceptance without accountability. Somebody must be accountable for a lack of educational outcomes and growth. We blame children and their parents if we don't have high academic outcomes. We blame superintendents for making us write too many reports. We blame the policies that are handed down by the city and the state. We blame everybody else, but if you are a building-level principal, the buck stops with you. I tell teachers and principals all the time that I love shared decision making and think it's a valuable and necessary tool. I love working in teams. It is the best way to move a school forward, but you have to understand that when something goes wrong in your school, they don't send for the team.

They send for you. They don't fire the whole team. When I was a building-level person I asked to be held accountable because I knew I would get results. I'm not afraid of accountability because I'm going to do whatever it takes. I'm going to look at the data, the strong teachers and the weak teachers. I'm going to document unsuccessful teaching. I had 800 employees when I left the New York City Board of Education and I told them "I will do everything I can to work with you. I will give you a year of my personal supervision, but at the end of that year, if you have not changed, I'm coming after you. And when I come after you, I'm not backing down. I'm not giving you a satisfactory rating so you can destroy somebody else's children. I'm going to stay after you until my job is complete." You only have to do that about three or four times. After that, everybody gets the message. It's a difficult job, but you cannot afford to allow teachers that don't teach our children to stay in your school. You have a moral responsibility to those children and their parents.

Most of my years in elementary school I thought about becoming a doctor. Then in high school, I had a tremendous calling to enter the teaching profession. We had a teachers' strike in New York City. I was in one of the top ten high schools in the nation at the time. My school was closed down, but there was a school in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn where the teachers refused to stay home. They understood that these young men in Boys High School had wonderful athletic ability but couldn't read, write or compute. These teachers said they would cross the picket line and keep their school open, and that any child could come there.

At 17, I thought that was rather neat. My girlfriend and I dressed up and went over to Boys High School. We were sitting in front of the classroom having a wonderful time. I remember watching the faces of 16, 17, and 18-year-old boys headed for pro
basketball and pro football careers as they read out of a 4th grade reader. Because girls were there, they hung their heads in shame. The teacher couldn't understand why they didn't want to read. I remember walking out of Boys High School that day with tears in my eyes. I couldn't understand how a system could allow these Black and Hispanic boys who were destined to go on to the pros to come through and not know how to read and write. That experience changed my life. I vowed that if I became an educator, I would always do whatever I could for the children most in need. If I could just make it through and be in the first generation of college graduates in my family, then I would make sure that somebody else's family would make it along the way. I believe that it was by divine Providence that I was called into education for such a time as this. To understand that there is nothing wrong with our children and that sometimes you've got to fight the system to get what you need for your children. Children are more than just a one-day data shot. They are more intelligent than we can measure and have more skills and abilities than we can tap.

When you go back to your schools and your communities, no matter what the hardships were this year, don't give up but look ahead to the future. Understand that every round goes higher and higher. All you need to do is rise above the mistakes you made this year and build upon them. Do something a little different next year, but don't give up the battle. When you're out there on the battlefield, and you're fighting for the children people will try to make you think you're crazy. Don't listen to those who ask you why you're working so hard.

Don't leave the principalship. I know superintendents make a lot of money. We need to build incentives so you can get paid for the job that you're doing. When I go to Long Island to speak I find people who left the New York City schools. I have found some of the good principals we trained in Comer in other cities and towns in New York. Stay in the city and work with our children. If everybody leaves for higher pay and a bigger campus, then who's going to help our children? I'm not telling you anything I haven't told myself. Every year about this time, I get calls from headhunters who want me to be a superintendent.

Every year I give up at least $30,000 by not going back to New York City. Believe me, I need the $30,000. I have a 14-year old who is studying in Paris right now at the Sorbonne. At 13 she studied at Cambridge University and walked away with honors. Next year she'll study at Oxford University at 15. While I need the extra money, I also believe that if you stay the course and do what it is that you've been called to do, something will come along to help you meet all of your needs.

Some of you have been called into the positions that you're in for such a time as this. We're entering the new millennium. If we don't hang in there with our children, God knows what's going to happen to them. Keep fighting and I'm sure that God will bless you for the work that you do for the least of them. God bless you.