

Dr. Michael Rice's Remarks
Michigan Association of School Administrators MidWinter Conference
Amway Grand Hotel, Grand Rapids
Thursday, January 26, 2017

Good afternoon. Our 32nd president, FDR, once said of public speaking, "Be sincere, be brief, be seated." That's my job today.

I'd like to congratulate Rob Glass, our 2017 Michigan Superintendent of the Year. Please give it up for Rob and his accomplishments!

I'd also like to recognize Chris Wigent for his outstanding leadership of MASA. Many of us lament having SEVEN board members. Imagine what it would be like to work on behalf of.....well, all of us.....given our enormous diversity. Please give it up for Chris and the entire MASA team!

Just as importantly, I'd like to recognize the cavalry. What cavalry? WE are the cavalry. We know that there is no NEW major force coming to the rescue of public schools and public school children. As superintendents, we have to lead that cavalry.....but we have to do so with our natural partners, our parents and grandparents, our many community members supportive of public education, our boards of education, and our teachers and other educators.

Some of you may not view teachers as part of the public school cavalry, but they are. In an era of anti-public school rhetoric and action, our teachers and public school supporters of all types are far more like one another than are the opponents of public education. To echo Chris's words yesterday, we need to band together on behalf of children and not fall prey to internecine warfare. To fight one another is to permit our opponents to undermine our kids' futures.

Here are a few of the MANY lessons that I have learned *in the last several years*.

Number 1: There isn't enough lipstick for some pigs.

Number 2: Lipstick or not, we still have to work with the pigs.

Number 3: We have to work with the turkeys and the chickens as well.

Number 4: While we have to work with many animals, we don't have to work with grizzlies. That's what guns in schools are for.

In all seriousness, here are a few brief thoughts.

If you don't like to take hits, get off the field. Get out of the profession. The superintendency is a contact sport.

If you don't like working for a board, get out of the superintendency. Boards come with the job. The expression, "I love my job, but can't stand working for a board" may make sense for others in public education and for many in other careers, but not for a superintendent.

If you prefer schools when kids aren't there.....you guessed it....find another job.

If you are fortunate enough to be a superintendent, use the opportunity to make your voice heard. If you have neither voice nor an inclination to use your voice, move out so someone else can serve children. You can't serve kids mute.

Kids need us and learn from us.

We need kids and have much to learn from them.

To this point: Last year, I challenged my male staff members to mentor five young men apiece on a weekly basis. One hundred forty (140) male staff members and I mentored 629 young men, predominantly young men of color, in 2,822 weekly mentoring sessions, often during lunch time. At the end of the year, Western Michigan University professors evaluated the mentoring program and recommended its expansion.

This year, 410 staff members are mentoring approximately 2,000 boys and girls. In addition, we have expanded our male mentoring program to include male community mentors from some of our Kalamazoo churches.

Mentoring is critical for our young people in the Kalamazoo community that has very dense poverty in many schools. Indeed, in the last three years, we have had 11 schools with 80 percent or more of our kids free or reduced-price lunch eligible, 7 with 90 percent or more.

Far too many of our kids grow up without role models. The weekly mentoring, however brief, is a chance for adults to pour into children in different ways than they do when they teach or support in schools.

It is an opportunity to show children that we care.

It is an opportunity to learn about children, and to have them learn about us, as individuals, as human beings, not as authority figures, but at eye level.

Mentoring is not a panacea. It won't cure poverty, homelessness, parental absence, or family illiteracy. It won't cure underfunding of schools and poor children and English language learners and special needs children.

But it does begin to say to kids, in a very different way, that we care about them.....and to open up our relationships with them to help improve their chances of success in our schools.

More than any experience this past year, mentoring has opened my eyes. I'm lucky to have the experience, to be able to contribute in this way to children, and to have children teach me at the same time. For it is only in opening ourselves up to learning—about ourselves and our children--that we can effectively teach.

Thank you. I very, very much appreciate the comradery and the partnership with you, my fellow members of the public school cavalry, and wish you well during the rest of the school year.