

World Educator Speech

Educating our population to be informed and active citizens has never been more important than at this moment in time. Clearly, there is much the American public is unaware of. Whatever the political leanings of students, faculty, parents and community members, our primary mission must be to better educate our audiences. We must nurture not just tolerance but understanding. Not just responsibility for our own actions but stewardship for the present and the future. There *is* hope for the future if we look at the past.

Activists have pushed this country to live up to our ideals despite overwhelming odds. In 1855, the U.S. Supreme Court denied Black Americans the rights of full citizens in its *Dred Scott* decision, suggesting even free Blacks had no constitutional rights. Within just 15 years, despite the large number of slave owners in Congress, African Americans by 1870 were granted equal protection under the law and African American men earned the right to vote. For seventy years, from 1881 to 1951, the High Court repeatedly denied African American students the right to attend white elementary and secondary schools, as well as their choice of universities and graduate schools. I'm sure things seemed hopeless to many parents and young people. Then in 1954, a unanimous Supreme Court demanded the desegregation of all public education in this country. In 1917, women were imprisoned for exercising their free speech rights on behalf of women's suffrage. Three years later, the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. And finally, in the late 1980s, apartheid showed few signs of ending in South Africa, as violence increased and political participation of people of color was unheard of. Four years later, South Africans elected Nelson Mandela to lead and heal their nation.

So if it seems that some aspects of our culture and institutions are regressing, it is up to us to teach the lessons of the past, to look for hopeful examples in today's world, to teach the lessons of hope, and to actively be agents of change toward a best possible future. The most productive thing we can do – in education and in civic life – is to join with other individuals and organizations.

The World Affairs Council provides a tremendous resource to teachers seeking to bring the world into their classrooms, and to improve their own content knowledge. The Council provides guest speakers, on-line lessons they've developed with local teachers like me, and in-depth workshops. Their Global Classroom makes complex international issues interactive and accessible, featuring university lecturers, panels of graduate students from the countries concerned, and curriculum that enables us to take what we've learned back to share with our students. My students and I are able to truly engage with the real world because of the work of organizations like the Council.

Other folks who have help make me a better teacher are the amazing Head of the Seattle Girls' School, Marja Brandon – who has never failed to support my ideas, no matter how lofty or unconventional. My teaching partner of three years, Rafael del Castillo, who has accommodated spontaneous international visitors, shared the risks of addressing controversial topics, and maintained his humor when outside events seem

most bleak. Gilda Wheeler with Facing the Future has been a great source of ideas and opportunities. My dearest friends and soul-mate colleagues and my family have always been sources of inspiration; it is because of who they are that I set my personal standards high. I want to become the person they see in me.

That's the reality for all of us in this room, isn't it? To realize the best parts of ourselves – the parts that sometimes others see more readily than we do. I have the opportunity this year, because a group of people saw qualities in me I may not yet see myself, to lead social studies teachers in Washington State. As of last month, I became the President of the Washington State Council for Social Studies (largely because no one else wanted the job). As you may or may not be aware, social studies – as a content area in public education – is under intense attack because of pressure to teach to standardized math, reading and writing tests like the WASL, and because social studies content can be a red herring to various interest groups who acquire political power.

The Council is urging the State legislature, schools, parents and teachers to promote social studies as a truly essential element in the K – 12 curriculum. As we see it, social studies education – for global citizenship – is one way to have a profound influence on the direction of our country. Likewise, its absence would have an equally profound impact. I am committed to working with my fellow social studies teachers to secure our place on the public agenda, and I encourage everyone in this room to do what *you* can to support education for democracy in this country, and for partnership with the rest of the world.

Thank you.

Wendy Ewbank