

Spring 2013 School of Education Commencement Address

Susana Cordova

Chief Academic Officer, Denver Public Schools

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to **change the world**.”

— Nelson Mandela

Graduates, Faculty, Family and Friends:

It is my honor to address the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education graduating class of 2013.

Today is a marker in your lives – we all have them – moments that define a **“before and after”** place. And the **“after”** that you are entering into gives you the power to **change the world**. I think about the **“before and after”** in my life – the point when I decided to become a teacher. Currently, I am the Chief Academic Officer in the Denver Public Schools. I started my teaching career in a middle school, teaching in both English and Spanish, and I have worked at all levels—middle school and high school, as an elementary school principal, in the central office, and working with Pre-service teachers in their teacher preparation programs.

Teaching wasn't supposed to be my **“after”**—it wasn't until I began to examine my life and what **changed** me that I decided that I needed to teach—that teaching was the reason that my life **changed** and was different from many of the kids I knew in my neighborhood. My father didn't graduate from high school—my mother didn't go to college; they both spoke Spanish before they learned English in school. They loved reading though and we always had books in my house, so school came easily to me. When I was in school, my favorite teacher was Ms. Vanderwyst. It was 1976, I was in 4th grade, and she was *cool*. She wore bell bottoms—it was the 70s, after all, and we did incredible projects. One involved building mother's day gifts with pieces of wood and shellac and she invited me to go with her to pick them up. I remember being in her car and listening to her sing along with the radio— *“Boogie Night, it's alright, we are here to party!”* My mind was blown! A TEACHER?? Singing *Boogie Nights*??? She has a radio?? That day, she became a real person to me. And I always knew I was a real person to her as well. She came to my house when my grandfather died and I remember hugging her and crying. I learned so much in her class—it was the first time I really felt smart.

I decided that I wanted to do this for other children as well—kids like me who depend on schools to **change their world**.

You are at this wonderful point in your lives—you have chosen education as your profession; you have been working at learning all that you can to prepare yourselves for this next stage—the

classroom; the principalship, higher education, research and policy; and you have had experiences in classrooms, in schools and with other teachers and so many students. The journey to get to today may feel like it has taken forever—especially for you PhD grads. The “**before**” is ending; you are entering into this “**after**.”

When I look back at my first few years teaching, I am amazed at how much I learned, and sometimes a little embarrassed, wondering if I taught anything to my students. My classroom was more fun than organized, more loving than logical, but I like to tell myself that we all learned together. In my first year teaching, I was 22 years old, single and living on my own for the first time. As I look back, I am amazed that I was entrusted with 125 middle schoolers.

I remember one family in particular—the Robles family. There were four kids in that family and over three years, I had them all in my class. I struggled a lot with the older kids—I was too green and Roberto, the oldest knew it. He ran all over me. I was always trying to have all the answers, even when I clearly didn’t have them. One day, Roberto Robles said, “Hey Miss, I don’t get this...” and in frustration I said, “I don’t either!” He stopped and stared at me. I said that I really didn’t know how to solve the problem and I thought we needed to work on it together. He seemed surprised, but we sat at the table and worked through the problem.

Things began to change after that. Roberto’s sister Amalia also noticed the change and told me that her mom was happy that Roberto was doing his homework and she wanted me to come to dinner. Dinner at the Robles house was great—a night of firsts for me. The first time in my student’s home, the first time I ever ate Nopales, and the first time I really understood that my student’s lives were not all that they appeared to be in my class. I felt a connection to my own favorite teacher at that time, who also took the time to come to my home.

For you as you enter into your “**after**,” there are so many things that ring familiar, regardless of where you go: The smell of school hallways—you can always tell when you are in a school, even with your eyes closed; the first day of school jitters—who all will be in the class? Is the school ready for parents? How will this school year turn out? And in this **after**, there are so many new things as well: new standards, new resources, new research and educational policies and an increasingly diverse group of students across our state and nation representing a wide variety of backgrounds.

Elizabeth Stone said, “The decision to have a child...it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking outside your body.” As educators, we are graced every day with precious cargo—children at all stages of their development who come to us to learn, and parents who believe that we will faithfully accept their children and teach them so that they will know more, do better and become successful. We meet with them in elementary school classrooms, in science laboratories, in art rooms and on the playground. We cheer them on, both on the field

and in the classroom. And it isn't always easy. Students don't always know all that we wish they did when they come into our classrooms, not in kindergarten, not in 7th grade, not in 11th grade, not in college. Our students start in our schools curious and hungry to learn. They are willing to try it all – putting themselves out in front of everyone as best they can. At some point, for some kids, that willingness fades. How do we keep that curiosity alive? Some of our students may come into our schools knowing very little or even no English...But they bring their life experiences. They may have seen places we have not, speak languages we do not, have parents who have worked at jobs we have not. Serving these students well will indeed **change the world**.

You **can** make a difference in their lives. You can give students opportunities to read more, to apply their learning in hands-on activities, to use technology and to express their creativity. You can expose them to science, to the joy of hard math problems, to expression through the arts. You can give them challenging material, and know that there is learning in making mistakes – valuable learning in struggling to understand difficult ideas.

You can support them through this learning. And you can acknowledge that we have considerable learning to do ourselves if we are to meet our students where ***they are***, from where ***we are***.

Jerome Bruner said, “Good teaching is forever being on the cutting edge of a child's competence.”

As educators, we have these children from when they are very young until they leave our doors at graduation. The promise we hold forth is that you will be rewarded everyday and for many days, weeks, months and years long after your students have left you. They will find you and thank you, or will forget you but remember what you taught them.

You will forever be someone's teacher, and you have the chance now to be the one that turns their experience with you into a **“happily ever after.”** Seize this opportunity. EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON TO CHANGE THE WORLD.