

Care Deeply About Students Is Mr. Woolley's Retirement Wisdom

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on June 9, 2013 6:06 AM | [No comments](#)

The school year has, or is soon ending, everywhere across the country. For some of us, this is our last year in public education. Those are the ones who have chosen to end their careers and retire. Retirement means open days, without uniforms ...dark suits and laced shoes or dresses and heels... which we don each weekday morning. It is a disorienting time, allowing for new work, or golf or travel or volunteering or grand parenting. There was a period in the history of our profession when leaders stayed a long time in service to one community, much like teachers still do. Retirement invites us to look back over a lifetime of work and get out the scales. Did we make enough of a difference for enough children? Were we appreciated and respected? Has our legacy been creating possibilities or shutting down dreams?

Recently, we discovered a letter written twenty years ago by a retiring superintendent. He had served as superintendent of one district for eighteen years. His letter made June 1992 seem not long ago and far away. It has caused us to pause and wonder if we rail and rally too much. Is it that for each of us, our present time is the toughest and the most remarkable? We bring you his voice, looking back and forward, the soothsayer leader whose vision was not limited in time nor impeded by nets of change surrounding him.

He begins with a salutation that describes relationships. His own unsatiated thirst for knowledge and attraction to creativity accompanied him and became his reputation. Euphoric times had passed. He observes that politicians were now in charge, searching for quick fixes. How prophetic this was; we would say the same today.

It is the ending of the letter that distinguishes it for us. Dismantling all the stereotypes of white, male leaders, he is unafraid to let his heart speak. As if he were speaking to us in 2013, he challenges us to care deeply, saying it is the only way we will prevail. *"The more we care about our students and what happens to them, the more well respected we will be and the more well fixed we will be. It is that simple."* Let us not forget that all of our sophistication, knowledge and expertise are meaningless if we are not opening our heart's ability to care and show it.

He implores us to *"dare to be different. We have to be willing to be more bothered. You and I are the only souls out there who can give our kids a choice and a voice. In giving them the choice and voice, we will prove that the American public school still is the best answer for our society."* Shame on us for those moments when we resist giving children choice and voice. It is our job to develop their capacity to use both well. It is fundamentally why American public schools have laid the strong foundation for this American democracy, with all its flaws still the most magnificent way for a nation to govern itself. And if educational leaders cannot dream dreams, how do the children? If we cannot engage each other with love in our hearts for our work and for the children, how do we inspire hope for the future? It is from knowledge, from innovation, from care, from daring to be different, from love, that leadership arises. It is June, the time to remember why we are in this work is now. The summer to renew our calling is before us. Thank you, Mr. Woolley for the reminder to be all we can be.

Dear Colleagues:

On September 3, 1974, I greeted you as the new superintendent of schools here in Spackenkill and now, eighteen years later, take leave after what I can only describe as a career filled with incredibly wonderful memories of the

deep commitment of hundreds of people and the success of thousands of children.

I had no intention of remaining so long, but each year there seemed to be one more big thing to do or resolve. It has been said that I was probably too liberal for the district when I arrived and too conservative now that I am leaving. There are those who feared my return from a conference with new ideas. Some joked that if airplanes only flew faster, 'he' wouldn't have so much time to think up more things to do. All conjectures are obviously correct. Nevertheless, allow me to share a final thought about what lies ahead.

First, the euphoria of the 80's is gone. Politicians are more in control of the driver's seat than ever in America. Secondly, they often seem to be more driven by quick fixes than a sound realignment of what it will take to fix our schools. And thirdly, nothing will likely fix our schools more than the caring people who work everyday with the children. Tinkering with class sizes, courses to cut or to keep, budgets to trim, etc., will not fix the roof and keep it from leaking. Caring, seems to me, to be the only 'stuff' which will allow us to prevail. The more we care about our students and what happens to them, the more well respected we will be and the more well fixed we will be. It is that simple.

And that, dear friends, will require you and me to dare to be different. We have to be willing to be more bothered. You and I are the only souls out there who can give our kids a choice and a voice. In giving them the choice and voice, we will prove that the American public school still is the best answer for our society. We can't point our fingers and say if only 'they'...because the 'they' is us!

Thanks for helping me dream my dreams! I love you all...Do good things...God Speed!

*Respectfully yours,
Richard D. Woolley*

Resource:

We thank Richard D. Woolley who granted us permission to print his letter.

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