



It was a wonderful evening listening to so many passionate people at Our Community's Board of Education meeting. Each asking our board members to please place kindness, compassion and dignity as our school districts number one mission. Below is a letter written from Colleen O'Connor-Potter, one of the many speakers from the evening.

"My hope is that Our Community's Board of Education truly listened to the passionate people that spoke this evening. That they will act and show everyone that they do represent our community on this very important topic. A common character core of kindness for everyone to live by who interacts in our schools at any level, would truly lead the way to excellence for years to come. Our school district has been asked to 'pay it forward' not only for Saratoga Springs, but for other school districts to emulate. Everyone benefits."

- Coach Rich Johns

My name is Colleen O'Connor-Potter and I am a parent in the district. I am also a graduate of Saratoga High School, Class of 1986. When I decided to come here this evening I created a list.

- Dr. Mike Gonroff, principal
- Mrs. Bobbie Jablonski Reed, English Mrs. Judy Vanderheide, guidance Mr. Joe Favat, English
- Miss Luci Bianchi, foreign language Mr. Bob Murphy, principal
- Mr. Ray Waldron, Athletic Director Mr. Jon Caldero, science
- Mr. Joe Ruccio, social studies
- Mr. Tom Coons, business
- Mr. Jim Matties, phy ed
- Dr. Allen Remaley, foreign language
- Mr. Dave Patterson, social studies

29 years later I was able to list 13 people off the top of my head. Why? What do they all have in common? Why do I remember them? Simply because they were kind to me during my years in junior high and high school. They made it apparent that it was important to them that I felt self-confident and comfortable in school. That I mattered beyond how I performed in a classroom or on a test. And now they all still matter to me because I can vividly remember how I was treated and how each of them made me feel.

I have a 2013 graduate of Saratoga High who is now a Division 3 college athlete. Now only 2 years later when I asked her to name adults from high school using the same criteria she could list 2. Neither of them were coaches. I also have a student athlete graduating in 2016. When I ask him in 2 years I worry what he will say.

I believe our district has done a tremendous job at the elementary level and also made significant strides at the middle school level building strong foundations for students with our campaigns to teach character traits and prevent bullying. Students are taking positive steps and being kind and respectful, showing good character, stepping up for a friend and talking to adults to help them stop negative behaviors.

However it appears to get a little unsteady at the high school level. Students are getting the building blocks kicked out from under them not just by their peers but by the very teachers, coaches and administrators they turn to for guidance, knowledge and support. Can you imagine the emotional impact this is having?

Act with Respect Always

More and more there is evidence and data supporting the connection of social and emotional development to learning environments. In 2013 a report published by the National

Association of State Boards of Education stated that “social emotional learning approaches have significant and positive impacts on students overall well being, behavior in and out of school and academic performance.” In a study published in the online edition of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, researchers from the University of California, San Diego and Harvard provide the first laboratory evidence that “cooperative behavior is contagious and that it spreads from person to person to person. When people benefit from kindness they “pay it forward” by helping others who were not originally involved, and this creates a cascade of cooperation that influences dozens more.”

I believe a kindness mission starts here tonight with you as a school board not just listening but acting. I do not believe we need more added to the plates of teachers and administrators by way of curriculum or committee task forces. What we need is an agreement that a change in behavior is necessary where all adults hold each other accountable for their words, their behaviors and their actions without fear of professional repercussions or backlash. After hearing everyone tonight I ask that you consider looking ahead from this point forward with clearer eyes and an understanding that we need to do better. As parents, alumni and students we expect you to do better.

Finally I would ask that you think back on your own experiences in education. How long is your list of names? Are you where you are today, sitting participating in this meeting tonight because of your great grades? Maybe. Because you’ve worked hard in your field? Perhaps. But somewhere along the way, you were positively influenced by the way a teacher, a coach or an administrator treated you with kindness and empathy and with an interest in you as a person. You were supported and you mattered. On behalf of those on your list and on behalf of those on my list who affected my life I would ask that you as school board members and administrators lead our district to bring kindness, compassion and dignity to the forefront and eliminate the micro and macro aggression that goes on everyday. 2 years or 29 years from now wouldn’t it be amazing for us all to be on someone’s list? Just imagine that. Thank you.



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