

When you are trying to write a speech or an article, often times the most difficult line is the first one. It has to be good enough to really catch people's attention. That's not easy to do! Why didn't I think of "Four score and seven years ago" or "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Those are really good. Or "When in the course of human events..." You could build an entire nation on that one. Or maybe "In the beginning..." Well, you could do a lot with that one too.

How do you start when all the best lines have been taken? Where are the new ideas, where is the creative thinking needed to think of that next great first line? Education, both public and private, both secular and religious, dictates that we try with everything we have to become better, to learn more, to reach our full potential, so that we can come up with the "next great, first line." Christian education dictates that we grow in our faith and in our knowledge of the Lord, and that we use what we have learned, indeed everything we have, for his glory and the advancement of his kingdom. So if we do a good deed, we do it not only for the other person but primarily so that others will experience God's goodness and will recognize his lordship. If we grow intellectually, it is not exclusively for our own good or the intellectual good of others, but because by our own intellectual advancement we move toward the greater good of reaching others with the gospel of Jesus. Christian education motivates us toward this end in ways that a secular education cannot. Christian education inspires us to grow, to reach out, to love and to serve. It provides us with opportunities to show our faith, to put it into action, to love not only in words but also in deed. It does not begin with nor produce perfection. It does not claim to have all the answers and often does not even ask the right questions. It does not solve every problem or take every troubled young person and put them back on the right track. But Christian education will give every student the opportunity to hear the message we all need to hear, the gospel of Christ; it will surround every student with the love of Christ (which sometimes is and must be a very tough love); it will offer grace and forgiveness; it will encourage and challenge all involved to live out their faith in word and deed. Christian education, in the school, in the church, and in the home, must not only be what we do, but must describe *who we are* at our very core. This education should not be about culture and tradition, but instead it should reflect who we are at the very depths of our being. How can we *not* train our children in the ways of Christ, when he himself has made us who we are? How do we leave it to chance, or simply *hope* that it all works out in the end? How do we *not* do everything we can, to fulfill the command given us in Deuteronomy 6, to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." We are compelled to give our children *every opportunity* to take his Word and hide it safely in their hearts. It is of the greatest importance that we do this. It is why I am involved in Christian education, and why I am standing before you this evening.

Tonight I will not spend time reviewing the current school year. Instead I would like to highlight for you my vision for the future of Providence, not only for next year but for five years and ten years down the road. There is nothing more challenging but at the same time more rewarding than educating children. They are God's gift to parents, and

yes, most of the time, even to teachers. They bring both pleasure and pain in ample and fairly equal doses; they bring both frustration in the present and optimistic hope for the future. They excite us and demoralize us. We love to see them walk into our classrooms in the morning and we love to see them leave at the end of the day. They are the reason why teachers enter the teaching profession, and occasionally the reason why teachers leave the teaching profession. Despite the inherent difficulties of working with this strange and untamed creature known as a teenager, we move ahead because we are called by God to ***impress on the hearts of our students the need to love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength.*** If we fail at this, we have failed, not necessarily as a *school*, but as a *Christian school*. With this in mind, I will highlight my vision for Providence with five key points.

1. **We will be academically excellent.** While we are an extension of the home and the church, we would be mistaken to think that we could set low academic standards as long as we were doing everything else well. While above all, what matters most is a child's relationship with God, it is clear that as a school we are mandated to challenge and encourage our students to develop and use the intellectual gifts that God has given them, for his honor and glory, and the benefit of mankind. We will revise our curriculum, train our teachers, and continually strive to improve our academic program. We will not stop with accreditation, but will use that as a building block for academic success in the future.
2. **We will develop Christian character in our students, and lead them toward growth in their walk with the Lord.** This is on equal footing with our desire to be academically excellent, for without it we are worthless as a Christian school. We will take every opportunity to help students grow spiritually; for those students who do not have a personal relationship with the Lord, we will encourage them in that direction. We will build relationships with students so that we can effectively speak truth into their lives. We will not in any way neglect spiritual growth in our pursuit of academic or athletic excellence.
3. **We will become known as a school of servants.** We are commanded to be doers of the Word, not only hearers. We will be out in our community, both in group, school organized situations, and in individual, non-school organized situations. We will rake lawns, pick up garbage, play bingo with elderly people, and shovel snow, not because it is required of us, but because we owe it to our Lord. We will do all we can to instill in our students a desire to serve, not just while in high school, but throughout their lifetimes.
4. **We will be athletically excellent.** We consider the athletic program to be integral to the success of our school as a whole. Physical development, leadership development, and learning how to win gracefully and lose with dignity are just a few of the reasons for this. A positive and successful athletic program is also good for school morale and for our standing in the community. At the same time, the academic and spiritual growth of our students will *always* outweigh the importance of athletic success.
5. **We will do all of the above while treating each other with love and respect.** If we are academically, spiritually, and athletically excellent, but fail to love each other in the process, we have not been successful. If we shovel every driveway

and rake every yard in all of Newaygo County, but fail to care for each other, we have failed. We are a landmark on the bend in the road, showing the people of this community the way *of* Christ and the way *to* Christ.. In every proceeding, in every event, in every meeting, we must reflect Christ. Board and staff must love and respect each other, parents and administration must love and respect each other. We are called to do this; it is an expectation, not a request.

I am convinced that if we stay on course, if we focus on these things – academic excellence, spiritual growth, athletic development, service to others, and love and respect for each other – if we make these things our priority, that God will continue to do great things here. I am convinced that he will take us so far beyond where we are now that we won't even recognize what we look like today. This will happen as we work together, and as we let the Lord lead and guide. *For we know the plans he has for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future.* Our hope and our future rest in him. May we never forget that truth as we work together to build his kingdom one student at a time.