

## Show and Tell

**Candy Olson**, Chair Council of the Great City Schools, and  
Hillsborough County Public Schools

Good morning. As I speak, you'll see photos behind me. They will show, I hope, why we're here.

When I was in school, I loved show and tell. There were so many different stories. When I was a mom, I liked show and tell. Especially when one of my daughters brought her cat to school, and it escaped, and I had to catch it.

We know the importance of show and tell. It's why we require oral presentations and science projects.

But I think we've forgotten the importance of it in the work we do. We need to pay far more attention to telling our story and showing people what we are accomplishing.

There are good reasons why we don't. We are called to lead in new and different ways, every single day, with all the courage and creativity we possess. We deal with so many moving parts. Some that need to be maintained. Some that need to be built or rebuilt. And some that need to be surgically removed. We do all of it with pressures from legislatures above and teachers and parents around us, with limited time.

Given all those challenges, you are probably thinking that you have more important things to do than tell stories. So let me tell you why I think show and tell is important.

First, education was and is a key to America's success, even survival. Second, truth is important. If we don't give people the full truth, they cannot judge fairly. Third, our story impacts teacher morale. And, finally, it's important to tell our story to build the support we need to continue the progress we're making toward providing a great public education for every child in this country

As a key to our success, public education is a fundamental American value. If the US history you studied was more than dates and dead people, you know that many of our founding fathers were the first members of their families to be considered "gentlemen," in large part because they were educated – they could read, use books, write. They valued education for all citizens and made it a priority. They believed education was necessary to generate the republican structures and the democratic content that would be the engines of peaceful progress. That belief was everywhere, and it still is, but its believers have been awfully quiet lately.

Second, truth is important. It is not true that we have a crisis in education today. If our graduation rates were to turn down, it would be a crisis. But they're going up. If

achievement gaps were to widen, it would be a crisis. But we are narrowing them. If we weren't using data more effectively, or managing better, it would be a crisis. But there is no crisis, although there is legitimate concern.

Most of us, I'm sure, remember 9/11. Many of us watched the twin towers fall. Some of us watched them fall . . . over and over and over. Psychologists tell us that, in part of our brains, those repeated viewings become emotionally like separate events – numerous attacks. We cannot allow one-sided repetition of myths to continue. Because repetition gives them power.

When people hear "public schools," too many of them hear "failing public schools." That's the result of our honesty about our challenges, combined with the repetitive rhetoric of many people who believe they have something to gain by tearing down what good people are building. It's the focus of a great deal of media coverage. We can no longer let that rhetoric overshadow our story. And that is that our schools, challenged though they are, are far from failing.

Public education is blamed for not turning out successful students – as measured by scores on standardized tests - and by extension, for the decline in American competitiveness. That's just malarkey.

We're not first in test scores. We never have been first, or even near the top. Maybe it's because our culture values creativity, innovation, independence, optimism, even quirkiness. Where but in America could Christian Louboutin sue Yves St. Laurent for copying the red soles of his very expensive shoes?

Do tests prove we're not competitive? Are we not competitive? The World Economic Forum has ranked us the most competitive country of 131 developed nations, and another organization says we have the second best climate in the WORLD for entrepreneurs.

Is our education system really responsible for whatever decline in competitiveness there is? Or could it be that after World War II we were the only country that had an economy, and our businessmen have become complacent? Or could it be that our companies are running drag races while other nations are preparing for the Indy 500, that great race here in our host city, which requires advance preparation, team work, and skill. As they say on Facebook, it's complicated.

Part of the truth is about money. It's said costs have gone up without a rise in achievement. Costs ARE up. The cost of doing business has gone up year after year, and women – the bulk of teachers – expect equal pay after many years of unequal pay. But no rise in achievement? Malarkey.

We hear that you can't fix education just by throwing money at it. Really? It that why we spend three or four times as much to educate a college freshman as we spend on a high school senior? Is that why the Pentagon's budget is the size of the next dozen or so nations put together? There's a difference between throwing money and targeting money. It's the difference between taking all your antibiotics to cure an illness and buying only half the prescription to save money.

And one last bit of truth. None of the other "high performing countries" – excluding, of course, India and China, nations that do not participate in these tests– NONE relies as heavily on standardized testing or uses tests as judgmentally as we do.

Show and tell will build teacher morale, and we need to build morale.

Better morale opens doors to cooperation. Teachers who feel part of the story are surprisingly willing to consider professional learning communities, more extensive use of data to inform instruction, even different forms of evaluation and compensation. As Marc Tucker says: "it is not possible to make progress with your students if you are at war with your teachers."

Alma Powell has said – at a conference of ours – that it's one thing to hold educators accountable and another to blame them for things for which we are all responsible. We need to invite, encourage, and motivate businesses, parents and other community members to join us in the work for which we share responsibility – the work of lifting every child through high school, ready to go beyond graduation to successful, productive, fulfilling adulthood. If we don't tell of our aspirations and achievements, why will people in the community step up to help? If we haven't supported our teachers by telling their stories, why will they tell their friends – their community – about our story? Teachers, you know, are the most trusted and frequently cited sources of information about our schools.

Sometimes we're like the teachers we want to improve – the ones who go into their rooms and want to be left alone. Like those teachers, we DO feel that we are the experts and we should be left alone. But if you want to change the dance, you need to find new music. You need to add the positive reality that we see to the negatives that seem to be all that is being covered by others.

Let me give you some examples from my district. When I was a new board member my school district was faced with rapid, and accelerating, growth in our student population and horrendously overcrowded schools (yes I know that's different from many other districts, but I'm from Florida and . . .Florida is different). The superintendent explained that we were responsible for educating children and others decided whether, and where, houses were built.

But those decisions were hampering our ability to provide a quality educational environment. Over time, we began working with those other government agencies to explain the impact of their decisions and to address our growth issues. It took a dramatic change in attitude to get the behavior to change. When we told our story and changed the music, we saw results. We went from a ballot initiative for school construction funds that generated criticism and ill will and failed 60-40– to a joint initiative with the county and cities that passed with solid support from the community. As the largest employer in the county, we should have had a lot of favorable votes for that first initiative, but we didn't tell our story well. We have learned to do better.

Our district has worked long and hard to develop and maintain a collegial relationship with our teachers' union. Because we have chosen to work with them, we have actually moved toward better supports for beginning teachers and more effective evaluations for all teachers. Some don't like it. But many have said that the support they've received is helpful. And some feel encouraged that their effectiveness will be recognized – and that their non-effective co-workers will be going home. With teacher input, we are measuring and evaluating carefully, with a detailed, user-friendly data system. We measure the impact teachers have on students.

It takes extraordinary amounts of time. It takes immense amounts of patience. Sometimes, it just takes realizing that someone has to be the grownup. Because our children can no longer be the victims of adult battles.

The story of public education in this country, at this time, is relentlessly about doom and gloom and despair. It's malarkey. But NO ONE is telling the whole story.

There are many caring, committed people who are doing great work to rescue and regenerate our underperforming schools, and prepare our children for life as successful, contributing citizens. But there is a \$500 million industry of testing, and test prep, and other stuff out there, with an agenda that does not always match ours. Those people have joined with people seeking their own gain, including some politicians, who do not wish us well, and they are not telling our story. They are helped by people who think they know more than they do, let's call them Armchair educators –who tell stories that are not helpful. Fran Tarkenton comes to mind. He says if we just tie teachers' salaries to performance we can have an education system just like the NFL. Hmm. Is that before the replacement refs, or after?

Speaking of the replacement refs in the NFL. I don't know how much those guys were making, but the "real" refs will be paid \$173,000 for a part time job. There is a difference between squandering money and having sufficient resources to do the work. It may be complicated, but it's not that complicated. Resources are essential.

What do we show and tell? We show public education as a fundamental American value. We tell the story of economic competitiveness and adequate resources. Ultimately, we show and tell about the children in our care.

And, when it comes to our children, we know we are not always true to our own American values. We want every child to have a high school education that leads to whatever college or career path she wants. And we will allow him or her a goodly amount of time to grow up and figure it out. It's part of our culture. It's part of what makes us competitive. That said, too many of our children don't get their fair share of those opportunities. We need to remedy that – and tell the other side of the story.

Whether our children come to us in used Edsels, jeeps, hummers, shiny new Cadillacs or Maseratis, we will help them find the right road and head in the right direction, even if they take detours. We know there is no single destination, no single route to a destination, just as we know there is no single solution to all the challenges of educating urban children. There are many routes, many destinations, but a single map, and that map is uniquely American.

Our teachers teach all children – children with great challenges, children with little or no food, or safety, or home life, children of newcomers, and the average, and the best and brightest. Our teachers serve children with dreadful physical and mental impairments and those who excel in rigorous International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and magnet programs. We are reaching more and more children.

And that is the story we need to tell.

I am not suggesting we paint an unrealistically rosy picture. Advertising executives will tell you that the fastest way to kill a bad product is with a great ad campaign. If you make people want your product, they'll buy it; if they hate it, they will tell everyone. Our story is mixed, and we need to balance what we tell.

But we have stories about efficient use of money. The story of the council's key performance indicators and how they are being used to streamline and deliver better service – that's a great story. The story of using data to drive teaching, and directing a laser focus of resources to students who need them most – that's an enlightening story. And we can talk with pride and hope about carefully crafted, mindfully implemented teacher evaluations that allow us to support teachers to get better, send home teachers who don't belong in the classroom, and identify and reward the greatness we see in so many teachers.

And we have stories about teachers and children. If you spend some time in a school, you'll hear a teacher admit that, yes, the person in the next classroom is still teaching science from twenty-year old notes. You'll hear a teacher express frustration that he's doing everything he can for his students but knows that next year's teacher doesn't

care that much, and his kids will lose a lot of what they've gained. You'll see the expression on a teacher's face when she sends her students on to a teacher who can't teach and really doesn't want to be there, and lets the kids know it. We need to confront that honestly.

You will also see miracles. A child who hates to read drawn into reading by a book was put into her hands by a teacher who took the time to find what interested her and a book that spoke to her soul as well as her brain. A child who "thinks" he's no good "caught being good" by a teacher who truly watches, and listens, and cares. A child who hates science finding a passion for chemistry because a teacher walked him through an experiment using language he could understand.

The reality is that we are making tremendous strides. The nation's largest 50 school systems have shown significant improvement in reducing dropout rates. The member cities in the Council of the Great City Schools are leading the nation in the aggressiveness by which we are turning around chronically under-performing schools. Reading and math achievement in the member cities has improved significantly faster than the nation at large and we have closed the gap on the nation by a third. Our graduation rates are finally improving as our dropout rates decline. Remember, too, that most of the nation's college and university students are graduates of public schools. And our colleges and universities are magnets for people from all over the world.

Friends, it is time for show and tell.

Every one of us can tell the story of a child who shouldn't have made it who has gone on to college and career. Renatta, once-homeless, now a senior at the University of Florida—not an easy school to get into, never mind graduate from. There's Gabby, who with her mother was homeless and is – again with help from school and community – finished with college and headed to law school. There is Sergio, a homeless youth who worked with state legislators to draft and pass a law that dramatically improves the lives of homeless kids.

And Shaquille, who'd been thrown out of school and into prison, who with relentless support and advocacy from the woman he calls his "white momma," and a courageous superintendent who persuaded a principal and a football coach to take a chance and give an opportunity – Shaquille has a 2.7 GPA and is on track to attend a four year college.

We need show what we are accomplishing, and tell the world what those successes mean for our kids.

In case you haven't figured it out, the pictures are of people who are, or were, children in our public schools. They include – you saw their names – Michelle Obama, Janet

Napolitano, and Warren Buffett. Not pictured, but also public school graduates, are Rev. MLK, Supreme Court Justices, Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Elena Kagan; Paul Simon, Art Garfunkle, Quincy Jones, David Letterman, Maya Angelou, Diane Sawyer, Oprah Winfrey, Jennifer Hudson, Woody Allen, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, and Billie Jean King. And Bob Martinez who before he was Mayor of Tampa and governor of Florida was president of our teacher's union. And last week the Nobel Prize in Chemistry went to a pair of Americans. One of them, Dr. Robert Lefkowitz, is the EIGHTH graduate of the Bronx High School of Science – a public school in New York City – to become a Nobel Laureate.

Look at those children, please, and think about this.

It is not enough

To understand the challenges these children face

To sympathize with the plight of their families

To want better for them.

It is time to

Address the challenges these children face, to provide the tools for our teachers and our parents, to support teachers in doing whatever it takes for their students to succeed, to engage businesses, churches and others in the community in solving the plights of our families.

So that we challenge and support each child to reach his or her highest potential as a committed, capable citizen of this great nation.

It's time for show and tell.