

September 2022

To Our Fort Thomas Families,

Welcome back! I sincerely hope that the 2022-2023 academic year is off to a great start for each member of our school community. The first day of school has always been one of my favorite days of the year. This August, the vibe was both energizing and inspiring in equal measure. Seeing firsthand the excitement and energy in our classrooms and hallways only underlines how invigorating the journey ahead of us can be in our five schools. We are motivated to continue generating fresh ideas and pursuing boundless opportunities, and in so doing become the best versions of ourselves and change lives for the better. This is our calling in Fort Thomas, one that stems from our rich tradition of providing one-of-a-kind learning opportunities while always focused on the future. It is a special responsibility that our District embraces.

We began our year August 11th challenging each member of our Fort Thomas community to “Be the Spark” that strengthens engagement within our school culture. Maybe it’s finding a new way of teaching a topic, supporting a colleague, collaboratively addressing a common challenge, developing a completely new assignment, or crafting an essay with new and thoughtful elements. Perhaps it’s taking a new class, going above and beyond in an extracurricular activity or showing compassion for a classmate. Sparks can produce ripple effects that reverberate positively across classrooms and schools and positively alter the course of someone’s life.

We have the best faculty and staff in the Commonwealth right here in Fort Thomas, and I asked six members of our team to deliver “Spark Talks” to jump start our journey this year. They answered the call better than I could have imagined. It felt a bit like a Bengals game (now that they are good), as Kevin Listerman, Kim Klein, Shauna Luebbers, Casey Gesenhues, Jennifer Forgy and Katie Mills selected their own “walk-up music” to pump them up before their presentations in the Performing Arts Center. Surrounded by the encouragement of their colleagues, a positive tone set by the audio-visual effects designed by HHS students Cooper Gamble and Robert Chalk, their talks were fast-paced and fascinating, and relayed the impact that education has had on them, and their vision for what education can continue to be in Fort Thomas.

Mr. Listerman identified his “Mount Rushmore” of impactful teachers and mentors, one of whom was his British Literature teacher. However, the spark in Lynne Blankenbuehler’s class had nothing to do with famous authors Charles Dickens or George Orwell. Mr. Listerman relayed his entire talk in a poem:

Our last assignment was kinda scary.  
A little weird. Had to write an obituary.  
The major impact that it had?  
I wrote about teaching, coaching, and being a dad.

Mr. Listerman said that writing his obituary provided clarity and purpose to his vision and values. It's now his life's mission statement, crafted from one assignment. The spark from one assignment contains that kind of power.

Our assistant principal at Highlands High School, Ms. Forgy, traced her family lineage in education to her grandmother teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. Ms. Forgy's message was for our teachers and staff to consider "flipping the script", to reverse a situation or do something totally unexpected. She cited the example of Sekoe White, a high school basketball coach at a school for the deaf in Mississippi, who delivered an impassioned speech in the huddle to his players in sign language.

"We can do anything in this life but it requires extra hard work," Coach White told Good Morning America. "Being deaf or visually impaired is no excuse not to succeed."

Ms. Klein shared a deeply personal story. She found an engaged mentor while pursuing her childhood passion for horseback riding. More importantly, she shared a personal journey through her story of adversity that gave insight few were aware of which demonstrated the power of public schools. It was a story that provided pure inspiration, purpose, and yes, a spark!

Mrs. Gesenhues shared how important it is to develop grit and a growth mindset in all settings as seen through her own children and students leaving their comfort zones in both sports and in the classroom. Ms. Mills took us back and encouraged us to remember teachers in our lives who embodied different characteristics: "The Innovator", "The Connector", and "The Influencer".

We are fortunate in Fort Thomas in that our District assigns learning devices to each student, enhancing the educational experience with an impact and efficiency that cutting-edge technology offers. It's a fantastic pillar of our curriculum, but Mrs. Luebbers highlighted the unique power that face-to-face conversations between teachers and students can hold. Can you remember a time that a teacher said something to you that completely transformed the way you think about something? Mrs. Luebbers introduced us to a gentleman named David Miller, in Eugene, Oregon, who has used humor as an author to connect with readers of all ages. He reportedly has written more than one hundred joke books for both adults and children. But the spark comes in the conversations he holds and the connections he forms either on the sidewalk, or at the public market, while selling his work.

Last school year our learning community embraced the spirit of "reflect and renew." We focused our attention on remembering what makes us a community second to none and embarked on a strategic planning process to renew our commitment to world class education. Now it is time to "be the spark." Sparks can be ambitious and attainable initiatives, acts, habits or comments. They can be examples for others to follow. They can be assignments that crystallize a student's interests and goals. And, most significantly, sparks can trigger the

kind of positive difference that can make the 2022-2023 school year our best one yet in Fort Thomas. We are off to a great start!

Sincerely,

*Brian*