



Dan Miller Opening Remarks, Back to School Night 2023

My first recollection of a Back to School Night is as a 22 year old teacher right out of college – 10th-grade history at the St. Ann’s School in Brooklyn. The parents were packed into a tiny classroom waiting for me to begin when one of them asked me politely if I knew when the teacher would be arriving. I remember thinking a couple of things at the same time: even though I felt immeasurably older than a high school student, I probably should have worn a tie and a nametag; and secondly, that people in their 40s must not have much of a social life if they were spending the evening listening to me talk about the Ottoman Empire. Now, a few decades and a couple of children of my own later, nobody’s mistaking me for a high school student, and I have a much better understanding of why this night is so important.

First and foremost, your presence speaks to your invested partnership with the school. So thank you for making the effort to be here. I also know that Back to School Night is understandably irresistible because it offers a rare window into your child’s life at a time when they may dole out morsels of information somewhat stingily or strategically depending on their desired impact. It’s no different than most of us did with our own parents. Urban is “their world,” and one can understand some healthy reluctance to share it. For parents of seniors, many of whom are here, there’s also a dawning, poignant recognition that opportunities to glimpse your child’s day-to-day world are fast disappearing. As a parent of two college graduates – I know I’m dating myself – I can vouch for that.

To be clear up front, Urban’s BTSN is mainly a refresher on the programmatic, the academic dimension of your child’s experience; which, depending on the day, represents a varying percentage of what they, or you, are thinking about. I once saw a cartoon of a pie chart labeled “a teenager’s brain;” one thin slice of it said: “math/science/history/English” and the entire rest of the pie said “Friday night.” We can all see some of the truth in that joke, but I’m here to argue that one of the unusual things about the Urban experience is by virtue of what we teach and how we teach it; the people who choose to work here; and the students that choose to attend – what takes place daily in our various classrooms – and I use the word “classrooms” broadly – is more integrated into your children’s general consciousness, is higher on their priorities, and a larger part of who they are, who they are becoming, and most importantly, who they will be. I’ll repeat my claim more bluntly: Urban’s program is far more ambitious than simply preparing your children for college, though that’s a happy byproduct; it’s intended to enrich and inform them for the rest of their lives.

I know that “an education for a lifetime” is a somewhat grandiose claim for a high school to make. How can we even gauge its validity, particularly since very few of us had a school experience like the one Urban students are getting, nor will we be around to see all of it. (Apologies for introducing our own mortality into a BTSN speech.) But let me make my case with a reminder – an inventory – of some of the distinctive qualities of the Urban program and the aspirational outcomes attached to it. In no particular order:

1. A commitment to building metacognition – in simpler terms, a feedback system designed to help students understand *how* they learn, not just *what* they learn; *how* they think and not *what* to think. And relatedly, a curriculum that emphasizes analysis and skill development over rote factual mastery.
We might not like to think about how much time we all wasted memorizing things in high school – even before Google and AI drove the point home – but it surely makes it easy to answer this question: heading off into the rest of their lives, is it better for our students to know things or have the ability to learn things?
2. A breathtaking range of electives to feed student (and teacher) enthusiasm and reward curiosity.
-Is there any single thing of more enduring value, anything more critical to an enriching life, than an appetite to learn?
3. Long blocks of uninterrupted class time that allow for hands-on work – for trial and error, for exploration of open-ended questions, for conversation, for cooperative problem solving, for evaluating different points of view. *In other words, the skills and habits of mind that will serve them regardless of the careers they choose, many of which, we can presume, don't even exist yet.*
4. A four-year service learning curriculum, i.e. an authentic commitment to understanding our own identities, biases and privileges and instilling a sense of social responsibility. *Independent schools are deeply privileged institutions. But that does not mean they need to be cloistered, nor self-absorbed. We want our students to graduate understanding that an engagement in the world, in its pleasures and its challenges, is part of a life well-lived.*

I'll add one more quality of the Urban experience that is too easily mistaken for a liability, but I think is actually an accelerator, a crucible, for all the elements I just enumerated: and that's the density of our campus. Because we live in a *contained* environment we are accountable to one another; our proximity requires compromise; demands communication, self-awareness, empathy and respect. Political debates in the hallways; impromptu study sessions in the lunch-line; 12 advisees playing pictionary in an advisor's office. We are a big, multi-generational, intentionally diverse, enthusiastic family living in the same house. What could be better preparation for the unscripted and deeply interpersonal challenges and opportunities students will find when they leave Urban for their wonderfully complicated futures?