



Thank you for being here. I'm always so appreciative and impressed by the tremendous turn-out we have for this event each year, but I am not surprised. I think Back to School Nights have a particular relevance for the parents of high school students because you may be operating in a bit of an information desert. As you know, when your kids are younger they're an open book. They respond readily to questions about what they learned in class, their friends, who was mean to them at recess, what they ate for lunch, their favorite teachers. They offer parents lots of data. It's not *reliable* data mind you, but it's not *intentionally* unreliable. When I worked at a school with elementary grades I used to tell parents that if they promised to believe only half of what their child said about the school, we'd promise to believe only half of what their child said about them. By high school, of course, the stream of information slows to a trickle, and Back to School Night offers a window into your child's life at a time when they may dole out morsels of information somewhat stingily or strategically, or not at all – just as we did with our own parents. And for the many parents of seniors in attendance, perhaps your presence also reflects a dawning recognition that this kind of opportunity to peek into your child's day-to-day world is fast disappearing.

I'm sorry if that introduced a whistful note into this event, which is really a joyful one. Tonight is our chance to show off our tremendous faculty, deepen your understanding of our program, and, I hope, inspire at least a little envy for what your child is experiencing each day. But before you head off, I want to offer a reminder that while our students experience a saturated, dynamic program hour by hour and day by day, our ambitions are much grander: an Urban education – some of what we do, and some of what we don't do – is designed with the long game in mind.

At our first all-school assembly I asked students to imagine their academic careers without *external* pressures or expectations or motivations: to imagine a world without grades, or social media “influencers,” or comparison to peers, or even the expectations of their parents. I asked them to think hard about what would inspire their engagement, their enthusiasm, when no one was looking or judging. And then I made the case that it would be their *intrinsic* motivation that ultimately sustained their interest; brought them the most enduring satisfaction and joy, and ultimately, would define who they would become.

I am not naive; I have worked with high school students for a long time. I'm a parent of two wonderful and sometimes exasperating children. I fully understand the pragmatics that influence student behavior and the irresistible impulse and occasional necessity for parents to hover, threaten, cajole and bribe – sometimes all in a given week. But my children are now just on the *other* side of college, and perhaps more importantly, I have spent time with 100s, likely thousands, of young alumni of independent schools. Over the years, I have seen that high school students who focus obsessively on grades to motivate themselves can feel unmoored without that immediate gratification or validation down the road – most immediately when they go to college, where professors are infinitely more removed and grades are far less frequent. I have seen that students who fully associate the process of learning – reading, writing, thinking – with the grades they might produce, also internalize an association with stress, with anxiety – two feelings that, as we all know, are counterproductive to learning, anathema to pleasure, and certainly a disincentive to sustained engagement. And I have seen students who are motivated solely by parental expectations, become resentful or resistant – you may be familiar with resistant.

I know this is a simplification. Our motivations are not binary – internal and external are mingled, with one informing the other – for all of us, and especially for young people who are truly becoming themselves. Of course, grades can play a useful role and, of course, so do your expectations. My hope for our students is that the four years at Urban will be a period of *transition* when priorities and values and interests become internalized, become reflexive, and that our students graduate with their natural curiosity enhanced and with the confidence to know and follow their own mind. In fact, I think Urban's approach, and what you'll see a bit of tonight, is specifically designed with these priorities. Some things to look for:

Urban students take fewer but longer classes during each term; are engaged through myriad teaching methodologies; work from primary or home-made source materials. This allows for meaningful conversation or debate; deeper, more satisfying exploration of subject matter, and a deliberate focus on skill development – all of this to cultivate an approach to learning that will endure well beyond a given exam or lab report.

We defer letter grades until the end of each term in an effort to disrupt their Pavlovian association of learning with stress, with competition. Instead, through written reports and countless conversations, teachers focus on helping students understand where they can improve, what approaches will work best for them, and how they can take more effective ownership of their learning, not just now, but into the future.



And last but not least, we offer students an extraordinary range of bespoke electives much earlier in their high school careers – the kind of classes we all wished we could have taken in high school – Marine Biology, Literature and Film, Chinese-American history, Robotics, stone carving – courses to endorse a young person’s natural curiosity, inspire their engagement, and create positive associations between learning and pleasure that have nothing to do with grades, and everything to do with the rest of their lives.

I know it’s only September, and this may seem hopelessly ambitious or idealistic, particularly to our very busy students who are living in the pressurized “now” of adolescence. But I think the more we can all remind ourselves of the bigger picture, the long game, the advantages of hindsight that we all possess, the more effective we can be in our shared support of these amazing young people in our care.

I know you are eager to see this in action, and let me go from up here into the grist of logistics....so I’ll stop my sermon here and tag on a few logistical notes.