

Karen Engels

MCSS award, 5.9.18

I am deeply honored to receive this award from the Massachusetts Council of Social Studies. I want to thank my principal Tony Byers and my wonderful colleagues at the Graham and Parks School in Cambridge for sustaining a mission-driven elementary school where the urgency and centrality of social studies is never questioned. And many thanks to Adrienne Stang for all of her support and for her thoughtful words tonight.

As social studies teachers, we have an awesome responsibility. Because the way we teach children about our shared history will determine if they view the world as it is with resignation or whether they see themselves with agency to make our society better. It's our responsibility to help children understand the complex, messy and painful truths of this history. They are capable of more sophisticated understanding than we often give them credit for. But, it is equally incumbent on us to endow children with hope. To do this, we need to provide each and every child with ample mirrors of strength, courage, and triumph against adversity. They need to read Frederick Douglas's Fourth of July Speech. They need to visit the Lowell Mills where young women organized the first campaign for a 10-hour day. They need to meet local indigenous activists like Wampemequin Wampatuck. They need to sing the words of Woody Guthrie. They need to feel that change is possible. And this is what we do every day! And it's incredibly joyful.

I've never been more grateful to be doing this work than I am today. At a time when xenophobia is again on the rise and our public discourse has been drained of civility, it brings me enormous comfort to spend my days with third and fourth graders from around the world, who speak many languages, practice many faiths, and come from many cultures. For 8, 9, and 10 year olds, fairness and equality are paramount values, and they are at a perfect developmental stage to connect to the stories that teach us how the arc of the moral universe has ebbed and flowed in its bend towards justice. They bring me a deep sense of optimism about the future. So I am full of gratitude tonight.

Lastly, I want to give a special shout out to my own children, Lucy, Clara, and Isaac, who are here tonight. You have always had to share me with the other important children in my life, and I know that it isn't always easy.