

Thursday August 8 @ 8:30-9am:

What is your epic calling? (Jimmy Kim)

Good morning colleagues,

My name is Jimmy Kim and I have the privilege of welcoming you to the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I'm so happy to see you. Thanks for being such amazing colleagues!

Ice breaker – question

Raise your hands if you remember your first year of teaching. Keep your hands raised if it was an easy year...

I remember my first year of teaching like it was yesterday. It was August of 1993 and I was 1 week away from starting school. I was a rookie. Green. Nervous. And seeking out my colleagues for advice on everything...to encourage me the guy who was in charge of in school suspension came to my room and said, "jimmy welcome, to LJ...hey, I know the kids in this school pretty well. let me see who's on your roster....oh my goodness, you have John....John...dude he is crazy, I had him in in school session every week... he got retained and you got him.... Oh geez, and you have Isaac...I'm so sorry, he's crazier than John, and he got retained....

I remember thinking, "I wish he would leave my classroom...."

Well, that first week was tough. I slept poorly, I was nervous, anxious, worried about classroom management, teaching state standards, preparing my kids for end of course exams.

#1 History gives you an epic calling

But then I reminded myself, why did I choose to teach at Luther Jackson Middle School in Fairfax County Virginia. The history of my school inspired my epic calling—the big WHY behind the what. You see, my middle school was named after Dr. Luther Porter Jackson. Dr. Jackson was a professor of history at VA State and FCPS opened LJHS in Sept. 1954. It was the first high school for black students.

Luther Jackson re-opened as an integrated middle school in 1965 when Fairfax County finally integrated its schools. By 1993, it was the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse school in Fairfax County.

The epic calling of Luther Jackson was to fulfill the promise of Brown v. Board of education...In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruling said, “today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. It is the very foundation of good citizenship.”

So when I felt completely overwhelmed during the first week of teaching in my first year, I reminded myself over and over again, “jimmy, your epic calling is to be excellent teacher who helps fulfill the promise of Brown by educating your students to become good citizens.”

#2 Your students give you an epic calling.

So history can inspire your epic calling. Your past and the reasons why you went into the field of education.

The second thing that can inspire your epic calling is your students.

I learned this lesson the first month of my first year of teaching. You see, in my district, 7th grade history teachers were responsible for covering US history from Reconstruction to the present. And we had a new textbook that was written by college professors. There was an emphasis on helping students read complex nonfiction text and using the best history. So my kids had to read a selection from Reconstruction, the Unfinished Revolution by Eric Foner. Let me read aloud a sentence from the epilogue. Are you ready? I’m warning you – this is going to be tough.

“Hindsight is a historian’s treacherous ally....” My kids struggled to decode multi-syllabic words like treacherous. They did not know what hindsight meant. They had little background knowledge about the Reconstruction era. And they were dis-engaged and hated reading the textbook. They asked me, “Mr. Kim, why are we reading this?”

You see, my kids did not have an epic calling. So, as their teacher, I had to help them discover an epic calling, a WHY for reading complex history texts. You see, many of the ideas that are in MORE are ideas that transcend time and place. Because the goal of MORE is to improve reading comprehension by building student’s domain knowledge and reading engagement. So here’s what I did.

First, I reminded myself: struggling readers are not struggling thinkers. I had to keep the level of complexity very high, have lots of discussions about big and important ideas, and give students autonomy and responsibility for becoming scholars, who read and write for an authentic purpose.

I told my kids we’re going to learn about Reconstruction by understanding how this macro-level historical event impacted black families. We were going to do this by reading selections from Alex Haley’s Roots and watching video-clips from the Roots mini-series. We were going to trace his family’s history from the antebellum to postbellum era. And we were going to make a video, similar to Ken burn’s PBS history the Civil War. They were going to create a video called

“Reconstruction: America’s unfinished revolution – a video history for future generations of 7th graders.” And then we could preserve this video history on VHS and beta max, and we knew that VHS and beta max would be around forever. (Yikes, I just realized, I’m talking to millennials who have no idea what VHS and beta max are).

Second, I had to build domain knowledge by staying on topic for many, many weeks. You see the principal determinant of how well you will comprehend a text is how much you know about the text. A corollary is this the principal determinant of how well you engaged you are when you read is how much you know about a text.

In honor of Trish – this is what the famous baseball study shows. It’s referenced on p. 21 of The Essential Guide to Teaching the EL Education K5 Language arts curriculum.

This study was done with middle school kids. It found that kids who are poor readers but know a lot about baseball will comprehend text about baseball better than kids who are good readers but don’t know much about baseball. Reading comprehension tasks are largely tests of knowledge.

**My kids motivated an epic calling. That epic calling was to prepare future citizens who could read complex nonfiction texts and be prepared for college and a good career.

First, history can inspire your epic calling.

Second, your students can inspire your epic calling.

And third, your profession and the institution you work can inspire your epic calling.

I’m professor at Harvard University. The epic calling of Harvard is summed up in one word – Veritas. Do you know what Veritas means – it means truth. We pursue truth and knowledge. I direct the READS lab. And our epic calling is to build knowledge to improve outcomes for low income children and struggling readers at scale. If we do this well, I believe we can help strengthen the foundations of American democracy.

Although I’m a professor now, I most strongly self-identify as an education professional. That is what you are – a professional in the field of education.

And today, the institution that we serve – the CMS – inspires our epic calling.

Let me tell you what that epic calling is by applying the first 2 lessons: history can inspire your epic calling and our students in CMS can inspire our epic calling:

1. The history of CMS is inspiring. CMS is the site of the 1974 Swann v. Meck County supreme court decision. It helped fulfil the promise of Brown by creating one school system and dismantled separate and unequal schools.
2. In Breaking the Link 2018, CMS leaders remind us that an equitable district and school is one where student outcomes are not predicted by student demographics.
3. In What Matters Most 2019, the CMS strategic plan, CMS leaders remind us that we're working to ensure that 80% of third graders are reading proficiently by 2024.

Everyone in this room, we share the same epic calling – to fulfill the promise of Brown V. Board of education, to break the link between poverty and achievement, to ensure that all students can read proficiently by third grade.

This is the 50th anniversary of the historic moon landing. In 1962, President Kennedy said our goal was to send a man to the moon and return him safely to earth by the end of this decade. We did it!

But when this goal was announced, less than 50% of Americans supported it. We had no solutions to the challenges that we'd face in undertaking the moon mission.

So how are we going to achieve our goals as education professionals serving CMS?

We developed MORE. It has a simple mission. To improve reading comprehension by building student's domain knowledge and reading engagement. It has 3 simple components – lessons for teachers, personal books and apps for students, and text messages to parents. That's it.

1. MORE is a home-grown solution. I've had the privilege of working with David Cox teachers who helped us fine tune lessons. The science and history lessons build knowledge. They push on the 3 levers that are outlined in Breaking the Link by fostering great teaching of grade appropriate standards, increasing time on complex context, and early exposure to advanced coursework.
2. We have to personalize learning for students, b/c kids are at different places. So we have given over 49K books and developed an app that uses CMS data to personalize activities for kids. Wow!
3. And we have to engage parents. We can reach even more parents through text and give them simple tips to encourage literacy at home. Celeste sent out texts to 260 kids last summer and it had an impact on kids' reading comprehension.

We all work for an amazing school district.

The former US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan once said, "The Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Schools narrowed more ethnic achievement gaps faster than other districts in North Carolina." CMS is a model of excellence with equity. For this accomplishment, you won the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2011.

I hope history repeats itself. I think it will. We can fulfill the epic calling of the CMS schools if we look to our history, to our students, and to our profession and our institutional mission.

I love this quote by G. B. Shaw, and I will end by paraphrasing it. Shaw once said, some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were and ask why not? Some educators see things as they are and ask why. CMS teachers dream things that never were and ask why not? Let's embrace our epic calling, together. Thank you.

Know your why: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ytFB8TrkTo>