

Own Your Experience and Lead the Way

By Sasha Clayton

In his Address to Congress on February 24, 2009, President Obama stated that "Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself; it's quitting on your country. And this country needs and values the talents of every American." What struck me about this was that the President put ownership back into the hands of the students themselves. He called upon the students to think about the needs of the country and put those needs before their own. Politics aside, this sentiment struck me as profound. Often, the challenge of preventing drop-outs is placed in the hands of educators. How will you ensure that students do not quit school? What can you do to make school an enticing place for all students? Instead, the question is flipped on its head. The president charges students to put themselves in the driver seat.

Here at Hilldale, we value the skill of leadership. One way to teach leadership is by requiring students to take responsibility (within reason) for their actions, for their communities, and for the world. Students learn to take ownership for their accomplishments, for their mistakes, and for their school community. In Contemporary Issues and Action class, we ask the upper school students to determine problems in their communities and/or world and decide what they are going to do to better the situation. In everyday interactions, young students are encouraged to use their words to express their feelings and their needs. Students are learning that their voices and their actions matter.

In his speech, the president also highlighted the efforts of a young girl from South Carolina. "[Ty] Sheoma Bethea] has been told that her school is hopeless, but the other day after class she went to the public library and typed up a letter to the people sitting in this room. She even asked her principal for the money to buy a stamp. The letter asks us for help, and says, 'We are just students trying to become lawyers, doctors, congressmen like yourself and one day president, so we can make a change to not just the state of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters.' [Her words] tell us that even in the most trying times, amid the most difficult circumstances, there is a generosity, a resilience, a decency, and a determination that perseveres; a willingness to take responsibility for our future and for posterity."

It is this sentiment that I hope we can pass along to our children: it is both within our abilities to reach great heights and also our responsibility to keep trying to reach those heights. Although some challenges will be greater for some of us based on circumstance, natural abilities, or chance, it remains the responsibility of each of us to do whatever it takes to be in charge of our own learning, our own successes, and even our own failures. For as we learned last month, true character is revealed when a person tries again even in the face of difficulty or failure.

Our president has called upon the talents of our youth and asked them to continue learning and developing their talents. Additionally, he has charged our students to take responsibility for the future of our country—to become inspired and impassioned about how they can contribute. I encourage our students to explore, invent, analyze, and create. But only when they are ready to lead, can they put their talents to full use and begin to change the world. I look forward to the day.