

# Dr. Tracy Vitale, Seneca Valley Superintendent of Schools

## Welcome Back Speech/TelePrompTer Script

8-24-20

Welcome Back, Seneca Valley!

It has been so wonderful to see many of you these past few days. I think you will agree with me that having the opportunity to see our colleagues has been good for the soul.

Since I know you would like to have the maximum time possible to prepare for our September start, we are greeting your 20-21 return today with a message from me and brief remarks from our school board president. Normally, we would be gathering for an exciting and high-energy opening with outstanding hospitality from our friends at Victory Family Church. It is my sincere hope that we can return to that format again next year. For now, we are here in SVTV's studios with just a few others present and we're all social distancing with greater than six feet, which is why I don't have my mask on – but I have it with me at all times and wear it in public spaces whenever social distancing isn't possible.

I know you are all tuning in today with a type of nervousness that's different and foreign to you at this point in your life; almost like you're facing the first day of school again yourself. I understand that some of you worry about what the semester and year will look like – and I completely understand your concerns. Fear is said to be the strongest and oldest of emotions - and the strongest *kind* of fear is fear of the unknown. This global pandemic is proving to be the most challenging and life-changing time of our careers - and our lives.

So how do we move forward? We do so by putting our focus on what we *do* know and what we *can* control. I truly believe that is why we functioned so well during the closure that took place in the spring – a time when we knew even less than we do today.

We maintained a laser-like focus on what we had available – and what we could do - for our students and community, and we moved mountains to provide it. Whether it was laptop delivery to students on a Sunday afternoon – or the grassroots development of a food bank in a teacher's garage - or the staff-led creation of face shields and sewing face masks, the overarching message was ***we will find a way***. I saw teachers pivot with instruction in less than a week's time and do so without missing a beat. I heard the stories of you reaching out with home deliveries of books for our youngest learners, hosting car parades for our families and, of course, delivering caps and gowns and signs to our graduating seniors. I cannot thank you enough for your efforts these past five months. In fact, it was all of you who proved to be our inspiration for this year's district theme for Seneca Valley – and that's (pause) **Above and Beyond**. We have clearly set a standard here at Seneca Valley that anything less is unacceptable. I believe in all of you and I believe in us as not just any public school district, but as a dynamic and student-centered school district that will always go ***above and beyond*** for its students.

Now that we are gearing up to once again provide instruction - no matter if it's in-person or online - we must continue to embrace some of the change we will see this year, which leads me to another subject during this difficult time.

The racial injustices and civil unrest that continues today is a conversation we must have as educators and (*PAUSE*) as human beings. I am sharing with you today my vow that as a public school we will demonstrate purposeful and newly focused emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion. Diversity, equity and inclusion must be core elements of our learning community embedded in every class, every day, not just when a horrible injustice occurs. We will have ongoing and intentional work where we will push the dialogue on race and embrace racialized conversations. Our administration worked all last year and during the summer months to develop actionable goals in diversity, equity and inclusion that will reach out to our communities, including our graduates, to examine the implicit biases we have as a predominantly white community. It is time for us to listen, learn and grow together-- as educators and as a community. It will not be comfortable, it will not be easy, but it is important work we must take on to challenge the status quo. Look for more to come from me, the administration and the school board this year as we will be focusing our efforts.

As we go through this semester and year, please know I will do everything in my power – as will all administrators and board members – to support you during this time. We are all going to be standing on our toes this year, ready to move and adjust all the while maintaining our optimism and positivity in front of our students.

I am not telling you anything you do not already know when I mention the mental health toll this time is taking on everyone; but I am especially worried about our students. Engagement – honest and real engagement - right now is key for academic success, but especially for the mental health and well-being of our youth. Please commit with me today to make this an important area we will address together.

As you know, our current cohort phase takes us through Oct. 5. We will be collecting, researching and vetting information that we will share with the school board along with our unique Seneca Valley data and information. We will be keeping you updated as plans evolve and progress. As always, school board Zoom meeting information will be made available before the Sept. 14 and 21 meetings, and we encourage you to register and attend as a participant. Our intent is to have a decision on or before Sept. 25 that identifies the learning model we will work under once our four-week cohort expires on Oct. 2. Again, we will keep you updated as we get closer to those dates.

In the meantime, I want to share with you a few reminders: Please remember to wear your mask, social distance, wash or sanitize your hands frequently and stay home if you are sick and/or have a fever. I've mentioned it in previous communications and I will say it again, because I think it's an important consideration for all of us: I strongly suggest you have a plan and discuss it with your family now for when someone gets COVID-19 in your home. Having such a plan in place today will make you feel less anxious during this time.

Finally, to quote an epidemiologist who I have come to respect, I ask you to consider the following two questions when making plans and decisions for your students this year: "What will our children say when they are adults about this pandemic? And will they say the adults served us well?"

*(PAUSE AND THEN SMILE)*

I sincerely believe they will say, Seneca Valley went **Above and Beyond**.

Thank you. Have a wonderful 2020-21 school year, Seneca Valley!