

Opening Day 2020 Speech

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View on Valhalla website: <http://bit.ly/ValhallaOpeningDay2020>

Good morning!

I'm so happy to see all of you, even though we've had to break tradition and not assemble together in the auditorium due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I think about how much everything has changed since we left campus nearly six months ago – we assumed we'd likely return in two weeks. Yes, we've spent time together on Google Meets but being here today, on the threshold of the 2020-21 school year, is a monumental achievement!

Since March, we were given an astronomical task with insurmountable odds – and we overcame it! You were and are all instrumental to Valhalla's success. Thank you for your continued time and dedication toward helping us return to school safely for our students and community members. Collaboratively, we created a strong Reopening Plan – a plan that I truly believe in and was proud to sign my name onto when I submitted it to Albany at the end of July for the governor's approval.

To our resilient staff members: Thank you for your invaluable passion, patience and knowledge. Most of all, thank you for YOU. We love our students and their families, but a district doesn't run if not for YOU. You are vital to our success and we appreciate your endless commitment to Valhalla families and your unbridled enthusiasm for ensuring that our students are respected and cared for. Please remember that we are here to help you. If you have questions during the school year, reach out to an administrator. You have always been essential to us. We are “all in” for you.

Here's an encouraging statistic: Eighty-two percent of our students are returning to school for in-person learning. Many of their parents want them to be in class every day. That shows the Valhalla community's confidence in us to educate and protect their children. I hope that makes you feel as incredible as it does me.

Our governor talks about “reimagining education.” We ARE reimagining education in Valhalla – and you're making that happen. This summer, the majority of our team members took courses to learn new, innovative and inventive ways to deliver instruction in these extraordinary circumstances. I don't want to call this our “new normal” because there is nothing normal about this. We are all anxious about bringing students back but we are taking every measure – to the greatest extent possible – within our control to mitigate any negative situations. Understandably, however, this is our current situation for the time being. Remember that us being here, ready to receive students, is the first step to reclaiming a sense of normalcy.

Let's briefly pause here. In Valhalla, we emphasize Social-Emotional Learning, so let's practice it together as a meditation for the year's beginning. Please sit up straight and take a deep breath in – 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... and out. Take another deep breath in and out... and one more. As we teach our students, you just increased your brain's oxygen supply, quieted your mind and promoted inner calm.

Next Tuesday, when our students walk through our doors, we will be making history! No one in our region has done this before. There is no script. This isn't about perfection; it's about progress and helping our community. We've learned so much since March, and every day we'll get better. There isn't a more dedicated team of professionals than our team here in Valhalla. I am so grateful for each and every one of you. We are Viking Strong and we are "All In"!

For years, I've heard that Valhalla is a place where people enjoy coming to work. It's incredible and inspiring to hear that. Nothing demonstrates or proves that enjoyment more than longevity. Later, we'll be celebrating the incredible commitment of our staff members who've reached their milestones of working in Valhalla for 20, 25, 30 and 35 years. We respect your dedication and are grateful for every year you've shared with us.

That's a perfect transition to lead us into discussing the importance of teamwork. Meet Charles Plumb, a U.S. jet fighter pilot in Vietnam, who had completed 75 combat missions when he was shot down. Plumb ejected himself and parachuted into enemy hands, where he spent six years in a Vietnamese prison. One day, back in America, a man approached him, excitedly yelling: "You're Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier 'Kitty Hawk.' You were shot down!" Plumb was confused by the man's detailed knowledge and asked how he knew that information. "I packed your parachute before you left. I guess it worked!" the man said. The two shook hands and Plumb assured him that it had. He said: "If your chute hadn't worked, I wouldn't be here today." Now 77 years old, Plumb is currently a motivational speaker and shares this story with listeners. At the end, he always asks his audiences: "Who is packing your parachute?"

In our lives – be it personal or work-related – many people help to pack our parachutes. Do you remember to acknowledge, thank and reward them? It is very easy to overlook the work of many. It takes a lot of people to create a team, and a lot of work to make the team operate well as a whole. As we embark upon this new school year, let's collectively advance with gratitude, appreciation and kindness for those around us. Let's continue to "pack the parachutes" of all Valhalla children – and each other – and let's focus on lifting up our community with strength and resiliency.

I believe in you. Thank you for being "All In."