

**Hitting the Ground Listening and Learning:
A Speech Written for Curriculum Night**

**By Kathleen Zimmerman
September, 2011**

Good evening. For those of you I have not had the pleasure of meeting, I am Kathleen Zimmerman, the new Principal of Underwood School.

I am so pleased to be standing before you and welcoming our returning and brand new families to Underwood for Curriculum Night 2011. Curriculum Night is a great night for parents and teachers. Our staff is thrilled to share with you their plans and hopes and dreams for the coming school year. We are all proud of what happens in our classrooms every day, and eager to share with you our curriculum to give you a taste of what happens on a daily basis throughout Underwood School.

My official start date was July 1st. Since arriving at Underwood I have hit the ground listening and learning. I have started with an entry plan that would enable me to get to know the school, community, and district as fully as possible and allow the opportunity to meet with all stakeholders. This summer I met individually with just about every teacher at Underwood. I met with aides, curriculum coordinators, facilitators of district initiatives, and district wide administrators. I reviewed documents to gain a greater understanding of strengths, concerns, priorities and goals.

Since the start of school I have spent time in classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, and on the playground to learn through observation. Here is what I've learned:

Underwood is a community made up of approximately 220 families, 289 students, and over fifty staff members. Our students are housed in twelve classrooms, and serviced by three Special Education teachers, over fifteen aides, an ELL teacher, two psychologists, and a social worker. Our twelve classroom teachers are supported by our math coach and reading specialist. The school nurse sees over twenty children each day. We have two custodians who work tirelessly to keep our building clean and in good working order. Our students have a forty-five minute art class, two thirty minute physical education classes, a thirty minute library class, and a thirty minute music class weekly. On Thursday afternoons our students participate in the Thursday Afternoon Program (TAP) on a rotating basis which is a collaboration of our special area teachers and a fabulous program for students.

I have learned that Underwood is a wonderful school. Our teaching staff is a group of great professionals, talented and committed, and I am honored to be among them.

I have learned that teachers have high expectations for students and through observation I have learned there is a high level of student engagement in our classrooms.

I have learned teachers proactively and explicitly teach students classroom expectations. Students were involved in the creation of classroom rules and rules were established so students can achieve their own hopes and dreams for the year.

I have learned that at Underwood, we are committed to differentiating grade level curriculum based on student need. I was in a classroom yesterday and the teacher had given some of the students note cards with various medical problems such as: I have a headache, I can't stop throwing up, I can't sleep at night, I fell and broke my arm. The students went around and read their cards and after each one was read the teacher responded, "I want you to go home, take two advil and get into bed." This quick and simple activity illustrated for the students that they each have different needs. To be responsive to their needs the teacher will need to treat them differently and differentiating instruction is how we respond to the varying needs in a given class.

I have also learned that we believe in students and we will do whatever it takes to see each and every child who attends Underwood School is challenged and reaches his/her full potential.

As I said, Underwood is a wonderful school but all schools can be better. My goal this year is to work collaboratively with the staff to continue the work that was started prior to my arrival; to continue to improve. Working in collaborative teams, the teachers at Underwood will meet this year, embrace learning as our fundamental purpose and answer the following questions:

What do we want students to know and be able to do at each grade level?
How will we know if they have learned what we want them to learn?
What are we going to do if students haven't learned it?
And what about the kids that already know it? How are we enriching their learning experiences?

We have a common goal at Underwood and each staff member is mutually accountable. We have a collective responsibility for all students and together we will ensure we are providing just right instruction to each and every child that walks through our doors.

This year I will continue the work of Underwood School Council, comprised of parents and staff members, it is the main advisory board for Underwood. In monthly meetings we will discuss relevant issues related to budget, staffing, and everyday

policies and procedures, and we will monitor and revise a school improvement plan for Underwood.

Our school improvement plan is on our web site. It currently has two major goals. These are...

1. To ensure academic excellence and innovation for all students.
2. To ensure a respectful, safe, and vibrant school environment in which students are responsible citizens.

Work addressing our current goals happens everyday. Teachers use culturally relevant teaching. They implement approaches and practices to strengthen students' social-emotional learning and enhance a school culture that fosters respect and kindness. Teachers meet to analyze assessment data to plan differentiated instruction in both reading and math.

We are working to advance our Response to Intervention (rti) program in reading which currently ensures all students are receiving high quality differentiated instruction in tier, a daily second dose of targeted instruction for those students who need little more to meet the benchmark, and a third dose of instruction for the small population who requires more intensive interventions. No new direct instruction takes place during intervention blocks so our students needing a second and third dose do not fall further behind. Instead we provide enrichment experiences for those students based on need and interest while we work to close identified gaps for others.

This year we are working to create a tiered rti program for enrichment and intervention in math. Our math coach will be instrumental in the establishment of a successful model but her role at Underwood will be more than that. Our state, as you may or may not be aware, has adopted a new set of curriculum frameworks based on the Common Core Frameworks for both English Language Arts and Mathematics. The 2011-2012 school year is a partial implementation year. Joining us this evening to speak to Newton's transition plan is our Math Coach.

Despite being new to the Underwood staff this year, Amy Lucenta, is certainly not new Newton. She has previously worked at Williams and we currently share her with Ward. Amy has provided professional development opportunities at both the district and state level and it is our great fortune to have her at Underwood. Please welcome Amy Lucenta.

(Amy addressed the community.)

This year Underwood Parents will continue to have a significant role in realizing the goals of our school. Your impact is significant and positively affects the lives of every single student at Underwood. Our PTO Co-Presidents, who dedicate their

time and energy with enthusiasm are two incredibly thoughtful and caring individuals. They have done so much to make tonight a success; from arranging the babysitting and planning the coffee to coordinating the set-up of the gym and having countless conversations about the logistics. It has been a pleasure to work with them so far. Here to share the role of the PTO are Erin Lake and Laura Davis.

(Erin and Laura shared the information about the PTO.)

I would encourage all of you to volunteer in whatever capacity your busy schedules allow. Volunteering sends a powerful message to your children that school is important and the whole Underwood community benefits.

We are off to a great start this year and I look forward to working with all of you in the coming months. Thank you so much for coming this evening. At this time, I invite parents of students in grades 3, 4, and 5 to head to their children's classrooms. Parents of our younger students please visit with our special area teachers, have one of the delicious baked goods I saw on my way into the gym, a cup of coffee, and head home to put your little ones to bed.

I hope to see you at the PTO Meeting next Tuesday where I will be available to answer any questions you may have. Thanks and have a great night!