



# Commissioner's

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# Comments

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## **Making the Decision to be Great**

As I watched the opening ceremonies and first few events of the 2016 Summer Olympics this past weekend, I was reminded what an incredible experience the Olympics is.

In 1996, when the summer games were held in Atlanta, I had the privilege to work at the track and field venue. Through the athletes' eyes, I saw both the happy moments, and the moments of sadness and disappointment when things didn't turn out the way they wanted.

As we watch this year's Olympics, we should pause and realize we are seeing greatness. The athletes pursue greatness in terms of medals, but also by dedicating their lives pursuing the opportunity to even participate in the games. The honor to represent your country is overwhelming. We also see greatness in the meaning of the Olympics. It is a time, once every four years, when the world puts its differences aside and comes together to watch and celebrate the hard work of thousands of athletes from across the world.

So, what do we consider greatness in the world of education? What prompts us to "go for the gold?" Is it high test scores? Is it a school labeled Distinguished? Is it a well-rounded graduate ready for a life and who contributes to society? I suppose it could be any of these things, although I would say high test scores should never be the sole measure. Greatness in education, much like with the Olympics, is based on your point of view.

In Kentucky, I have seen firsthand the greatness of our educators. Last week, I attended four opening day kickoffs for staff – something I had never experienced before, since my previous states did not celebrate opening day. The teachers in each district I visited were excited, even fired up, for the 2016-17 school year. They inspired me and have me fired up for the new school year.

For our teachers, greatness is not simply test scores or the number of points they can help accumulate for the school in the accountability system. For them, greatness is embodied in the students they teach and the impact they have.

In my opinion, what makes our educators great is the determination they have, so that instead of a student saying "I can't" he or she says "I can." It is their dedication that prompts a student to seek them out at the grocery store to simply say, "Remember me? I want to say thank you." It is their care that results in a student who was into a bad scene turning her life around and sending a message on social media to say because of you, she was graduating with a degree in nursing. It is their persistence that results in a student, as he crosses the finish line in his last cross country race, lifting up his coach up in a giant bear hug as he whispers, "Thank you for never giving up on me." It is a teacher's greatness that prompts students to leave a note that says, "You will NEVER die. The things you have taught us in class and about life will be passed to our children and our children's children. Your legacy is us, you will live forever."

I realize to some, this sounds self-aggrandizing, given all we must do in education to close the achievement gap and provide a quality education for each child. Should we even think about greatness in education? Absolutely we should.

Educators do what they do because of students. If things do not get done, it is because we lose sight of that. It is time that we allow our teachers to focus on that greatness. It is time for all Kentucky educators to be great. It is time for us, as an education community, to stop doing what we have a right to do and do what is right. It is time to be great!

That's right, greatness is a decision. Olympians make a decision each day to work hard in pursuit of a goal so that they can stand atop the medal stand and hear their national anthem. Educators make a decision every day they will provide their students the opportunity that will change their lives. It is time we all make the decision to be great.

I dare you to be great. I dare you to put students ahead of the day-to-day issues that currently face us. I dare you to put student needs above a traditional approach to content. I dare you to put what is right for students ahead of the state test. I dare you to be a bridge for students that allows them to see a new horizon they have never seen before. I dare you to allow students to see themselves in a future they thought was reserved for someone else. I dare you to be great.

Opening day is here. Greatness is in our reach. Our educators inspire me, but more importantly, they inspire greatness. I challenge us all in education to seek greatness and make Kentucky education great!