I have spent my entire life either at the schoolhouse, on the way to the schoolhouse, or talking about what happens in the schoolhouse.

0:22(Laughter)

0:23Both my parents were educators, my maternal grandparents were educators, and for the past 40 years, I've done the same thing. And so, needless to say, over those years I've had a chance to look at education reform from a lot of perspectives. Some of those reforms have been good. Some of them have been not so good. And we know why kids drop out. We know why kids don't learn. It's either poverty, low attendance, negative peer influences... We know why. But one of the things that we never discuss or we rarely discuss is the value and importance of human connection. Relationships.

1:07James Comer says that no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship. George Washington Carver says all learning is understanding relationships. Everyone in this room has been affected by a teacher or an adult. For years, I have watched people teach. I have looked at the best and I've looked at some of the worst.

1:33A colleague said to me one time, "They don't pay me to like the kids. They pay me to teach a lesson.The kids should learn it. I should teach it, they should learn it, Case closed."

1:44Well, I said to her, "You know, kids don't learn from people they don't like."

1:50(Laughter)

1:52(Applause)

1:58She said, "That's just a bunch of hooey."

2:01And I said to her,

2:02"Well, your year is going to be long and arduous, dear."

2:07Needless to say, it was. Some people think that you can either have it in you to build a relationship, or you don't. I think Stephen Covey had the right idea. He said you ought to just throw in a few simple things, like seeking first to understand, as opposed to being understood. Simple things, like apologizing.You ever thought about that? Tell a kid you're sorry, they're in shock.

2:30(Laughter)

2:32I taught a lesson once on ratios. I'm not real good with math, but I was working on it.

2:37(Laughter)

2:38And I got back and looked at that teacher edition. I'd taught the whole lesson wrong.

2:43(Laughter)

2:44So I came back to class the next day and I said, "Look, guys, I need to apologize. I taught the whole lesson wrong. I'm so sorry."

2:53They said, "That's okay, Ms. Pierson. You were so excited, we just let you go."

3:01I have had classes that were so low, so academically deficient, that I cried. I wondered, "How am I going to take this group, in nine months, from where they are to where they need to be? And it was difficult, it was awfully hard. How do I raise the self-esteem of a child and his academic achievement at the same time?

3:26One year I came up with a bright idea. I told all my students, "You were chosen to be in my classbecause I am the best teacher and you are the best students, they put us all together so we could show everybody else how to do it."

3:42One of the students said, "Really?"

3:44(Laughter)

3:46I said, "Really. We have to show the other classes how to do it, so when we walk down the hall, people will notice us, so you can't make noise. You just have to strut."

3:56(Laughter)

3:57And I gave them a saying to say: "I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful, and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go."

4:12And they said, "Yeah!"

4:13(Laughter)

4:15You say it long enough, it starts to be a part of you.

4:20(Applause)

4:27I gave a quiz, 20 questions. A student missed 18. I put a "+2" on his paper and a big smiley face.

4:36(Laughter)

4:38He said, "Ms. Pierson, is this an F?"

4:42I said, "Yes."

4:43(Laughter)

4:44He said, "Then why'd you put a smiley face?"

4:48I said, "Because you're on a roll. You got two right. You didn't miss them all."

4:53(Laughter)

4:54I said, "And when we review this, won't you do better?"

4:57He said, "Yes, ma'am, I can do better."

5:00You see, "-18" sucks all the life out of you. "+2" said, "I ain't all bad."

5:11For years, I watched my mother take the time at recess to review, go on home visits in the afternoon,buy combs and brushes and peanut butter and crackers to put in her desk drawer for kids that needed to eat, and a washcloth and some soap for the kids who didn't smell so good. See, it's hard to teach kids who stink.

5:31(Laughter)

5:33And kids can be cruel. And so she kept those things in her desk, and years later, after she retired, I watched some of those same kids come through and say to her, "You know, Ms. Walker, you made a difference in my life. You made it work for me. You made me feel like I was somebody, when I knew, at the bottom, I wasn't. And I want you to just see what I've become."

5:57And when my mama died two years ago at 92, there were so many former students at her funeral, it brought tears to my eyes, not because she was gone, but because she left a legacy of relationshipsthat could never disappear.

6:12Can we stand to have more relationships? Absolutely. Will you like all your children? Of course not.

6:20(Laughter)

6:22And you know your toughest kids are never absent.

6:26(Laughter)

6:28Never. You won't like them all, and the tough ones show up for a reason. It's the connection. It's the relationships. So teachers become great actors and great actresses, and we come to work when we don't feel like it, and we're listening to policy that doesn't make sense, and we teach anyway. We teach anyway, because that's what we do.

6:59Teaching and learning should bring joy. How powerful would our world be if we had kids who were not afraid to take risks, who were not afraid to think, and who had a champion? Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.

7:23Is this job tough? You betcha. Oh God, you betcha. But it is not impossible. We can do this. We're educators. We're born to make a difference.

7:35Thank you so much.

7:36(Applause)