

I know that for many of you this is the first day of school. And for those who are in kindergarten or at the beginning of middle or high school, it is the beginning of a new school, so a minimum of nervousness is understandable.

I imagine that among you there are veterans who only have a year left to finish their studies and are therefore happy. And, no matter what class you're enrolled in, some of you are probably thinking nostalgically about summer and wishing you could've gotten a little more sleep this morning. I know what it means. When I was young my family lived in Indonesia for a few years and my mother didn't have enough money to send me to the school that all American kids went to. So she decided to give me extra lessons herself, from Monday to Friday at 4.30 in the morning. Now, I wasn't exactly happy about getting up so early. Most of the time I fell asleep at the kitchen table. But every time when I complained my mother would give me a look and say, "It's no picnic for me either, boy."

Now, I've given a lot of talks about education. And I talked a lot about responsibility. Of the responsibility of teachers who must motivate you to learn and inspire you. Of the responsibility of parents who must keep you on the right path and make you do your homework and not let you spend the day in front of the TV. I spoke about the government's responsibility to set adequate standards, give support to teachers and get rid of schools that don't work, where children don't have the opportunities they deserve. But in the end we can have the most passionate teachers, the most attentive parents and the best schools in the world: nothing is enough if you don't live up to your responsibilities. Going to these schools every day, paying attention to these teachers, listening to parents, grandparents and other adults, working hard, a necessary condition for success.

This is what I want to emphasize today: the responsibility of each of you in your education. I start from what you have towards yourself. Each of you knows how to do something well, he has something to offer. You have a responsibility to find out. This is the opportunity offered by education. Maybe you know how to write well, well enough to become a book author or a journalist, but to know that you need to write something for your English class. Or you have the vocation of an innovator or inventor, perhaps enough to know how to develop the next iPhone or a new medicine or a vaccine, but you can't know this until you do a project for your science class.

Or you might become a mayor or a senator or a Supreme Court justice but you'll only find out if you participate in a student debate. It's not just important to you and your future. What you do with your ability to get an education will decide the future of this country, nothing less. What you learn in school today will tomorrow be decisive in deciding whether we as a nation will be able to meet the challenges that the future holds for us. You will need the knowledge and problem-solving skills you learn in science and mathematics to cure diseases such as cancer and AIDS and to develop new technologies and energies and protect the environment. You will need the analytical and critical skills that come with the study of history and the social sciences to fight poverty and hardship, crime and discrimination, and make our nation fairer and freer.

You will need the creativity and ingenuity that are cultivated in all courses of study to found new businesses that will create jobs and help the economy flourish. I know it's not always easy to do well in school. I know many of you face challenges that make it difficult to focus on homework and learning.

It happened to me, I know what it's like. My father left the family when I was two and I was raised by a single mother who struggled every day to pay the bills and wasn't always able to give us what other kids had. I often missed my father. Sometimes I felt alone and thought I wouldn't make it. I wasn't always as focused as I should have been.

I've done things I'm not proud of and gotten in trouble. And my life could have easily taken a turn for the worse.

But I was lucky. I had a lot of second chances and the opportunity to go to college and law school and follow my dreams. Some of you may not enjoy these benefits. It may be that there are no adults in your life who support you as much as you need. Maybe someone in your family has lost their job and there is no money. Either you live in an unsafe neighborhood, or you have friends who try to convince you to do the wrong things. But, at the end of the day, the circumstances of your life - your appearance, your origins, your economic and family status - are not an excuse to neglect your homework or have a negative attitude. There is no excuse for snapping at your teacher, or skipping class, or stopping going to school. There is no excuse for those who don't try.

Your goal can be very simple: do all your homework, pay attention in class or read a few pages of a book every day. You might decide to take up some extracurricular activities or do some volunteering. You might decide to stand up for kids who are teased or bullied because of their appearance or background because, like me, you believe that all children have the right to a safe environment to study and learn. You may decide to take better care of yourself to perform more and learn better.

And in all of this, I hope you wash your hands a lot and stay at home if you are unwell so as to avoid catching the flu as much as possible this winter. Whatever you do I want you to dedicate yourself to it. I know that sometimes TV gives you the impression that you can become rich and famous without actually having to work, becoming a basketball star or a rapper, or the star of a reality show. But it's unlikely, the truth is that success is hard to achieve.

You won't like everything you study. You won't make friends with all the professors. Not all tasks will seem so fundamental to you. And you won't necessarily be successful on the first try. Rightly so. Some of the most successful people in the world have racked up the most enormous failures. JK Rowling's first Harry Potter was rejected twelve times before finally being published. Michael Jordan was kicked off the basketball team in high school and missed hundreds of games and missed thousands of field goals during his career. But he once said: «I have failed over and over again in my life. That's why I did it."

No one is born capable of doing things, you learn by working hard. You're never a great athlete the first time you try a new sport. You never get every note right the first time you sing a song. You need to exercise. It's the same with school. It may happen that you have to do and redo a math exercise before solving it, or you have to read and reread something before you understand it, or you have to write and rewrite something before it goes well. The history of America was not made by people who gave up when the going got tough but by those who moved forward, tried again and harder and loved their country too much to do anything less than your best.

It is the story of the students who sat in your seats 250 years ago and made a revolution to found this nation. Of those who sat in your seat 75 years ago and overcame the Depression and won a world war. Who fought for civil rights and sent a man to the moon. Of those who sat in your place 20 years ago and created Google, Twitter and Facebook, changing the way we communicate.

So, I ask you, what will your contribution be? What problems will you solve? What discoveries will you make? What will the president who comes 20, 50 or 100 years from now say that you have done for this country? Your families, your teachers, and I are doing everything we can to make sure you have the education you need to answer these questions. I'm working hard to guarantee you classes and books and accessories and computers, everything you need for your learning. But you too must do your part. So this year I expect seriousness from you. I expect maximum commitment in everything you do. I expect great things from each of you. So don't disappoint us, don't disappoint your families, your country and yourselves. Make us proud of you. I know you can do it.