



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Eric Adams

From the Desk of NYS Senator Eric Adams

ERIC ADAMS September 3, 2010

Dear Constituent:

In early May, in the aftermath of the attempted car bombing in Times Square, I issued a media advisory to commend and congratulate the professionalism and hard work of the NYPD, local law enforcement, and counter-terrorism officials. As Chair of the New York State Senate Committee on Homeland Security, I applauded their efforts to make the streets of our cities, State, and nation safer. Further, I specifically praised Lance Orton and Duane Jackson, the two street vendors who alerted police to the suspicious vehicle by embracing the crucial concept embodied in the slogan ‘See Something, Say Something.’

The willingness to take meaningful initiative seems enterprising, resourceful, and laudable. However, I would like to suggest that the exigencies of modern society make it a fundamental and indispensable duty. Further, I posit that we must extend this responsibility to every walk of life in which we see our fellows endangered. And if our “fellows” are our children, the commitment becomes mandatory.

One brilliant example of the ‘See Something, Say Something’ mindset stands out as I recall the actions of an outstanding educator:

When the new principal first arrived at her new school assignment, the state had already classified it a failing institution. She announced a school-wide assembly immediately. The staff whispered among themselves that her actions were reckless: it had been more than three years since any assembly had been held.

This interval had not resulted from the absence of an auditorium space. The lack of any assembly was rooted in fear. It was an apprehension that arose from the daily arrests, many of them for student violence that included guns or other dangerous weapons. The staff and prior administration had considered it too dangerous to assemble all the pupils in one location.

This was not the position of the new principal. She set aside their concerns and convened the assembly. When all the students were seated, she revealed that she intended to give them a new designation. She further informed them that they should ask their parents to use the revised title. The staff members had a puzzled look on their faces as they realized that the entire auditorium was hushed.

The quiet was broken by further words from the new principal. She explained to the students that their new label was Scholars. She described what it meant to be a Scholar and how she would spend her time as their principal making them Kinder, Wiser, and Smarter.

She collaborated with an art teacher who had volunteered his time and ability, painting those vital words on the ceiling beams throughout the entire building and using them to cover over all the graffiti in the school.

Her ideas resonated with all the children, but one student in particular seemed to feel something special. He found the new principal in her office the next day and asked to speak. She immediately stopped her work to listen. The student informed her that his math teacher

had been phoning him at home, and although the teacher was polite, for some reason something just did not feel right. When the new principal asked the young man why he sought to share this with her, he stated that it was because her words in the auditorium the previous day had made him trust her.

The new principal had long embraced the belief that in matters concerning the safety of a child, one must err on the sign of caution, and she immediately called 911 to report the issue to the police. When she shared the story with the responding sergeant, he berated her as though she had completely wasted his time. The officer's posture was shared by the school staff. Although on the premises for less than a week, she had alienated many of the staff because they felt she had unfairly accused a good teacher of committing a terrible act.

It did not take long for word about the matter to reach the parents. Two days later, a mother appeared with her son at the new principal's office door. They asked to speak with her and were invited inside. The mother looked at her son and instructed him to repeat for the principal what he had told her. The young man reported that the math teacher had purchased sneakers as a bribe for male students who then allowed him to sodomize them on school premises. Several young boys had been victims of his sexual assaults.

When the new principal asked why the parent had decided to come forward now, she replied that the new principal had been the first who appeared willing to take decisive action against the misconduct. It had been reported to the previous principal and police, but they had done nothing. The math teacher was arrested and subsequently convicted.

That Principal, Ms. Tracey Collins, who has volunteered a large amount of her time as the Chair of my Educational Task Force, fully embraced the 'See Something, Say Something' philosophy as an obligation of her profession, and I suggest that private individuals adopt it as an enhancement of their citizenship.

[A postscript: When you walk the halls of Principal Collins' old school, you still observe written on the ceiling beams: "Scholars are Kinder, Wiser, and Smarter."]