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R.I. Commissioner of Elementary and
Secondary Education
Johnson & Wales University
Graduate School Commencement
Address
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Chairman of the Board Yena, University
President Bowen, Providence Campus
President Schneider, degree recipients,
families and friends, I am pleased and
honored to be invited here this evening to
speak to you and to receive this prestigious
award.

During the 17 years that I have lived in
Rhode Island, I have watched Johnson &
Wales grow from a relatively small,
business-oriented college into a university
that offers advanced degrees in a wide
variety of professional fields, including my
own field, education. Over the years, I have

bumped into many Johnson & Wales students, professors, and mentors at your training sites. I have hosted national conferences at Johnson & Wales facilities, where folks have complimented you on the remarkable service and attention to detail. You can't be a Rhode Islander without engaging with, recognizing, and celebrating the learning and achievement of J&W students and graduates.

So here I stand, getting an honorary doctorate in education leadership. Never before has our national attention focused so intensely on education. As our economy in America is battered, as the entire global economy is under threat, we are challenged by the conflict between free markets and regulations, by rapid changes and sudden obsolescence, by issues of business ethics, by issues of workforce preparedness and the need for innovation. The whole country is calling out for high-performing students

with 21st-century skills. We need graduates who are creative, entrepreneurial problem-solvers. I'm told that we need graduates who have been trained to anticipate changes in their ever-evolving workplace. We need adapters and innovators who have picked up the sensibilities that will allow them to respond to those changes.

As a lifelong public educator, I have to ask myself: Are our high-school graduates ready to meet this challenge? Some are – more every year, I hope. Yet I have to acknowledge that I represent an industry that fails fully one-third of the kids – and in cities, half of them. That's a tragedy, and I have spent my professional life trying to build an education system that is responsive to human need and is about hands-on learning as well as academic learning, a system that is not just for some students, the fortunate ones with the wherewithal to gain access to a high-quality education, but for all

students, the rich and the poor, the privileged and the not so privileged, students who learn differently, English-language learners, *everyone*. That is a wonderful mission, a new mission, for both our economy and our democracy. But it is not the mission that the system I represent was set up to accomplish.

If we are to have an education system that meets the needs of all kids, I believe that we must provide multiple pathways of high quality that lead students to proficiency. No one should be judged by the results of a single test. One size does not fit all. Students must be given many opportunities to show what they know and what they are able to do. In Rhode Island, we have worked to bring this type of learning into every high school, through internships, senior projects, portfolios, and service to the community.

And that's why it's such a pleasure to speak to the advanced-degree recipients of J&W, for this university has led the way. You are a premier example of finding avenues for students to engage in both the work and the learning, and to achieve and to demonstrate success.

Let me address you now as successful graduates of Johnson & Wales. Because of the unique J&W education, with its strong emphasis on practicums and real-life workplace experiences, you have been trained to solve problems, to be dropped into a situation that's unfamiliar and to figure it out, to locate and acquire resources and turn them into production, in business or education or whatever field you have chosen. This is much more than academic learning. It's about analysis, creativity, applied learning that is relevant and rigorous. It's about learning to work with

and to manage people in a workplace. It's about real-life learning and lifelong learning.

And that's my story, too. I care about this because I experienced it.

I was not a book learner – at least not initially. As a child, I was a struggling student who had great difficulty learning to read. Today, perhaps, I would have been diagnosed with a learning disability and I would have received extra support. But that wasn't the case back then. I struggled for years, until as a young man I was engaged by purposeful teachers and challenged by things I cared about, and I was recognized for good work, with praise and support and nurturing criticism.

Right now, I'm an education commissioner. I didn't grow up wanting to be a commissioner, and I was never trained to be one. There is no training for this job, but

there are pathways along which you can learn about and experience complexity, policy development, administration, and leadership. After college, I joined the Peace Corps, where I learned what it means to be a global citizen, to have cultural tolerance, and share an international perspective. After the Peace Corps, I taught in an urban middle school in Rochester, New York, an experience that changed my life. There, I found myself working with dedicated colleagues, master teachers who worked to reach students and parents in a culture of shared responsibility. It was that spirit that I brought with me to later jobs – program development, budget management and priority setting, superintendent of schools in a district of 40,000 students, then Commissioner of Education, here in Rhode Island, a state with 36 districts and 150,000 students. Our role is to set state policy regarding academic standards, testing, and

teacher certification, and to ensure equal access and program quality.

So I've held seven or eight different jobs. I didn't realize at the time that each one was preparing me for the next, but it obviously was. All along the way, I was acquiring knowledge about the work and skills in understanding the human and political context. I learned about strategic thinking, tactical planning, community organizing, and the management of people.

That's what you have experienced as you have worked toward attaining your degree, and it's what you will continue to experience as you go on with your careers. You may be certified or accredited, and you are well-trained and ready to advance in a particular field of employment. But I would venture that you have already experienced two or three transitions, and these will be only the first. I think it's fair to say that, in

our 21st-century economy and workplace, you'll have five or six jobs before you're 50.

Let me be clear: You are blessed. Your graduation today certifies you as prepared, but you are also a generation that is cursed, entering an economy challenged at its center regarding its viability, sustainability, and responsibility – for today, all businesses face an additional challenge of contributing to the quality of community life.

In this new world, as you experience opportunities for advancement, promotion, profit, and success, you will at times weigh profit and advancement against what's good for your community, your state, your nation.

The countries we're trying to compete with, particularly Singapore and China, are places where to succeed corporately is to advance the nation. On the other hand, we are in fact a nation that is so proud of our

entrepreneurial free market that we experience incidents of huge profits at the cost of the environment and quality of life.

You're a special class because the nation's consciousness has been raised. For the first time in years, we are in an era when people are looking to the government itself to act as an agency of progress and change. So you will be challenged to do both – be successful and contribute to a community; be profitable, and contribute to the nation. In fact, that may be the greatest challenge that you will face. I'd like to think that a school like Johnson & Wales, a good community partner, would constantly remind you of that issue: Do these decisions advance my standing in my business as well contribute to the local and national agenda and interest?

More than ever, you will be responsible to weigh profit against fairness and community health. If you focus only on quarterly profits

or annual test scores, your actions may bring short-term results, but will they be beneficial in the long run? As we all have witnessed recently, incremental decisions made over a long period of time without regard to sustainability, fairness, and community can come back to haunt us all in the future.

As you walk out of here tonight, you are ready to lead and to succeed in the workplace, but whatever field you have chosen is going to change rapidly. You need to keep reminding yourself that the changes in your workplace are a continuous learning experience. You have to engage the challenge, respond to the opportunities, and create your own future. And as you move through your career, reflect on the education you got here that positioned you to respond to these changes and opportunities. The career paths coming at you require gaining knowledge in multiple disciplines rather than in a single one.

You and I can appreciate that your getting your graduate degree wasn't an accident. It required hard work!

So as we celebrate your accomplishments, I recognize that you didn't get here alone. When you leave here tonight, go find the teacher who made a difference, the spouse or mentor or friend or former boss who supported you as you pursued your degree. Thank them, and realize that, as a graduate, you are the inspiration for somebody else.

You are now a person of standing in the community. Obligations come with this celebration, and I hope that you can appreciate them. For with your degree come responsibilities and the expectation of your becoming a role model for others – for your children, for young people in the culture, for your colleagues.

As Judge Frank Caprio, whom I know as a member of the Board of Regents, which makes him one of my bosses, but whom you may know as the judge on the local cable show “Caught in Providence,” has said: One of the truths about success is that nobody gets there alone. When you’re given a chance or a break or a promotion, never close the door behind you, never pull the ladder up. Always look back and offer a hand to someone else who might be climbing that ladder, too.

I have complimented you on your adaptability and resourcefulness. You’re going to need both. We’re coming into a time of job scarcity. As much as you’ve been tested in order to reach this point, some of the most serious tests could very well come in the next couple of years. Your degree is an accomplishment, but not an entitlement. Whatever work you do now, you’ve got to do it well. Your knowledge

and skills will be constantly tested. But the adaptability and resourcefulness that you have learned at Johnson & Wales make you, today's graduates, a valuable resource to our society, which is a compliment to the school and to you.

Congratulations, and best of luck in all of your endeavors. I am proud to be among the degree recipients today. Thank you!