To My Fellow Educators,

I am so blessed to be a Mississippi educator and a partner with you in empowering all students to become responsible citizens in our global society. As we continue to conquer this unprecedented year, I would like to share a few words of encouragement with you. I will begin with a quick story:

On November 9, 1847, Charles Ellet, Jr. was tasked with constructing the first bridge connecting the United States and Canada over the Lower Niagara River. The only question was, how would he get the first cable for this suspension bridge across the river? The rapids were too great and too swift for a boat to navigate. Ideas, such as shooting the cable across attached to a cannon ball or igniting fireworks, were discussed. Ultimately, Ellet decided that a cash prize would be given to the first child to fly a kite over the river.

The challenge began January 1848, and a boy named Homan Walsh accepted. At only 8 years old, he took his kite and ball of twine and crossed the river to the Canadian side. Along-side many other boys, in the dead of winter, Homan flew his kite day and night. During one flight, his line went limp; his kite had plummeted to the rocks and ice below, breaking his string. After retrieving his kite and making necessary repairs, Homan flew his kite once again. On January 31, 1848, his kite made it to the other side, crossing the 800 ft gap, and got snagged in a tree. He had won the contest.

The next day, a stronger line was attached to Homan's kite string. After that, a thicker rope was attached. They continued this system, each time tying something thicker and stronger to the end of the line: twine, rope, and finally cables. Homan's kite string eventually became Ellet’s suspension bridge.

What can we learn from this? Just like Homan, we must persevere; we must press on in the face of adversity and look forward to the future we are building. Teachers, 2020 has been a year of challenges and strife; it has forced us to take on new beginnings. But there is beauty in 2020 and in the things that you are doing even now. Often, we are tempted to look down on the small things, or on things that are too difficult. We despise tough beginnings because our initial efforts often seem insignificant. This year has challenged each of us to find a "new normal" for teaching, learning, and connecting with students. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in many ways, become an unprecedented test for teacher-student relationships. We have been forced to readjust our expectations and re-evaluate how we connect with students in a meaningful way. As a result, we have all come to realize the importance of these relationships, not only for students' academic success, but for their social-emotional learning as well. Teachers must continue to develop deep, meaningful relationships with their students despite all the challenges of this year. I personally have had to find new ways of connecting with students through multistep air high fives and distanced communication. I’ve had to find new ways of “reading” student emotions from behind their masks and showing them that I truly care. My hope is that with every air high-five and every word of encouragement, my students will feel valued, respected, and loved. None of this is easy, but each action is a step forward, no matter how small.

How might the small steps you are taking this year build a bridge to a brighter future? Big things can happen out of the smallest starts - things that can change your world, or better yet, change the world of every student who walks through your door. ~~I~~f you despise beginnings, you lose the value of what is hidden in the beginning, and you may lose heart for what is to come. So, as you continue to teach, know that the things you have done in 2020 may seem insignificant now, but you are building a bridge; soon you may trade in your twine for rope, and rope for cables. Build your bridge well this year; be patient and don't lose hope. Your small acts of dedication now may produce something greater than you could ever imagine. You are building more than you can see.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Howard Hines Austin
2020 Mississippi Teacher of the Year