Good morning, Milwaukee!

Let me just start by saying this: every early childhood educator in here deserves free coffee for life, hazard pay for snack time, and an Olympic medal for surviving the words to any Gracie’s corner or a miss Rachel song.

Only in this room do people understand the courage it takes to tie 14 pairs of shoes, clean up a mystery sticky spots, and answer 47 questions before 9 a.m., here about a young person’s home life that is telling you way more than you probably wanted to know. And yet, despite all that — you show up. And that’s where the power begins.

Because that chaos? That joy? That impact? That listening ear, and that pearl clutch…. That’s the power of YOU. I’d like to start with a quick 2min activity. Tell someone in this room, what your superpower is with children? What’s your gift? Why are you AMAZING?

\*\*I will pause here and let them talk and then ask a few ppl to share\*\*

I didn’t become an educator because I thought it would be easy. In fact, my first day…I almost wondered if I was built for it at all.” I didn’t teach the traditional route. I took a fast track program where I had an orientation and the next week I was an official teacher. In a high school at that. I’m young I thought. I am relatable. And then I had students who were labeled “special ed” so some were as young as 13 and others were as old as 21. I remember thinking “this is insane” I can leave and get a drink AND potentially see this kid there. YIKES

Teaching high school humbled me quickly, but nothing humbles you more than younger students. A student looked up at me and said, ‘You look tired’ — and it was only 8:05 in the morning. Asking me if I’m old. Students would tell me their pains of how they felt at home. Of how they felt about me (good and bad)… I faced tantrums, many moments of dysregulation, the most testing of patience I have ever experienced in my life happened with my younger students. I would say “god, I see what you’re doing here—well played”

Kids will humble you quick right?

But then, in the middle of the exhaustion, came moments that changed me. A hug when I didn’t expect it. A child repeating something back I thought they didn’t even hear. A parent saying, ‘My child loves you, Miss Curry.’ or those random moments when you’re at a store and a kid see’s you and is in awe! Like whoa you go to the store… YEP baby, Miss Curry comes to the store too. That’s when I realized: the impact was already inside me. I just had to be brave enough to use it.I taught in a room with kids who were identified as having major behavioral challenges. They had been isolated from other kids and confined to my little space. I knew quickly the world was kind of against our success, but I knew I had the power inside of me to make it work. So, I’d like to talk to you all today about the power inside of you! I am hoping you take one small thing from today, and you carry it with you and that it sustains you to continue to shift a child’s life in ways you never thought was possible. And if you are here feeling hopeless and afraid about the future of early childhood education, maybe I could offer you a small seed of hope.

There are three powers you carry inside you every single day. The Power of Presence, The Power of Belief, and the Power of Legacy.

**The Power of Presence** – Just showing up consistently can change a life. Kids don’t remember if your lesson plan was perfect, but they remember if you looked them in the eyes and listened. A little bit of attunement, of noticing our kids makes all the difference, We are designed to be together in community—as a matter of fact we thrive from it. Not just being physically present, but the power inside you to extend positive energy, bringing your upbeat spirit can make or break a young person’s ability to trust people.

Presence is one of the greatest gifts you can give a child. Not fancy toys, not even the right words every time—but you. Your presence.

Children know when you are truly with them. They feel it in the way you make eye contact, the way you kneel to their level, the way you listen with your whole heart. Presence says, “You matter enough for me to pause. You are worth my full attention. You are seen, you are valued, you are loved.”

Think about it—so many of us can remember that one adult from our own childhood who was simply there. Maybe they sat and listened to us talk about something that seemed small but felt big. Maybe they showed up day after day, consistently, reliably. That presence stays with us long after the moment has passed. It shapes how we see ourselves and how we learn to show up for others.

For our kids, your presence builds trust. It tells them, “The world is safe. I belong. I have a place.” And that sense of belonging is the soil where confidence, courage, and curiosity grow.

But presence isn’t just about what you give to children—it’s also what you give to yourself. When you are present in your work, when you slow down to notice the joy in a child’s laughter or the determination in their effort, you refill your own cup. Presence allows you to find meaning in the small wins, the everyday moments that are actually the foundation of extraordinary growth.

So never underestimate the power of presence. Your presence has the ability to turn an ordinary Tuesday into the day a child decided they were smart, capable, and loved. It turns your classroom, your center, your program into more than just a place to learn—it becomes a place where children know they matter.

**The Power of Belief** – You believe in children when others may not. Sometimes you’re the only adult who sees their brilliance. And that belief — it becomes their backbone.

When we talk about the power of belief, we’re not talking about something abstract. Belief is not just a word—it’s a force. It’s something children can feel before they can even fully understand it. Think about the way a child’s eyes light up when someone says, “I know you can do this.” That spark? That’s belief.

Children come to us with endless potential wrapped up in curiosity, creativity, and sometimes even uncertainty. They may not always have the words, but they are constantly asking us: “Do you believe in me?” Every time you lean down and tie their shoe with patience, every time you clap for their drawing, every time you say, “I love how hard you tried,” you are answering with a resounding, “Yes, I do. I believe in you”

Belief is what makes hope real. You may not see the full picture today, but your belief plants the seed for what can grow tomorrow. A child who feels believed in learns to take risks, learns to persevere, learns that they are worthy of greatness. That child grows into a student who raises their hand even when they’re unsure. They grow into a teenager who applies for opportunities others told them they weren’t ready for. They grow into an adult who carries resilience because someone once told them, “I believe in you.”

But belief is not only for these children—it is for you, too. You are educators. You are shapers of futures, hope dealers. And sometimes the world forgets to remind you of how powerful you are. Sometimes, the day-to-day routines, the exhaustion, the challenges, the policy and politics, can make you question, “Am I making a difference?”

Let me remind you—yes, you are. You are difference-makers. You are legacy-builders. You are the reason children feel safe enough to dream. But for that impact to flow fully, you have to believe in yourselves. When you walk into a classroom believing, “What I do matters, who I am matters, my presence matters,” you carry a strength that children can sense and mirror.

Children don’t just learn their ABCs from you; they learn what it looks like to stand tall. They learn what it looks like to lead with compassion. They learn what it looks like to never give up. And that starts with you believing that you are enough—that your dedication, your voice, your heart, your love are enough.

So today, I want you to hold onto this truth: Believing in a child has the power to change their life. And believing in yourself has the power to change generations. When you pair those together—your belief in them and your belief in you—there is nothing more unstoppable.

**The Power of Legacy** – Sometimes the hardest part about this work is you are planting seeds you may never see bloom. But those seeds become leaders, parents, innovators, teachers and change agents for Milwaukee.

You are the reason hope isn’t just an idea but a reality.

And Dr. King reminded us to never write ‘insufficient funds’ on the checks for our kids’ futures.”

That is the essence of legacy. Legacy isn’t just what we leave behind—it’s what we leave within others. Every child you nurture carries a piece of your love, your patience, your belief, into the future. That becomes part of who they are, and they pass it forward to their own families, their communities, and the next generation.

Legacy is why your work is never just about today. It’s about tomorrow, and the countless tomorrows after that. The way you comfort a child when they’re scared, the way you cheer when they succeed, the way you teach them to try again after failure—those moments ripple out. They echo in classrooms you will never step into, in boardrooms you will never sit in, and in households you will never visit.

What you do every day may feel ordinary, but it creates extraordinary legacies. And the beauty of it is—you may not always get to see the final picture, but you can trust that your fingerprints are all over the future of this city.

When a child grows up to become a compassionate parent, a bold entrepreneur, a dedicated teacher, or even the next voice for justice in Milwaukee—they will carry with them the echoes of your belief. That is the power of legacy. It is invisible at times, but it is unshakable.

So, when you are tired, when you question if it matters, remember this: You are not just shaping children. You are shaping generations. You are writing chapters in stories that will be told long after today. And one day, someone will look back and say, “Because my teacher believed in me, I believed in myself. Because they saw something in me, I learned to see something in others.”

That is the legacy you are building—quietly, powerfully, and forever.

So let me ask you:

• How do we deepen our impact?

• How do we make sure it’s sustained?

• And how do we multiply it?

Are you nurturing the kids’ sense of agency — so they know they have the power to shape their own destiny? Take a few mins to talk and turn to someone near you.

\*\*we will pause here for the activity\*\* if there is time we will debrief

Our young people today are hyperconnected — yet deeply divided.

That means we must be united, intentional, and relentless in raising our children up to be everything they are supposed to be.

Carry pride in what you’ve already done. But be relentless about what still needs to be done.

Now let me pause here, because you can’t give what you don’t have.

You cannot pour into children from an empty cup. Being well doesn’t mean being perfect. Being well means being aware enough to recognize your blindspots. When are you so tired you may be causing harm to the very child you are trying to help? Are you strong enough to accept feedback? And flexible enough to adapt and pivot when what we’re doing is no longer working for our kids. Are you bold enough to challenge the status quo?

And sometimes, being well means closing the classroom door for five minutes, taking a breath, and eating that snack you were planning to share.

\*\*I may insert a personal story but it depends how I feel emotionally\*\*

You are not babysitters. You are brain builders. You are change agents.
You are city shapers. Every child you meet is asking:
Do you see me?
Do you believe in me?
Do you know I matter?

And your answer — through your care, your love, your patience — is YES.

The future of Milwaukee doesn’t start tomorrow. It starts every morning when YOU walk into your classroom, your center, your program, and when you come into proximity of a young person.

That… is the power of YOU.

Thank you for all that you do for the families and children of this great city!