Address for the Florida Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
On Educating for Rationality

October 22, 2026
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Good morning. Thank you for the invitation. Before a teacher ever stands in front of a classroom, someone has prepared that teacher. The work represented in this room is the work of forming the people who will form everyone else. That is not a technical task. It is the cultivation of rationality itself.

I have spent much of my career teaching Florida students and then serving in roles that try to make the system worthy of them. Those years confirmed something I still believe: education changes lives. A great educator opens doors, builds confidence, and sometimes redirects an entire trajectory. But that only happens when the educator has been formed—not merely trained in techniques, but initiated into the life of reason.

Florida has pursued a clear vision: education should create opportunity. Not the managed progression of students through a system, but the preparation of free persons for success in life. We have built pathways that run from early learning through K-12 and postsecondary education into employment and economic mobility. The goal is not that every student follow the same path. The goal is that every student leave with the knowledge, skills, and character to pursue a path worthy of a free citizen.

The results are measurable. Florida has ranked first in education freedom by the Heritage Foundation for four consecutive years, first on the Parent Power Index for four years, and first on the ALEC Index of State Education Freedom—the only state to receive an A+ this year. We have led in higher education by *U.S. News & World Report* since those rankings began, and we rank first in talent attraction and workforce education. This school year our graduation rate reached a record 92.2 percent, with gains in every subgroup. More than 60 percent of students are performing on or above grade level in both English Language Arts and mathematics on progress monitoring.

These are not accidents of demography or funding. They follow from high standards, accountability, parental empowerment, and a refusal to treat every outcome as equal. They follow from treating education as the formation of free persons rather than the socialization of clients.

Aristotle insisted that liberal arts learning is a condition for virtuous citizenship. The free person is equipped to deliberate about the common good and to order his own life toward worthy ends. John Henry Newman argued, in *The Idea of a University*, that a classical liberal

education shapes the whole person through disinterested inquiry. It disciplines the intellect for its own highest culture so that a person can perceive what is true and good. Robert Hutchins put the point directly: “The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public. Its object is the excellence of man as man and man as citizen. It regards man as an end, not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is the education of free men.” He added that “wisdom and goodness are the aim of higher education. How can it be otherwise? Wisdom and goodness are the end of human life.”

R.S. Peters described education as initiation into public traditions of knowledge and understanding that transform the learner’s outlook. “We would not call a man who was merely well informed an educated man,” he wrote. “He must also have some understanding of the ‘reason why’ of things.” Transmission of knowledge that does not foster the development of rational ability is not education at all. For Peters, education is the sustained attempt to elicit and build up the rational form of life.

Israel Scheffler sharpened the same claim. “Rationality, as I see it, is a matter of reasons,” he wrote, “and to take it as a fundamental educational ideal is to make as pervasive as possible the free and critical quest for reasons, in all realms of study.” Critical thought, he insisted, “is of the first importance in the conception and organization of educational activities.” Teaching, properly understood, is not mere behavior modification. It is a human exchange in which the role of reasons is paramount—in which the teacher offers reasons for beliefs and remains open to questions and objections from students.

Harvey Siegel has carried this tradition forward. “The critical thinker is best thought of as one who is appropriately moved by reasons.” Rationality, and its educational cognate, critical thinking, “constitute a fundamental educational ideal.” The fostering of rationality and critical thinking, he has argued, is the central aim and the overriding ideal of education. To fail to educate for this is to fail to treat students with the respect due to persons. Education, in this view, is initiation into the space of reasons.

Florida has tried to act on these insights without pretending that one credential is the measure of every life. More than 818,000 K-12 students are enrolled in career and technical education. Our colleges serve more than 512,000 postsecondary CTE students. Since 2018–19, Florida students have earned more than 550,000 rapid credentials. These pathways create opportunity. They do not replace the need for the cultivation of reason. A skilled tradesperson, an apprentice, a nurse, or an engineer still needs the literacy, numeracy, and capacity for judgment that make free citizenship possible. Success is not measured by whether every student earns the same credential. Success is ensuring every student has

access to a pathway that matches talent and aspiration—and that every pathway rests on a foundation of knowledge and the ability to reason about it.

Teachers are the most important school-based factor in student achievement. Research confirms what common sense already knows. Policy, funding, and programs matter, but the educator in the classroom shapes the daily experience. Teachers help students master content. They also help them discover possibilities they had not considered. Whether a student chooses a university, an apprenticeship, military service, or immediate entry into the workforce, an educator helps navigate that choice. That is why the preparation of teachers is decisive.

If we want students prepared for the future, we must prepare educators who can cultivate rationality in others. That means strong content knowledge, effective instructional practice, meaningful clinical experience, and an understanding of the full range of pathways available to students. As Florida expands workforce education, apprenticeships, and industry certifications, we need teachers who can present those options while initiating students into the free and critical quest for reasons. Educators who themselves have been formed in the liberal tradition—who can offer reasons, welcome questions, and model the life of reason—are the ones who will form the next generation of free Floridians.

That is the work I ask of you. Continue preparing highly effective educators ready to make an impact on day one. Strengthen partnerships with districts so that preparation is grounded in the realities of the classroom. Help future educators understand the full range of educational and career pathways, and equip them to guide students toward them while never losing sight of the permanent task: the cultivation of reason. Elevate the teaching profession by insisting that those who enter it have first been initiated into the forms of knowledge and the critical spirit that education requires. Serve as thought partners as we strengthen the educator pipeline.

Florida's success did not begin with rankings or accountability systems. It began with educators. Before those educators entered classrooms, they were prepared by institutions like the ones represented here. The future teacher, nurse, firefighter, entrepreneur, engineer, and skilled tradesperson sitting in a Florida classroom today will be shaped by someone you have prepared.

The future of Florida education is sitting in teacher preparation programs across our state right now. Your work forms the educators who will form the next generation—not merely as skilled workers, but as free persons capable of reasoning, judging, and governing themselves.

Thank you for your partnership and your commitment. I look forward to the work ahead.