

Nicholas Ferroni - Keynote Day 2 Transcript

- Hello everybody, thank you for being here. I'm Nicholas Ferroni, and I will get into my background in a moment. But today, we're basically gonna dive into what truly matters most at the end of the day whether it is in person or virtual. So quick overview of today's presentation. So why am I here? I'm not here to lecture you for an hour about why you shouldn't lecture your students, I'm also not here because I'm the best teacher in America, I'm most certainly not, and I promise you I'm not the best teacher in this room right now. But I'm here just to reflect on these past two years, and to remind you why you became teachers. So, it's a very simple message. And I'm also here to tell you how a single teacher and the single post-it note changed my entire life as an educator. But first, I'm in my 19th year as a high school History and Culture Studies teacher in New Jersey. I'm an outspoken educator and advocate, I was named Upster of The Year by The Human Rights Campaign as well as Teacher of the Year by both the American Conference on Diversity and the Foundation for Gender Equality. All things I'm amazingly proud of. But, here's my real resume. As a child, my Italian and very Catholic grandmother used to hit me with a wooden spoon for being lefthanded. But my elementary school teacher would see that, and then read me books about all the amazing lefthanded people that are in the world. When I was 12, everybody used to call me Eddie Monster and Dumbo to the point I used to superglue my ears to my head. WE can laugh about it now, I promise, counseling and therapy, I'm over it. When I was a senior, my girlfriend dumped me a week before prom to take another guy, a college guy. Don't worry about that, it's traumatic as it was, he cheated on her a week later, so karma, everything works out. During high school, I battled with depression and anxiety. But because of my teachers, administrators, even my school lunch lady, I survived. I got through it. It takes an entire school to educate a child. My mom has only been wrong about one thing in my entire life, that was never a good haircut. So that picture you're looking at, that was never a good haircut so please if you're a parent, do not give your child a haircut, take them to a salon or they'll have to explain photos like that to their students or their children for the rest of their lives. But before I started, I feel compelled to talk about these last two years because even though I'm in my 19th year, I felt like I was in my first year as a teacher. Literally because we had to adapt and pivot. So, I think this is a great example of what people thought teaching was like, and what it actually was like. ♪ I gotta testify ♪ ♪ Come up in the spot looking extra fly ♪ So this little video was a great perspective of that. what teaching is like, or what people think it's like, and what it is. The irony is, the second half of the video, a lot of people pointed out that, "If this was real, that person would probably not even have an oar, or they will have to bring their own oar." But point taken, but this is a great example of showing the differences. For me being a virtual teacher. I was very jealous of elementary school teachers, because they got to see their students faces every day, their students cannot wait to turn on their cameras. This is what it was like for kind of a secondary teacher. Looking into a black void with virtual teaching. I did have a few students who kept their cameras on because they probably felt bad for me, which I truly appreciate. But this is probably the best example of what it was like. If I could sum up last two years in a tweet. This is

not a knock against administration, but just to show quickly we had to adapt everything, "Please be prepared, to teach online, in person, both simultaneously, on a moving train, while juggling, in a burning building, under the sea, during a wrestling match with a T-Rex, as a hologram, and riding a unicorn, Also be safe and we value you." We had to pivot more, and administrators too had to pivot every single day. It was a day to day basis. So this tweet I thought kind of summed it up. There were good things. Let's not forget about the mute button. I wish I could bring the mute button back into my normal classroom. It was tough to develop relationships. Again, elementary school teachers got to see their students faces on a regular basis. For me if I was lucky, I would have them put their cameras on at the end, so I knew they were okay. But I would see their ceilings. Please put your cameras on for me so I could see your faces, please. So it's tough. I didn't know half of my students faces until they actually came into school. They remember all times. This is still the best excuse ever for being late to class.

- [Teacher] Ivan why are you late?

- [Student] Repeat the question, repeat the question.

- [Nicholas] Ivan, so why are you late?

- There was a cat was stuck in my car.

- When a student had a cat stuck in his car. He brought the receipts, he brought the cat. so whether it was stuck in his car or not, he had the cat, to me that was enough. And then there was hybrid, which did not really exist until these past two years. I never heard of hybrid in the educational sense, until recently. Again this meme I thought summed it up very quickly. We were not prepared for it, we weren't resourced to do it. But we somehow made it work. And then as educators, we struggled with our mental and emotional health. We keep a smile, we keep going on, we keep quiet, so everyone thinks we're okay. When in all due honesty, we're dealing with our own trauma. We are then taking on the struggles and emotions of our students and their families. So the pandemic was so much more overwhelming for educators because, not only were we dealing with our own struggles, and surviving a pandemic, but we are then taking on a lot of the trauma that our students are dealing with. And we do it because we care. During this crisis and pandemic, I did go through an existential crisis, I reevaluated everything about my teaching career. Why I became a teacher, I thought about my teachers. So I thought about the teacher I am, and I also thought about the teachers I had and I felt all the teachers fit into a cookie cutter mold. And let's be honest, whenever we had a teacher, we always kind of associate them with certain things. I thought teaching would be like this when I became a teacher. I thought teaching would be dead poet society, I would have them hanging on my every word. They'd be engaged, they'd be all inspirational. And there are moments like this. A lot of times we have a lot of moments like this, but I quickly realized that there are probably not as many moments like this, but many more moments that are like this, or it's just

management, it's engaging. If you turn your head on your class for a second, especially elementary school, you lose track and you lose control of everything. So I realized as much as it's like that Poets Society, it's also like Kindergarten Cop. There is a balance even at the high school level. I then thought about how I see my teachers. And I'll be honest, I saw my teachers as superheroes. So many of your students see you as a superhero. They see you as this incredible person who could do so many things at one time. Some of your students may see you as a drill sergeant, I saw so many of my teachers as drill sergeants, because everything has to be structured a certain way. We then have the maternal teachers, I'm sure if we were live and I asked you to raise your hand if you've been called mom, I'm sure so many of you would be raising your hand, because your students call you different things. Mom is one of the consistent things. I'm sure some of the male teachers have been called mom, because you give them that maternal feeling. We have those psycho analytical teachers where they psycho analyze everything. We have the ATM teachers, where students come for you if they need money, or if they need snacks, they know you have it. They know they can go to you if they need something. We have the nerdy teachers, which is also fine. We have the judgment teachers who judge their students based on everything who may not know the whole story, something that I tried to distance myself from a lot as a teacher, I never judge, because we do not know the whole story. But I was judged a lot by my teachers. Then we have the old senile teachers who are a little crazy but crazy in the best ways. And then have the teachers, which I'm a part of now, the group that was cool at one point, still think they're cool, but are not cool anymore. And this is kind of where I am. I knew every one of us has a moment we realized we're no longer that cool teacher. For me, it was when my students no longer got my Saved by the Bell references. That was my punch in the gut, eye opening moment when I realized my students no longer think I'm cool or I'm just not cool because they're no longer getting my references. But looking back about all the educators we had in our lives, there's always certain things that stand out that make them memorable, is how they made us feel when we're in their classrooms, how we felt in their presence, how they treated us and how they talked to us. For me, it's always been my standard of a teacher. The teacher I try to be has always been Mrs. Martino my kindergarten teacher. Mrs. Martino, to me is the epitome of a teacher and I'm gonna come back to her later and tell you why. I then thought about during a pandemic. Why students go to school? We always think students go to school to learn, it is that simple. As educators we know that is the furthest thing from the truth. I always believe students who are loved at home, go to school to learn, students who aren't, go to school to be loved. And I was loved at home and I still needed that affirmation from my teachers. So it's interesting that we always think kids go to school to learn and that is it. So many people feel like if you're a good teacher, that you can get your students to focus on Bloom's Taxonomy and academics, if they're hungry or stressed or depressed or dealing with image. We know as educators that Bloom's Taxonomy is completely irrelevant, unless we first meet Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If students don't walk in feeling secure, feeling safe, feeling loved, having self esteem, education's, first of all, it's not relevant, but it's not gonna happen. It's impossible to get a student to care about learning if they think nobody cares about them. I did update Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the 21st century students. I will say this, I think cell phone, battery life

and laptop life and Wifi would be at the bottom. I think my students would put their cell phone battery life above their physiological needs. So I feel like this is kind of the modern day version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We all realized during the pandemic of how essential schools are. That we spend 1000 hours with our students. We nurture them in a multitude of ways. And I don't think people realize how much time we do spend with our students. My father was one of my heroes. He was an amazing father, but I probably only saw him two hours a day. I saw him in the morning, for breakfast, before he left for work. And then I saw him at night time when he came home for dinner, and then he would go to sleep and get up. He was a brick mason, he worked 12, 14, 16 hour days. So, I spent more time with my coaches and other teachers, than I did with my dad. Which doesn't mean he's a bad father, just that was the circumstance. We spend so much time with our students. Empathy is something I questioned a lot during the pandemic. I think we all showed our students so much grace, we empathized with them so much more. Because we knew they were going through such a tough time we went above and beyond as we always do for our students, but to levels I didn't think were even possible. I didn't think teachers could do more than we were doing already. And then the pandemic hit and I realized we could and we did. We shouldn't have to, but we did because we care. Empathy is the one thing that we always come back to, the ability to connect with students, the ability to develop those relationships. I've learned a lot during the pandemic about my own teaching mantra. One message I always share over and over with myself is never take things personally. We're all emotional beings. We're all a product of our circumstances. Never judge your students and never take things personally, because we don't know the entire story. We don't know what they're going through or what they're dealing with at home. There's so many times we see a certain behavior and then we learn about a student's background and it breaks your heart, because the fact that student even comes to school is somehow a miracle. So never take things personally, meaning, it's often not about us. It's not. If a student breaks down, if student behaves a certain way, I promise there's probably a reason for that behavior. And I promise you once you find out the reason, it would make you look at the student in completely empathetic and compassionate light, because it'll break your heart when you find out why they're behaving that way, and why they're asking for love in some of the most difficult ways possible. So many of our students, come to school for so much more than an education. And so many of you do so many things that I don't think you realize you do. That is why when I saw this TikTok, it just reinforced everything I know and love about being a teacher, but about educators in general. ♪ But you ain't really good ♪ ♪ We never learn we've been here before ♪ ♪ Why are we always stuck and running from ♪ ♪ The bullets ♪ ♪ The bullets ♪ There's so many little things that you do as educators on a daily basis that you don't realize have such a profound impact on your students lives. This video of this young lady, talking about going to class being all disheveled. Her teacher combing her hair everyday, not thinking anything of it. That is what mattered the most to her. And that is what you remembered the most. So I thought this video, it gives me the chills seeing it because it's so important and reflects so much on what we do as educators. This is the stuff that will not be in your evaluation, that most people will not even know you did, but will be the most memorable thing for these students later on in life. And I don't think people realize, so often that behind every successful person,

every celebrity, stands a teacher who believe in them. Words matter, words to our students matter more than you ever know. Most of you probably recognize Emily Hampshire, she plays Stevie on Schitt's Creek, very successful, incredible actress an incredibly human being. She will tell you to this day, she would have not gotten into acting if it wasn't for an educator in her life. Her vice principal, saw her in a play and said, "You're really good at that." And then used to give her articles about different theater and different shows. Basically nurtured her and inspired, just from her vice principal saying, "You were really good, I think you should do that." That's why she did. And so many people, I mean, so many celebrities were encouraged, so many successful individuals. So many of us became teachers because we were inspired by our teachers, and we know the impact they have. So I just thought this video just resonates so much and it's so simple.

- Quite literally. It was my high school vice principal, but she was a teacher first and then she was the high school vice principal, and she is the reason I became an actor 100%. I would get in trouble a lot, and she was like, I don't know, she talked to me, and she's like send me these at the time newspaper clippings I don't know if anyone knows what those are. But she cut out these newspaper clippings, for theater stuff. Well, it was, she was like you join something after school and I joined drama, and I did this play. It was in Grade seven. And then after, she came up to me and she was like, all she said was, "You were really good, you were really funny." And literally that was every... From that moment on I was like, I'm gonna be an actor, I'm gonna be the best actor.

- We often forget how much our words and our encouragement at time can impact our students. This is a former student Elizabeth Duffy, her fifth grade yearbook. She wanted to be an astronaut, she wanted to work for NASA. Fast forward. She is the first female engineer in the Mars Rover program, she was the head engineer in the development of the program that landed the Rover on Mars, the first female ever to do that, first female head engineer. She wanted to work for NASA and she is, because that's what her science teachers encouraged her to do. That's the support she received. You telling your students they could do something, would push them down that road and will absolutely give them a great opportunity to succeed. It's so funny in a traditional educational world, there's so many things that are considered misbehaviors that we try to control, harness, or even eliminate. That could be a child's greatest gift. For me one of the best examples is Anthony Mackie. Most of you know Anthony Mackey's, he is an Avenger. He's Captain America now. He's an Avenger. What most people don't know about Anthony Mackie is, it was his third grade teacher that got him into acting. When he was a kid, he was that disruptive kid who wouldn't sit down, who would act out. While other people want him to become medicated or try to control it, his third grade teacher was like, "Let's put him into the theater program. Let's control and harness and channel all that energy." He will tell you to this day, it was his third grade teacher who got him into acting and got him down this road. Something so minor, imagine that third grade teacher suggested that he was medicated or that we force him to sit down. Or they punish him, because he's not focusing and he's not adhering to the classroom norms. His life would have turned out differently. For me it's

Paulina. I noticed Paulina, he used to sketch a lot in class. She used to draw, she used to sketch. She wouldn't really talk, she wouldn't really pay attention and she'd be doodling during class. So I noticed this, so of course, one day after class I kept Paulina, I said you like to draw, don't you? And she nodded, yes. And I said, so here's what you're gonna do. You're missing a few assignments. So instead of doing the definitions, I want you to sketch them. You don't have to define them, I want you to sketch 'em, sketch 'em any way you want, pick five terms and draw them however you please. And that's what I want you to do. And this is the first example of what she turned in, it was incredible, blew me away. She probably spent more time doing that than she would have doing the key terms but that's what she wanted to do, and that's what she felt good doing. So, fast forward a few weeks, I see a competition on social media from a company called Sock Problems. Sock Problems is a company that was looking for an admission, to create a design to put on a sock that would help combat gun violence, especially in schools and with youth. So I saw it, I presented the opportunity to Paulina, and I basically said, I'll pay the admission fee, you're gonna work on this this week, we'll submit and let's see what happens. So, she did it, and this is the design that she actually submitted. It is incredible, it blew me away, a child reaching for a book or a gun on a set of blocks, that says enough? I would have never thought of that in a million years. So I submitted it, a few weeks go by we don't hear anything. I didn't think she got it. I just said to her, I said it was incredible, it's their loss, they should have picked the design. It's amazing! So, a few more weeks pass and I get an email. They picked her design. This is the sock that they designed into use a campaign to combat gun violence. She was a sophomore in high school, she had her own national sock. She said two words to me that entire year. Should be more than two. But the first two words she said to me were Thank you. All I did was give her an opportunity and push her down that road. I took something that could have been disruptive and made it a bad thing. Like why isn't she focused? I need you to do this, and I just took her talents, and put in a constructive manner. So that gave her that opportunity. And every one of you is in that position where you push students down a certain road or you encourage them down a certain road and it pays off. She's now currently excelling in art school, and I could not be prouder. So now back to Mrs. Martino. Whenever I do press, I always talk about Mrs. Martino. I always talk about the story on how I was having rough days because my grandmother was trying to force me to write right handed even though I was lefty. And I'd come to class, and she'd always read me these books about left-handed people, and always just nurture me and hug me. One day in particular, I always tell a story about how I was having such a rough day and she let me go over to the toy box, and she whispered. "Nicholas, don't say anything to anybody, but you can go to the toy box, and pick out your favorite toy and take it home." And obviously being in kindergarten, and your teacher saying, "You could keep your favorite toy." Was the greatest thing ever happened. So I just told the story about how this one teacher, Miss Martino, my kindergarten teacher, let me go over to the toy box. Keep a human action figure. I took it home, I put it in my book bag. It made my world. It was such a minor event, but at the same time it had such a profound impact at that moment. So, I always tell this story whenever I'm on the news, and whenever I do press about Mrs. Martino. And I always send it to her. We were friends on Facebook but I haven't seen her since I was her student, since I graduated. So, I would always tell this story and I

would always send her the article through the links or the video of my segment and she'd always respond back, "I'm so proud of you, it's so amazing, I love you so much, I'm so happy for you give my best to your mom." So I did that today. Sharon and I talked about her as well. And so I finally sent it to her, and she saw it and replied back the same thing, "I love you. I'm so happy you think of me and talk about me in such great ways." But then she replied back, "But I have to talk to you." Never in the history of anything has anybody had to talk to anybody that didn't turn out to be a bad conversation, or a conversation that that person didn't wanna have. So, I saw this is, and obviously caught me off guard, and I said, what do we have to talk about? And she then replied, "I have to be honest with you." Another thing, I don't ever wanna hear, because, I don't think anyone has ever said, "I have to be honest with you." And it ended with something good. I don't think a woman has ever sat down, a man, her spouse, her partner, and said, "We need to talk." And it be about how great you are as a partner. So my heart's beating 100 miles an hour, my stomach is clenched up, because this woman, I am who I am, because of the confidence that she helped instill in my youth. Is she gonna crush all that confidence with one comment? Is she gonna tell me that she's not proud of me that I shocked her? That she thought I was gonna be a failure, that I was this horrible kid, and she's shocked that I turned out to a decent human being? Is she gonna say that I wasn't that good of a kid and I just shocked her, and everything I'm doing now? That I shouldn't be an educator, or that I proved her wrong? So all these thoughts are going through my head, my entire confidence is about to be crashed by what this woman tells me. So, she's typing on Facebook, and I see her typing. You can see typing someone typing on Facebook. My heart's beating, I'm about to be traumatized by what she says to me. So, I see her typing and typing and typing it seems like she's typing for hours, though it's seconds. Her message finally comes through. So, I read her message. It says, "Nicholas I'm so proud of you, I love you so much. It's so inspiring, I knew you're gonna do such amazing things. But I have to tell you, I wasn't your kindergarten teacher, I was your pre school teacher. And it wasn't a human action figure, it was a Fonzie doll. So yes. It was a Fonzie doll, they did exist. So, the first thing I did, was text my mom, and I said, "Mom." I'm like what grade did I have Mrs. Martino? She was like, "Pre-K, why?" I said, oh so, what toy did she let me bring home? She was like, "What? That weird little Fonzie figure? And she was right. For some reason in my mind, I thought it was kindergarten, and obviously I repressed the fact that it was a Fonzie doll, and made myself believe it was a human action figure. But after 30 years, there's a point to this story, I promise. After 30 years, she's had thousands of students, she remembered the moment, the figure and the grade. When everything else has happened. So after 30 years, this woman remembered everything. Which is why I thought the only logical response to all that, would be to surprise her. So, after 30 years, I finally got to surprise her in person. She opened the door, she started crying, I started crying, we hugged. It was such a great moment. Which also reminds me that elementary school teachers are the most patient people on the planet, because you have to literally wait like 20 or 30 years to find out if you did a really good job or not, so I hope your students don't wait that long, before they come back and thank you. So, now back to a post-it-note, how a post-it-note changed my teaching career. We all have students who give us a tough time, and I remember I told you never to take things personally because we always have students who go out of their

way to we think make our lives tough, our classes will run better if they are not there, at the same time when they're not there, we worry about them, so it's such a bizarre situation. We always have students who we think about. I've had students over the years who I would think about all day, whether they were gonna be in class, if they are gonna be in class, what type of mood or energy are they gonna be in? One year I had this one student named Tai. Tai was very emotionally troubled, traumatized young lady, I had her the last period of day, so everyday I would be thinking about how she was gonna be that period, it would affect my whole teaching day. Everyday she came in late, she was very loud, very aggressive. Shouting. Aggressively going after they boys verbally, taunting people. She would just never sit still. She was very outspoken. Some days were not so bad, some days were really bad. She'd fight people, and everyday she would just kind of, just try to control class. And everyday after class, I would keep her after, and I would just say to her, are you okay? What's going on? What can I do for you? This doesn't seem right, I feel like you're struggling, how can I help? And every day she would say the same thing. "Leave me alone, nobody cares. I don't care, I hate this school, I hate this place." And she would just walk out. So, everyday I would keep her after class, same thing. I'm worried, this breaks my heart, what can I do? How can I help you? Can I help you with work? What can we do? Do we need to talk to somebody? And every day. "Stop caring, nobody cares, leave me alone. Whatever, just leave me alone." Every day we would go through the same struggle, and I would always tell her, I'm always gonna care. When I stop keeping you after class, that's how you know I'm done caring. So we went through that every single day. Last day of school comes, she's a senior. Seniors don't come to school the last day, so I'm expecting a walk in class, and it would be an empty classroom. Of course, I walk in, and there was one student here, Tai. She's sitting in the middle grouper desk, she had a big smile on her face, which threw me off a little bit, she was early. So, I walk in, and I'm looking around, and she's like, "I had to come get my transcripts, do you mind if I just hang out and stay for class?" I'm like, well of course, you're supposed to be here, but absolutely. So the whole energy and demeanor were different with Tai. We had a conversation, she asked me what I was doing in the summer, like why I became a teacher. She told me about stuff we did in class which she loved, which I had no idea she was even paying attention to or participating in. She talked to me about what she wanted to do, which it was such a great conversation. So, the bell rings to end the period. And I remember saying to her, and I said, I said, this is the person who I knew was there the whole time, who I wish I would have seen every single day. And I just want you to know that no matter what, as tough as things were, I'm so happy you were in my class, and if you ever need anything, I'm always here for you. And she stood up, she's like, I'm choking up a little bit saying it, but she said, "Can I give you a hug?" And I said, absolutely. So, as she's walking out, she just yells back, "Mr Ferroni, I left you something in your desk." So, of course I walk over my desk, and my first thought is, did she just punk me? Did she prank me or do something or leave something inappropriate on my desk or just mess with me? And that would have made it all obviously, she got me, kind of thing. So, I opened up my desk drawer, and this is what I found in it. It's a post-it-note. It says, "You're the best, don't ever forget that, I'm so thankful for your caring, you always look out for people, you're loving." And right then and there, it choked me up because, a 170 something days, of her battling with me every single

day, this one post-it-note made it all worthwhile, and made me realize that she needed that, and she did appreciate it. And she did need me to show that affirmation every single day. So, of course I framed it, and I'm hoping every one of you has everything framed that your students give you, because these are the things that remind us, and kind of get us through the tough days. Sort of recap. Never forget why you became a teacher. Always remember that students come to school to learn and to be loved. Always overestimate your student's potential, know that so many of your students cannot wait to get to school because of how you make them feel when they are in your classroom. They literally cannot wait to see you and spend time with you. But more importantly, never, ever judge a child, by the haircut his mom gives him, or by the toy that he plays with in his classroom. And just know, that of all the things, you do for your students. All the lessons, all the activities, all the content, all the curriculum, the most amazing lessons that you do for your students, the things that they're gonna remember most, are the most random things. That is why I thought this video summed it up perfectly. They will be telling their children about this moment forever. And of all the things, this teacher did for them, this is what they're gonna remember.

- [Woman] The moment Miss Fits became a legend

- Thank you so much for your time, thank you so much for everything you do. You have my IG and my Twitter handle, @NicholasFerroni you also have my email. If I could ever help you, if I could ever celebrate you, if you ever need to vent, I am here for all of you.