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When I began thinking about what to say on behalf of our class that would be meaningful and give you a sense of what we experienced over the past year, I realized that I found the EPFP experience to be very much like the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. I know you're thinking how will this be meaningful and how could he possibly compare the educational system of the most advanced nation on earth to a movie of a girl and her dog in a fictitious place called OZ. So let me see if I can quickly bring clarification of this analogy to you.

Like Dorothy, we each showed up at opening EPFP retreat in an unfamiliar location, with people we did not know, and each not quite knowing what to expect. And like Dorothy, several of us just wanted to figure out how to get back home.

We then met several people, but they each kept referring to this lady who was going to lead us through the program, the person who would be in charge of this experience. The Great Wizard of Oz - Dana Rickman. And like in the movie, the all powerful Oz asked, "What is it you want from me?" And each of us in the class stated why we had decided to apply to be a part of the 2016 Fellows cohort.

Some of us, just wanted to be like Dorothy and go home. Like the Scarecrow, some of us wanted a brain. We wanted to understand how the educational policy process worked and how we could better advocate for and impact the lives of the children in our communities. Like the Tin Man, some of us wanted a heart. We wanted to be better connected to our communities and better stewards of resources and abilities. Like the Lion, some of us needed courage. The courage to venture into an unknown space, the courage to face the fact that each

day we are failing our children, our communities, our state and our nation. The courage to stand up and be counted as an advocate for each of these.

And after explaining what we wanted, The Great Oz sent us on a journey. A journey where we heard the history of education in our state. Where we realized what one might consider to be either unimportant or too controversial could affect the perspective and outcomes of all those there to learn. And so it is with policy and with the teachers in the classroom. What each determines to skip or determines to elevate in focus is critical to our students' achievement. Whether its curriculum or facilities, urban or rural, academics or sports, these decisions matter.

We traveled the yellow brick road of our educational system and like in the movie along the way we went to some scary places. The land of the Wicked Witches of the East and West. Where we saw schools with astounding poverty rates and abysmal achievement scores. We heard from policy makers who compared our children to cargo on giant ships and that cared more about their reelection than outcomes for children. We met policymakers who did not believe that every child had the right to a high-performing school or access to a quality education.

We saw dysfunction in various places in our system. It was surprising to us all to find how little of a role our teachers actually play in the policy making process, yet they are the ones closest to the actual implementation. We even went to a place where answering questions of the wicked witch was discouraged because of the tales of what she had done to previous EPFP Fellows. And yes, it was as bad as the tales portrayed.

But like the movie, it wasn't all doom and gloom, we also traveled to the land of the Good Witches of the North and South. We met

education policy making experts who weren't afraid to stand for what was right. We met civil rights giants who worked tirelessly to ensure that the civil rights of individuals were not only made into law but we're actually implemented throughout cities across the country.

We met statisticians, economists, researchers and analysts who not only identified the areas that require the most change, but professors and those in academia who gave insights on how to make a change. We met people and organizations that have been in the fight for high-performing schools - schools with nurturing environments, caring qualified teachers, wraparound services, strong academic curricula and the appropriate technologies and materials for our students to thrive.

We walked what many would say are the halls of justice. Also known as the halls of our legislatures, both at a state level as well as on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Unfortunately, some of these halls were uncomfortably quiet, while in others there was a great ruckus.

And after visiting the Wicked Witches of the East and West and the Good Witches of the North and South, we returned to The Wizard of Oz. And also like in the movie, the curtain was opened and we found that The Great and All Powerful Wizard of Oz, was just a person. As smart, knowledgeable, passionate and committed to educational achievement as she is, she was just a person. But she then spoke to each...

To the Scarecrows who wanted brains, she helped them realize that they understood more about the education system than they thought. They were in fact able to determine where the system was broken and provide ideas on making it better. They were disappointed but not shocked that a map of access to high performing schools and opportunities in nearly every case was in direct alignment with high income neighborhoods. They actually did know why school board members went through the election process. And they did in fact

contribute to making the journey through Oz successful!

To the Tin Men who wanted hearts, she helped them find that their heart was already there; and that their hearts were much more connected than they thought. Some hearts were happier after the journey because they saw hope for our educational system; they saw innovative ideas being relentlessly pursued; they found places where people and communities ensured that academic achievement was high.

Yet there were others who were infuriated because of what they found. They felt for the communities, particularly low income and/or minority communities, where children are not getting access to the educational opportunities they deserve. They empathized with students and families stuck in the red tape of politics. They were outraged to see community revitalization efforts that make the community better by merely displacing those who don't fit "the vision" of the new community. Either way, our Tin Men found that they had hearts and they felt the plight and impact from the lessons of the journey through Oz.

And finally, for the Lions who were looking for courage, she reminded them that throughout the journey they demonstrated the courage to stand up and ask the hard questions. They asked the questions that no one else wanted to ask. They stated those things that no one else was willing to state and challenged the ideology of a system that for far too many and for far too long has either neglected or has chosen not to adequately serve some of the most vulnerable, yet highest potential, constituencies of our community.

So like Dorothy we now have the opportunity to go home. We have the opportunity to return to our communities with this new understanding, revised perspective and renewed dedication to making a difference. We have before us the challenge of not just learning about policy and

practice but actually becoming an advocate for change. We certainly did not all agree on the best way to make changes for our students; however, we all did agree that immediate changes were needed.

I will remind you of the diversity adage that states, “You don't have to be one of, to stand with.”

So, we challenge you and we challenge each other - as individuals, as community members, as business owners and business leaders – to affect change for the students and the families within our communities; to stand with those who don't have a voice; and to stand for those who don't have the podium or the mic.

It is up to us to ensure that they have the ability to choose success! On May 24, we have the opportunity to take another step toward better education by exercising our right to vote. Voting directly affects the decisions that will be made regarding the future of our children and communities!

We thank each of you for the opportunity to participate in such a meaningful program, and we thank our Great Wizard of Oz, Dana Rickman, for her leadership and commitment! The EPFP program was a phenomenal program and we're honored to have the opportunity to participate.