Thank you, Dr. Fine, President Garanzini, Dean Prasse, faculty, parents, and guests.

Congratulations to the graduates.

Good luck as you embark on new responsibilities in one of the most important enterprises with which our society can entrust you – the preparation of the next generation.

Yet you leave here in a national climate of mistrust for all government, including public education. You are entering a highly politicized field where facts are too easily ignored.

In medicine, and in all fields, we know you can’t design proper treatment if your diagnosis is factually flawed.

Yet in education, conventional and widely shared diagnoses are based on fantasy, with little relation to facts.

Understanding these fantasies requires you not only to be good educators, but sophisticated citizens, capable of questioning data and penetrating the relationships between schools and the society that they reflect.

Politicians of both parties, leading educators, and philanthropists like Bill Gates who increasingly influence education policy, repeat incessantly that our schools are failing, especially for disadvantaged children. Past efforts at improvement, and vast increases in spending, have accomplished little or nothing, they say. Achievement gaps between disadvantaged and middle class students have narrowed little, so as the proportion of white children declines, this failure of our schools weakens our nation, rendering it unable to compete internationally.

In truth, this conventional view relies upon imaginary facts.

You may be surprised to learn that African-American elementary school student achievement, in Illinois and nationwide, has been improving so spectacularly that in math, the average black student now performs better than about 90% of all black students performed less than a generation ago.

What’s more, black elementary school math performance is now better than white performance was in the previous generation.
Let me repeat: black elementary school students today have better math skills than white students did only twenty years ago.

These data come from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal sample that is the only reliable source on student achievement over time in this country. The gains have been almost as great for middle-schoolers in math, and for elementary school students in reading.

Most gains were posted in the 1990s, before the test-obsessed accountability system called “No Child Left Behind,” a law whose flawed premise was that it was necessary to force educators to pay attention to minority students.

For Hispanic students, there are no data that can distinguish between very recent immigrants and children who have attended American schools throughout childhood. But my guess is that if we had data, we would conclude that Hispanic gains have been equally dramatic.

Policymakers, pundits, and politicians ignore these gains; they conclude that you, educators, have been incompetent because the test score gap hasn’t much narrowed.

But the reason it hasn’t narrowed is that your profession has done too good a job – you’ve improved white children’s performance as well, so the score gap persists, but at a higher level for all.

Policymakers, with a preconception that schools must be failing because the public sector and its employees must be corrupt, are not interested in these facts. As a result, we’ve wasted 15 years avoiding incremental improvement, and instead trying to upend a reasonably successful school system.

Of course, not all teachers are competent; some have unacceptably low expectations, some should improve, and others shouldn’t be in the classroom at all. But the data show this is not the most serious problem we face.

Instead of searching for systemic failure where it does not exist, we should have been trying to figure out what we have been doing right, so we can do more of it. That will be one of your challenges, and you will have to do it with little support from elite opinion.

The biggest challenge now facing public education is our fiscal crisis. But it is hard to imagine how you, as educators, can urge the public to provide more money to schools if you fail to challenge, as vociferously as you can, the false charge that schools are failing. Why should the public increase support for a failing institution? If you believe public education deserves greater support, as I do, you will have to boast about your accomplishments, because voters are more likely to aid a successful institution than a collapsing one.

Because education has become so politicized, with policy made by those with preconceptions of failure and little understanding of the educational process, you are entering a field that has become obsessed with evaluating only results that are easy to measure, rather than those that are most important. But as
Albert Einstein once said, not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts.

Of course, teaching basic reading and math skills is important, but when policy holds you accountable only for student scores in these skills, it ignores what generations of Americans have known are less-easy-to-measure, but equally important educational goals—citizenship, character, appreciation of the arts and music, physical fitness and health, and knowledge of history, the sciences, and literature.

It should not have to be your responsibility to remind the public about the goals of education, but in this environment, it is another task you will have to take on.

I said earlier that you will also have to become sophisticated about relationships between schools and society, because here, too, you will have little help from leaders who should know better.

As you are aware, our national unemployment rate remains over 8 percent. In Illinois, it is higher, about 10 percent.

For blacks, about 19 percent.

For Hispanics, about 13 percent.

If we include those unemployed so long that they’ve given up looking for work, and those part-timers who are still looking for full-time work, the unemployment rate for each of these groups is half again higher.

These are the parents of children you’re expected to teach.

Policymakers, pundits, and politicians say this shouldn’t matter. Don’t concern yourself with such problems. Stick to your knitting: If you have high expectations, your students can succeed regardless of parents’ economic circumstances.

That is nonsense.

You know better than anyone how our economic crisis affects children.

Families suffering unemployment experience great stress. Parents tend to be less patient with children; discipline becomes more arbitrary. Children come to school reflecting stress from home, pay less attention, act out more.

Families suffering unemployment may lose health insurance; children are less likely to get routine and preventive care that middle class children take for granted. Even in good times, low-income children have 30% more school absence from untreated asthma, toothaches, earaches, and other minor illness, than middle class children.

No matter how high your expectations, how accountable you are for results, if children are absent from your classrooms because of illness, they can’t benefit from whatever schools have to offer. If they can’t
see because they don’t get glasses to correct vision difficulties, high expectations can’t teach them to read.

When parents suffer from underemployment or wage stagnation, families may fall behind in rent, have homes foreclosed; they may have to move frequently, doubling-up with relatives. Mobile children will pass through your classrooms, their individual strengths and weaknesses obscure to you because you haven’t had the chance to know them and to apply the sophisticated pedagogies you learned here. Even stable students will suffer, because you must repeat lessons for newcomers. Your classrooms will have to be reconstituted, as the mobility of homeless or transient students makes your student load too big or too small.

Again, no matter how high your expectations, how accountable you are for results, if children are moving in and out of your classrooms, they cannot benefit from what schools have to offer.

In short, underemployment of parents is not only an economic crisis – it is an educational crisis. You cannot ignore it and be good educators.

To be good educators, you must step up your activity not only in the classroom, but as citizens. You must speak up in the public arena, challenging those policymakers who will accuse you only of making excuses when you speak the truth that children who are hungry, mobile, and stressed, cannot learn as easily as those who are comfortable.

As educators, you must insist that children need good health care, high quality early childhood preparation, and high quality after school and summer programs if they are to come to you ready to learn.

As educators, you simply cannot remain uninformed and silent about the social and economic context of your work.

Nobody knows better than you what the consequences of economic hardship are for children’s ability and opportunity to learn.

Parents will count on you to do everything in your power to increase their children’s chances of success, not only by better classroom practice but by insisting, as citizens, on the broader attacks on inequality that are necessary to make classroom success possible.

We, too, are counting on you to fulfill these parents’ expectations.

Thank you, and good luck.