



Colonial Early Education Program special education teacher Rebecca Louise Vitelli reflected on what she learned serving as Delaware's 2020 State Teacher of the Year during her final speech as Delaware Teacher of the Year.

Editor's note: The following is the script of the speech delivered by 2020 Delaware Teacher of the Year Rebecca Louise Vitelli at the 2021 Teacher of the Year virtual awards ceremony.

Good evening and thank you so much for having me be a part of your celebrations tonight! Though we aren't able to be together in the traditional way, tonight is still ALL about each and every one of our honorees for the 2021 Delaware Teacher of the Year – we could not be more proud and excited for you!

It's an absolute privilege to address you a year after the life-altering moment when I was announced the 2020 Delaware Teacher of the Year. I'm Rebecca Vitelli, an inclusive preschool teacher at the Colonial Early Education Program in the Colonial School District. As I said when I was selected, one thing we really focus on in early education is modeling big feelings and how to handle them.... so, again, I'll do my best tonight as I

deliver this speech, because reflecting on my experiences fills me with a lot of BIG EMOTIONS (ha-ha).

There was nothing “typical” about 2020. Just as I felt my duties and honors picking up steam, it seemed to come to a grinding halt as COVID abruptly altered many plans envisioned for the year. But it was still a tremendously impactful year.... a year of MANY firsts.... numerous lessons learned, and of imperative service. Being Delaware’s Teacher of the Year has been a constant source of pride for my family, in particular both my parents who are educators themselves. It shined the light on my school, students, and families. And it also gave me a greater responsibility to uplift our children and represent educators across our state. It’s been a year that’s changed the way I will lead and teach for the rest of my career, and, I believe, a year that’s revolutionized our profession, our schools, and our communities.

My message celebrates our youngest learners and advocates for those who cannot yet advocate for themselves. And with our youngest learners, we emphasize the importance of greetings and goodbyes. Research shows us that children specifically remember these.... but the same is true with adults. So as my year comes to a close, I present my “3, 2, 1 exit ticket.”

I begin with 3 highlights from my year among the many unforgettable moments.

First, there was the SURREAL experience of traveling to California to represent Delaware at the National Teacher of the Year Induction Conference. There, on Google

campuses, I met with educators from across the country who have similar visions and unwavering passion and commitment to teaching students. I felt empowered when I returned to DE. Second, a week later, and right before the pandemic shut down, I attended the National Association for the Education of Young Children Public Policy forum in Washington, DC, where I toured the Congress Child Care center and went to Capitol Hill to speak with state legislators from the House and Senate about the importance and current standing of early childhood education in Delaware. This opened the door for future conversations with legislature staff regarding child care and preschool concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. And third, I was invited to meet with former Vice President Biden at my school in New Castle – where he presented his platform for mobilizing a 21st century care and early childhood education workforce. Hearing his passionate words of support for the profession in the space where I actually do work was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Now, with all that has happened in 2020, here's 2 lessons I learned.

Foremost, teachers are EXTRAORDINARY people because the work we are doing right now COULD NOT be done by the ordinary. Educators across our state and nation have gone above and beyond, working longer hours, continuing to rise to the challenge and show up, in whatever type of setting, with a smile on their face. I've never been more proud to be a teacher and to represent such AMAZINGLY creative and resilient

individuals, transforming the world of education into something more meaningful than ever before.

Second, it's evident that strong connections must be at the forefront of what we do. 2020 has truly shown that high-quality education involves the entire community. It takes our collaboration and many different resources, supports, and individuals to ensure that children thrive. During these uncertain times, let us continue to teach and lead with empathy and unity. And perhaps most importantly, give ourselves the same love and consideration we are giving to others. Take some deep breaths as we model what it means to be human: to *not* have all the answers, to struggle, to make mistakes, and to persevere.

So, here comes my 1 piece of advice.

Advocate for the change you want to see. Educator voice has NEVER been more essential. And we have SO MUCH WORK to do. Not only regarding education and emotional-well-being during a pandemic. But also speaking out for equity and the elimination of systemic racial injustice. Take ownership of the profession. You are a leader, a champion for a better future. Share your knowledge, expertise, and ideas. Empower your students, families, and colleagues. They need you. Our profession needs you. The world NEEDS teachers.

To ALL the 2021 Delaware District Teachers of the Year - what an incredibly dynamic and talented group of people you are!!!! Thank YOU for your service, your passion, and

for continuing to inspire me, your students and families, and all individuals around you. You each make the world a better place. NEVER underestimate your impact.

And, to the 2021 Delaware Teacher of the Year, my heart is BURSTING for you. I cannot wait to follow your adventures. Your upcoming year will be challenging, transformative, exhausting, and rewarding. Embrace EVERY moment and document it. Follow your heart and your passion. I know without a doubt, you will, to quote Hamilton - “blow us all away” and make us so very proud.

I’m so thankful for my INCREDIBLE journey. Voya Financial, CCSSO, Secretary Bunting, Governor Carney, Alison and the entire Delaware Department of Education – thank you for the many opportunities you have given me and for all your support. To my family, fellow teachers, colleagues, and friends, I cannot thank you enough for everything as well - your love and support made it all possible. This year was messy, and there was disruption, but it was tremendously meaningful and I wouldn’t change my experience for the world. I am honored to be the 2020 Delaware Teacher of the Year, and I can promise you that this is just me getting started....

My final words.... are going to be a wish for all. In preschool, I teach my students to wish well.... because whether together or apart, know we are always in each other’s hearts. And I think the world could use a whole lot of wishing well right now....SO, TO ALL watching this VERY SPECIAL event tonight.... from my heart to yours (take a deep breath), I wish you well and may we never forget that our worth depends on seeing the worth in others. THANK YOU. :)