

Failure Is Not An Option

Grace King High School

Louisiana

By Patrick Roberts

“You had me at hello.”

Perhaps the most iconic line from the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*, “You had me at hello,” is instantly recognizable to moviegoers (and romantics) the world over. A short time ago, I was given the opportunity to reflect on *Jerry Maguire* because of a conference I attended on education. More specifically, the conference focused on the plight of high school freshmen across the country.

“Plight,” you say? What plight? Ethiopians have plight. Freshmen have pimples!

While it is true that Ethiopia has had its share of plight and freshman have had their share of pimples, it is also true, according to research published on The George Washington University’s Freshman Transition Initiative website:

For every 100 U.S. students who start high school, only 67 earn a diploma within four years. Of those, only 38 enter college, 26 are still enrolled after sophomore year, and just 18 graduate on time with either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree.

To put it another way, roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of students who enter high school will not complete a secondary degree. Their plight then will be one of dramatically less earning power in today’s hyper-paced, hyper-connected, hyper-qualified world where menial labor jobs disappear faster than hot dogs at an eating contest.

Jerry Maguire? Hot dogs? What does all of this have to do with freshmen?

If you recall *Jerry Maguire* at all well, you remember that the story begins because Jerry has an epiphany of sorts. In fact, Jerry tells us he had “a breakthrough.” “Breakdown?” he reflects and then states with certainty, “Breakthrough.”

Remember that scene? Good, because it brings us to the star of our story – Pamela Pritchard, assistant principal in charge of curriculum and special programs at Grace King High School in Metairie, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans. Pamela also had an epiphany one night, and she shared that with educators at the conference.

First, however, a little more back-story on freshman plight before we get on to Pamela and Jerry. As it turns out, around 9th grade is when most kids make up their minds about whether they want to finish high school or not. In fact, recent research has shown as many as 62% of high school freshmen nationwide make the decision to drop out by November of their freshman year.

That being the case, in recent years a number of curricula have been developed to help ensure that freshmen don’t make exactly this type of uninformed decision. One said curriculum—which has actually been around since 1990—is called *Career Choices* by Academic Innovations, host of the Focus on Freshmen conference at which I was sitting listening to Pamela.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that Academic Innovations had retained the services of my freelance pen for the duration of the conference, but like most conference attendees, I was hardly expecting to be entertained by anything close to a Jerry Maguire-esque moment.

However, let’s get back to Pamela. I had the pleasure of hearing Pamela speak about her efforts to keep freshmen in school at Grace King.

Strangely, Pamela pointed out that Grace King was the best school in her district *before* she came to work there. She said Grace King served a middle to higher socio-economic demographic and that they sent 74% of their freshmen on to 10th grade every year.

Where’s the plight in that?

Not so fast! If you remember, things were going pretty well for Jerry Maguire as a “superagent” before he had his epiphany as well. Yet in the movie Jerry tells us, “It was the oddest, most unexpected thing. I began writing what they call a mission statement for my company. You know – a Mission Statement – a suggestion for the future.”

You see, Pamela would go on to tell me and the rest of those in attendance her own mission statement if you will. She said, “I woke up in the middle of the night one night before school started, and this thing just popped into my brain. Something – a mantra that we needed to have for the freshmen and for everybody at Grace King – *Failure is Not an Option.*”

It wasn’t, “You had me at hello,” but it sure had people in that room. If you haven’t met her, let me be clear in saying that Pamela is not one to mince words. She went on to clarify for anyone who might have been confused that, “You do not have the option to fail. You may not fail!”

Simple. Elegant. Fantastic. Everything a mission statement is supposed to be. Pamela talked more about what she would build her new philosophy on. “You have to pass on your own merits. We are not going to give you grades, but failure is not an option.” And, just like Jerry Maguire, she said, “...and that kept me up the rest of the night so I started writing it down and sent e-mails to all the teachers who were going to teach 9th grade.”

If you are reading this and you are not an educator, this may not be hitting you as squarely as it is for others of you but, let me tell you, I was sitting there when she said these crazy things about not allowing students to fail and it hit me pretty squarely. Think about it—a zero-tolerance policy on failure! If every school had that how much better equipped would our kids be to succeed in today’s world?

Of course Grace King faced challenges like every school does – namely obtaining funding to implement the *Career Choices* curriculum in their school. They had been ravaged by Katrina, and were still rebuilding from that. As awful as that situation may be, it provided a unique opportunity for Grace King to qualify for a grant from the State Department. This grant allowed Pamela to implement the *Career Choices* curriculum in a new freshmen course called appropriately, *Failure is Not an Option*.

But getting back to Jerry Maguire for a moment. In the movie the “original sports agent,” Dicky Fox, says, “The key to this job is personal relationships.” Pamela reminded us that it’s the same in education. She said, “I’m a firm believer in professional development.” Once again if you don’t know Pam let me tell you that “firm” is the operative word in that sentence.

Pamela determined that she had to match up the right kids with the right teachers. She realized, just as Dicky Fox said, that the key to her and every teacher’s job was definitely personal relationships. She decided that “every teacher that in the first year that touched 9th graders had to teach *Career Choices* because we wanted to see how it worked. Unbelievably, whether the teacher was really dedicated or not so much, the kids still bloomed. It was just amazing.”

Define bloom? How’s this: “At the end of the first year,” Pamela said, “96% of our students went from 9th grade to 10th grade.”

Pam, “You had me at hello.”