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**'Critical Questions' Series**  
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**Could a Single Word or Phrase Provide Encouragement  
Right When it is Needed Most?**

"Never, Never, Never Give Up..." I have purchased this sign for many people over the past several years. I have also seen this sign in a few classrooms around our school district. As a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent (and father) I have known of the importance of helping others see their potential and even beyond. I get my energy and enthusiasm from supporting others. I am not used to being the recipient of this support. A couple weeks ago, however, I received it.

Running a marathon is a humbling experience. It's 26.2 miles and several hours....so much time to think. There are moments in everyone's marathon experience that you wonder whether your legs can take another step. For me, it was between miles 18-21.

The Friday before the marathon, I received several cards of encouragement from family and friends. I was now the recipient of support and honestly wasn't quite prepared. I read through the cards right before falling asleep knowing that in a few short hours, I would be running and running and running. Below are a few excerpts:

I know you are very nervous for tomorrow, but what is the reason behind your nervousness? You are prepared and you can run 26 miles in your sleep. Just go out there and run like you know how to. In football, we are told to play with authority because we know what to do and we know what will happen. So tomorrow, you must run with authority for the same reason.

May your heart be blessed in quietness and confidence. May your heart also be strong enough to get you through this marathon run!

Allow yourself to be lifted up.

With every step of your marathon, you will encourage all those around you in everything big and small.

Run, Mike, Run.

When it became overwhelmingly difficult..., when my quads hurt worse than I could ever remember..., when I saw my wife, Britt, taking pictures with our car just a few steps away (I could just sneak into the passenger spot!)..., when I thought, "There is no way I can do eight more miles....."

....it was then that quotes from the cards entered my mind....Run with authority...be lifted....run, Mike run. For three miles, I pushed these quotes to the front of my mind. For three miles, I struggled to put one foot in front of the other. I kept myself focused on reading the cards in my mind....Run with authority...be lifted....run, Mike run.

Although, it is hard to describe, I don't remember much of miles 21 -26. They just happened. I do remember the last .2, though. It was wonderful to see Britt. I couldn't help but smile. I could really see the finish line, not just imagine it like I had for the previous 26 miles.

I often write cards and letters to family/friends, staff and students after an event has occurred letting them know how impressed I was or how terrific I thought they did, etc. I would say about 80-90% of the time I write these after-event notes and only 10-20% before an event. I wonder if I might need to reverse this habit a bit.

If the friends and family who wrote me cards would have waited until after the marathon to write me a note, I wonder what I would have used during miles 18-21. What does this mean for the students we work with? Are you like me and write notes and talk to students after an accomplishment? Could our words and actions help them more if we were to offer them before an AP test, state assessment, presentation, or activity/sporting event? Could a single word or phrase help them right at the time they need it the most? I wonder how we might support our students and colleagues with authority before an important moment in their lives.

Mike Nelson  
Superintendent  
Enumclaw School District  
[michael.nelson@enumclaw.wednet.edu](mailto:michael.nelson@enumclaw.wednet.edu)