Good Afternoon,

Before we begin, I want to express my gratitude. Thank you to the collective LWSD PTSAs for bringing together parents, teachers, students, and staff this morning. Thank you to Ms. Adanna from the Equity and Family Engagement department for championing equity at both the school and district levels. And a heartfelt thank you to my mom—without her, I wouldn't be who I am today.

I'd like to start with a quote from Alan Turing, renowned mathematician and computer scientist, who once said: "We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done."

While Turing spoke of testing a machine's ability to perfectly imitate a human, his words extend beyond that—reminding us that progress isn't about perfection but about constant improvement.

An enduring seed planted as I grew up was the understanding that "practice makes perfect."

But over time, I learned that perfection is an illusion, an unreachable standard that can trap us in self-doubt and fear of failure. So instead, I have come to embrace a different perspective: Practice makes progress.

Progress allows for growth. It allows for mistakes. It allows for learning. And learning, I've found, often starts in discomfort.

Outraged by the allegation, I crossed out the inconceivable: Autism.

The diagnosis glared at me. I knew what it meant; I'd seen kids with autism at my mom's clinic, and I didn't look like them. I was alarmed that I—an energetic ten-year-old—could be dissected on a page and challenged in the same way. This knowledge contradicted how I saw myself. I felt lost, invalidated, reduced to a single description. To repudiate this discovery, I sought to be reassessed, only to find I also have generalized anxiety disorder.

Slowly, I uncovered the autism in me. I didn't want it, but I couldn't escape it. As time went on, I found that acceptance is more productive than denial. Autism, like any other feature of my identity, can coexist with strength and potential. It looks different for everyone. However "mild" I may appear to others, I don't experience it mildly. I've always wanted to look and feel normal. It turns out I'm not—and in more ways than one.

And that's the thing about imperfection—sometimes, it's not about embracing flaws but about realizing that what we once saw as a flaw isn't one at all.

But for a long time, I still tried to chase an idea of normalcy that didn't include all of me.

Being gay blindsided me, becoming another aspect of myself I sought to renounce. I was conflicted as I tried to comply with my father's pressure to ask a girl to a dance. The more I learned about myself, the less "normal" I felt.

Standing at the top of my high school cafeteria that day, I scrambled to pull the Pride flag off the wall in full view of everyone: gay, straight, loving, hating. I hated myself more than anyone else. I flushed it down the toilet, along with my identity that day.

I thought that if I rejected the parts of me that didn't fit, I could be perfect. But the truth is, rejecting ourselves doesn't make us more whole—it makes us smaller.

I began uncovering my true self.

A year later, at the start of my junior year, I stood in front of the Pride Club. Trembling, I "came out" to the group, acknowledging that I had hurt more than myself that day. I had practiced my delivery with my stuffed animals the night before, wanting to express myself sensitively and authentically.

Stereotypes almost stopped me.

Even if I could embrace all these aspects of my identity, would others? I worried if they would accept me if I didn't fit the stereotypes they expected. I didn't know how I could live differently and still feel content without following the instruction set I acquired from those around me. Now I know that contentment requires introspection and self-understanding, without which I wouldn't have the supportive community that cheers me on.

Still, acceptance is a journey. Whenever I discover something new about myself, it takes time to adapt. I fear each experience might bring a setback I'll need to anticipate, a script I must perform to respond "normally."

But what is normal, anyway?

Could disability stop me?

Another label on that page took me longer to acknowledge—disability. It didn't fit with the confident, able person I am. True, I'm not what people expect, but nothing is missing. Now, I've accepted that I don't need to apologize for unmet expectations. I can be gay with no fashion sense. I can be an Autistic public speaker. I can lead a student government initiative despite my anxiety. I have accomplished all of these. I am all of these. No one description defines me.

My mom's clinic helps prepare kids like me for a world that isn't ready for those outside the norms, but not because we are less. We identify our needs, celebrate our differences, and see what others don't: weaknesses can be strengths, and "disability" builds resilience.

I took my seat among the Pride Club members to applause and an overwhelming sense of belonging. I had hurt them as I had hurt myself, but amidst vulnerability and authenticity, we built a connection, and I formed a community that day, making it one of the best of my life.

So when I say that practice makes progress, I don't just mean in academics or skills—I mean in how we understand ourselves, how we accept our identities, and how we allow ourselves the grace to be imperfect and still worthy.

I'm not a single word on a page—I am litanies of words on volumes of pages—there is nothing I can't do.

And neither is there for you.

Let’s embrace the beauty of imperfection. Let’s celebrate growth over flawlessness. And let’s remind ourselves that practice doesn’t make perfect—practice makes progress.

Thank you.