



North Haven Public Schools

North Haven, Connecticut 06473

Convocation Speech

August 25, 2014

Once Again Good Morning and Welcome Back:

As I prepared my comments for this morning's program, I had this compelling need to go back and look at a presentation I made in January 2001. Just to set the stage for you briefly, I was the interim superintendent of the Naugatuck Public Schools and very interested in receiving the permanent appointment. The Board decided to hold a Public Forum in which community members would have the opportunity to ask me questions about education and the community's schools. I went back to look at my opening statement for that forum because I believed as I write it that it summarized my own core values about teaching and learning at the time. The only difference I found between what I described then and what I believe now is that there were fewer beliefs back in early 2001. Time hadn't taken away my beliefs, only added to them.

At that time I talked about:

1. Wanting to lead a school district that was student centered and committed to continuous improvement.

2. Wanting to maintain a focus on the classroom, making decisions for the district based on what was in the best interest of students.
3. Never wanting to lose sight of the tremendous opportunity and responsibility I've been given.

I was pleased to see that those values and core beliefs haven't changed very much over the course of the past 14 years.

Fast forward to today, and as you know, our district's vision statement reads; "As a result of their experience in the North Haven Public Schools, every student will acquire the skills necessary to meet the demands of the 21st century." In 2011, during our annual summer retreat, administrators and I drafted that statement to portray what we are striving to accomplish as a school system. It's a statement, I believe, that best creates a picture of the kind of future I hope we are all trying to build for our students here in North Haven.

I believe that everything we do truly does revert back to our vision along with our values and core beliefs about teaching, learning, and students. These beliefs define us as a school system and hopefully unite us as a community of educators. Here in North Haven there are five beliefs that you've seen and heard for a few years now:

The first belief applies to all of us. It reads:

- Faculty and staff of the North Haven Public Schools have the capacity to make continuous improvement in student achievement. The jury is in and student achievement is the only real measure of school and district success. Everything we do must be in service to the non-negotiable goal of improving student achievement. I want to emphasize, however, that our core belief does not say “teachers” alone have the capacity to make continuous improvement in student achievement. I said “faculty and staff” because this is a shared responsibility for which we all, every single one of us sitting here this morning, own a piece.

As Superintendent, there are three groups I can assist in their efforts to accomplish this goal of continuous improvement. These include district leadership including the Board of Education, school leadership, and most importantly teachers and others working directly with students. One of my summer projects this year involved researching what role the central office plays in school reform, particularly the whole area of student achievement. I learned that effective leadership at the district level can change what occurs in classrooms, and what happens in classrooms has a direct effect on student achievement. How? It comes as no surprise that we are all truly interdependent. Work at the district level has been

shown to have a measureable effect on student achievement and a great deal of that central office work involves setting clear direction and supporting you as you do your work.

The second core belief targets administration:

- District and school leadership must commit to improved student achievement. Recently, there was a study conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development of Effective Schools worldwide. Periodically, this group participates in something called the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15 year olds in member countries on their ability to apply what they've learned in the areas of math and science. Some assessment experts believe this test is the most accurate measure of an educational system's effectiveness. Their findings are fascinating. There is not a single, documented case of a school or a district successfully improving pupil achievement in the absence of talented leadership. In addition, research has shown that not a single school system, which demonstrated improvement, did so without sustained, committed, and talented leadership. I think it is safe to say we can never forget that leadership matters.

The third core belief also speaks to all of us:

- We must hold ourselves, and each other, to a standard of excellence and contribute to the positive school experience of all students. Our work calls for us to put differences aside and enter into a genuine partnership that is focused on students. Actually, more than simply putting those differences aside, it requires us to explore those differences hopefully arriving at an even better solution. More than simple compliance, we are all challenged to be committed to the work, convinced that what we are doing is in the best interest of all students. To do this, we must engage in civil discourse about what we believe will assist us in realizing our vision of having all students leave us prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It requires compromise on all our parts. We have to respectfully listen to one another's' ideas, decide on action and do it, and not do it half heartedly but instead with true fidelity and commitment. That's the only way we're going to know if we're making good decisions and if we're making a difference in the lives of children.

Our own student performance data suggests that we've not yet cracked the code on how best to help our students receiving special education and those receiving free and reduced lunch. Our results continue to show that these two subgroups remain somewhat of a mystery. Solving that

mystery has to be one of our priorities this year. I don't believe for a moment that the only solution is to throw more people at the problem. We will make progress, however, if we can identify and agree upon an area of weakness and set out to address that weakness with a laser-like focus. Let's remember... students receiving special services, like every other student we see daily, remain the responsibility of all of us. It starts with the classroom teacher and spreads out to include those who provide specialized instruction. It is the responsibility of administrators to know what is happening with students in classrooms, to contribute to problem solving, and to support the people doing the actual instruction. In the end I truly believe, we all own responsibility for the academic achievement of every student including those receiving special education and those qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

As I've examined our student performance over the past three years, a pattern emerges. Seventy-five percent typically perform at or above goal. That's good, but it isn't good enough. We have got to examine what is happening with the other 25%, or a quarter of our students, and put a corrective plan in place. It's that 25% that I ask you to be giving serious consideration to tomorrow as you begin to draft your SLOs for the coming year during professional development. If we genuinely believe that all

means every student, then we have to begin giving serious consideration to what we can do to bring that percentage of students not meeting success down and how we can move students from below basic to basic and from basic to proficient. The definition of “high levels of achievement” will differ from student to student, but at the end of the day, at the very minimum every student should demonstrate at least a year’s worth of progress in a year’s time. If we maintain focus, over time, we’ll see the improvements we’re hoping for.

The fourth belief speaks to teachers and other staff members working directly with students:

- All students deserve highly effective instruction every day. Research has shown that the more competent and capable the teacher, the greater the expected gain in student achievement. The better the leadership, the better students perform. Effective instruction is considered causal to enhanced student achievement. The work we do in schools is among the most important work imaginable. You’ve heard me say in the past that the two most important things happening in this district throughout the day are teaching and learning. What teachers need in order to learn more about effective teaching is no secret. One of the best forms of professional development actually comes from teachers speaking with

other teachers about the work of teaching. There is also at least equal, if not greater benefit to having teachers observe one another and then discuss their practice. For the past three years, the administrators have engaged in ongoing professional development on “best instructional practices.” Keeping that group composed of only administrators, and for the past few years including program coordinators in core subject areas was a conscious decision so that as a group we could develop a shared understanding of what good teaching looks like. A part of that work has been conducting classroom walkthroughs. It’s time to expand this opportunity and involve all teachers in this most valuable experience. During your professional development later today and tomorrow, your administrator will explain how classroom walkthroughs will work in your school this year. The goal, however, is for all teachers to have a minimum of two opportunities to observe the practice of their peers. By doing so, we begin to expand our collective, common understanding of our district’s perspective of best practices.

Fifth, and finally:

- Learning must be relevant, engaging, and challenging. One way to accomplish this is by providing every student with the opportunity to read and write every day in every class. There is an abundance of scientific

research that supports the importance of that practice. By writing I don't mean completing worksheets. I mean writing that causes them to think and to organize their thinking and reflect on their learning. These do not have to be long, involved papers. They can be brief writing assignments at the beginning or end of each class. We have to be certain we are asking students to do things that are worthy of their time. Reading and writing most definitely meet that criterion.

If we genuinely believe all students can achieve at high levels, we're going to approach our work with them from that vantage point, understanding that the "high level" is going to vary among the students with whom you work. At the same time, if we believe that only some "have it" but others don't, somehow intentionally or unintentionally that message comes across and has an equally powerful effect on how we, and ultimately our students do our work.

For a long time, I questioned whether a vision statement and a mission statement and identifying values and core beliefs really made much of a difference. But time and experience have taught me otherwise. If we use our mission and vision statements, not merely as an exercise to put something on paper, but truly as an opportunity to explore and examine our own values and core beliefs, I believe they can have a profound effect on our work with

students, and as equally important, our work with one another. The bottom line, however, is that no matter how we get there, all must mean all.

This morning, however, our focus today is on new beginnings and moving forward. Our first order of business is to determine our “vital few” this year or those critical areas that everyone will devote time to because they are good leverage points. In essence, these are considered our “best bets” for improving student achievement currently and for time to come.

From the district perspective, I’ve identified two for this year. I believe one of our “vital few” must involve planning for active engagement. That Domain is the district focus this year. The importance of planning can never be overstated or underestimated in our work. In the past I’ve asked you to address three questions in your planning:

1. What are they learning?
2. How will they learn it?
3. How will you know if they learned it?

To that list, I’d also add a fourth question. What are you going to do if they haven’t learned it? Teaching something is only the first step. Knowing that they’ve learned is the true goal. So, planning for active learning is our first non-

negotiable. Planning for active engagement is the first of our “vital few” during 2014-2015.

Improving the performance of special education students and students receiving free and reduced lunch across all three levels, elementary, middle, and high school is the second. It we are saying all means all, which we are in North Haven, that means every single one of our students...the ones with supportive parents, the ones with disengaged parents, the ones who do their homework, and the ones who don't do their homework. Every single one of them.

My goal is to make our school system one of the premier school systems in the area, and as a faculty you are capable to help us reach that goal. I want us to be known for both our programs and for the people we employ, their concern for and commitment to students. I ask you to join me in partnership. My hope is that this school year is your best one yet. Keep in mind that you play a big part in that as it can be as good as you make it. Please approach each day with an awareness of the tremendous opportunity and responsibility you've been given. We are creating the future and to be able to have even a small part in that is pretty awesome.

Enjoy Wednesday and the 180 days that follow that!

Thank you.