



North Haven Public Schools

North Haven, Connecticut 06473

"As a result of their experiences in the North Haven Public Schools, all students will acquire the skills necessary to meet the demands of the twenty-first century."

Convocation 2018-2019

Framing my comments for Convocation proved more challenging this year than it has in previous years. That includes my time as both an assistant superintendent and then as a superintendent going back some twenty-two years now. As I reflected on this, I believe it was as challenging as it was because the my goal this morning is to express my genuine and sincere appreciation to each of you for the role you've played in helping us evolve into the high performing district we are today. I don't want this to be a talk filled with empty platitudes because what you've accomplished, and continue to accomplish, deserves much more. The bottom line is that I want very much for this to come across genuine and sincere, and a true reflection of how I feel. Determining how best to communicate those feelings was the real challenge.

In 2001, before I was appointed Superintendent of the Naugatuck Public Schools, the Board of Education held a Public Forum in the high school library one evening. The community was invited to meet me and pose questions about what I wanted to accomplish in the district were I fortunate enough to become the next superintendent. Before I began taking questions from staff, parents, community members, and elected officials, I made an opening statement. I thought it would be a good idea to revisit that statement after eighteen years in preparing for this morning. In some respects, it brings everything full circle.

I started that presentation by listing what, for me, at the time, were my three core values as an educator. They're not profound, but they were, and continue to be, most certainly honest and heartfelt. As I reviewed them in preparation for this morning, I realized that in one way or another I've said these, or very similar statements, to you over the course of our time working together. I hope that I've not only said them, but modeled them through my behavior and decisions. You'd be a better judge of that.

Back in 2001, I said that there were three things I hoped to accomplish as superintendent:

1. I wanted to lead a student-centered school district committed to the continuous improvement of all students.
2. I wanted to maintain a focus on the classroom, always basing my decisions on what I believed to be in the best interest of students and teachers because it's in the classroom that "school" really happens.
3. I also never wanted to lose sight of the tremendous opportunity and responsibility I've been given. I did not want to ever take that opportunity for granted, nor did I ever want to lose my appreciation and gratitude for that opportunity.

You've heard me reference these over the years and I'm very pleased that even today, some eighteen years later, these are the three truths in which I believe most strongly. However, what I've come to learn and understand, and what is far clearer to me today than it was eighteen years ago, is that in order to truly live these truths, and to accomplish what I hoped to do, I needed you. You see, I must have you working with me or we simply spin our wheels. Learning this lesson is challenging, and I'd be the first to acknowledge that there are times when I do it far better than others. However, every step of the way you've taught me. Sometimes I was a quick learner, other times not as quick! However, in one way or another, each of you have taught me the importance of "us" and "we" as opposed to "I" and "me."

So, in going back to these basic beliefs, the first question I asked myself was;

Are we a school district that is student centered and committed to continuously improving?

Because of the quality of your work, and through your ongoing efforts, I believe this system to be truly student-centered. I see evidence of it daily in schools, in classrooms, including the time I've spent with many of you. There are numerous examples including:

- At the high school, in the early spring last year I was struck by the speed with which a group of staff members were able to develop and introduce a high-quality program to support the increasing numbers of students refusing to attend school for many, the result of mental health issues. By June we saw improvements in the attendance of several students, because of your supports and interventions.
- I've always been impressed by the great care taken by staff in North Haven whenever a student is being recommended for expulsion. I've never known anyone to lose sight of protecting and preserving the dignity of both the student and his or her family. The focus is always on a fair, reasonable consequence for the student's actions, but also on finding a way to have him or her return to school for a fresh start as soon as possible.
- Then there's the high school's Graduation Task Force that meets monthly, beginning in September, to monitor the status of students at risk of not graduating with their class. Embedded within that is the willingness on the part of high school teachers to work with the Task Force, the student, and the student's parents on behalf of the student. Throughout the process, students are held accountable for doing their part so that their diploma truly represents their efforts, and is genuinely earned.

- I believe we are committed to students when I learn of the number of middle school teachers who give of their time after school to serve as club advisors, affording more students with social opportunities they may not otherwise have.
- The idea of commitment to students was clear last spring by the willingness on the part of so many elementary school teachers to pilot the district's new standards-based report card even though it meant twice the amount of work for each teacher who also had to complete a traditional report card for each of their students, as well.
- The commitment so many teachers have made to change their practice and carry out the work they're learning through Columbia Teachers' College in classrooms throughout the district because, by all accounts, that is what is best for students.

So, yes this district is certainly student focused.

Do We Demonstrate a Commitment to Continuous Improvement?

I believe we do. Here's why I say that...

- Our increased use of data as concrete, measurable evidence of student learning, even when we don't like what the data is telling us. This includes our introduction last year to the i-Ready Universal Screener.
- Every elementary teacher's commitment to the Columbia Teachers' College Writing Program that not only has asked you to attempt new practices, but also to open your classrooms to both colleagues and trainers for others to observe.
- The seriousness with which each of you takes the performance of your students on the Smarter Balanced Assessment at the elementary and middle school levels, and the SAT at the high school, Connecticut's rigorous, high-stakes testing. This year, just as one example, that commitment was so clearly evident at Montowese School where, through

everyone's efforts and focus, students showed impressive gains. Two years ago, the middle school showed that when you follow our curriculum with fidelity, when you use the practice materials; not to teach to the test, but instead as an instructional tool, students benefit and their performance improves.

Throughout the district, our commitment to continuous improvement is clear.

Are We Maintaining a focus on the classroom because that's where the district's most important work is carried out by each of you?

I've seen this repeatedly in the efforts you put into:

- The work so many of you have done, and continue to do, developing, revising, and rewriting curriculum.
- Your administration of progress monitoring assessments and IABs, despite the myriad of other things making demands on your time.
- Your willingness to work collaboratively with program coordinators, welcoming special education personnel, reading/language arts coaches, and math coaches into your classrooms as we increase the amount of "push-in" services delivered to students in an attempt to close the achievement gap and improve the achievement of the lowest performing 25% of your students.
- Your demonstrated commitment to students, to being accountable for the achievement of each one. In addition, your accountability to the North Haven Community and families to provide well prepared, contributing members of the community.
- Your ongoing commitment to helping all students feel that they belong.
- Your willingness to stress to students that even though they have dedicated teachers, hopefully supportive parents, and great schools, none of it matters unless each one of them fulfills his/her responsibilities. They need to show up at school, pay attention to you, listen to their parents, grandparents, and other adults, and put in the hard work that's

necessary for them to succeed. That's their responsibility to the classroom, to the school, and to the district. Daily you teach them about the importance of taking responsibility.

I can say with confidence that we do, indeed, maintain a focus on the classroom.

Finally, We Should Never Lose Sight of the Tremendous Opportunity and Responsibility We've All Been Given

- On a personal level, I'm well aware of the fact that there are only 169 school districts throughout the state of Connecticut. That means that I'm fortunate enough to be one of those 169 individuals charged with the responsibility of leading a school system. How fortunate I am, and have been! From an opportunity standpoint, I try to never lose sight of that good fortune.
- As far as opportunity is concerned, I'm frequently reminded of just how lucky each of us sitting here this morning is. For example, last year, when we conducted our search for the next middle school assistant principal, we received over 200 applicants for the position. That scenario is repeated over and over again during searches to fill both teaching and administrative positions in this district, most recently evidenced when over two-hundred candidates responded to our advertisement for a first-grade teacher at Green Acres.
- I know I've said this before, but it can't be said enough. To each of the new teachers attending this morning, know that the competition was fierce, and the hiring process deliberately made comprehensive. Yet, out of the pool of candidates applying and interviewing for the position, there was something about you that set you apart. As a Board of Education, and as a district leadership team we are committed to putting only the

best before our students. They deserve nothing less and that's why we've asked you to join us.

- Finally, the idea of responsibility falls to all of us, and the best way to meet our collective responsibility is to work together, in partnership. I need administrators committed to leading with the highest ethics and integrity, and a commitment to every student for whom they're responsible. They, and I, in turn, need you to help us continue to strive every day to help every student achieve at high levels. That doesn't let anyone else who touches the lives of our children and adolescents off the hook, but you, the professionals who work directly with our students are the key. It's in your classrooms every day that we shape the future.

Yes, from all that I've witnessed, we take our responsibilities very seriously.

Over the years, there's never been a shortage of new initiatives in education, usually presented as the answer to our problems. Some of you may remember Madeline Hunter, Empowering Writers, Whole Language, inclusion, to name a few. In fact, all of them had something positive and good to offer. As I've thought about these solutions, however, I've come to believe at my core that if we were to set them all aside, our work really comes down to the interactions between you, the teacher, and the student. A relationship that must be built on trust and mutual respect. Ralph Waldo Emerson said. "the secret of education lies in respecting the pupil." That idea works both ways, however. You too deserve to receive the same level of respect you're extending to others.

I don't believe any student ever begins their school career wanting to fail. I don't believe that on Wednesday morning even one of those kindergarteners coming to school for the first time doesn't want to please the adults in his/her world, and succeed. For you, the job is one of maintaining a laser sharp focus on every student who sits before you every day. While the relationships between the student and everyone else associated with the school are important; the

administrator, paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, custodial staff are all important and cannot be ignored, it's the teacher/student relationship that's so essential for improving achievement, and turning the student on to the excitement of learning. I'm not telling any of you anything new when I say that the work is hard, the work is challenging, and the work is extremely demanding of our time, not only when we're actively working with students, but in preparing for that work, and in making certain that they are, in fact, learning. In short, our work is not for the faint of heart or anyone unwilling to work extremely hard.

The quality of a school, or school system is, in the end, the result of the quality of the people and the relationships among everyone who has a part to play in making the system work. The work of every single person in this room is essential to our success. Our school district needs to be accountable as a system for student learning. We owe it to the community, and our families, to provide the best possible education for our students. We are in a partnership, but the partnership doesn't just happen at school. Partnerships include families working together to provide support for the teacher and student. Students need strong support from their families to be successful. The families and the schools can't do it alone. They need the support and backing from the community. In North Haven, we're very fortunate to have that.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." Our responsibility is to help all children to dream big, and to believe in the beauty of their dreams. We must remain committed to working hard to make certain every student has the same educational expectations in every class, in every school in this district. We continue to work hard to make sure our curriculum is aligned both across the district and from grade level to grade level. We know every student needs a strong educational foundation. If we give them that, their chances of achieving their dreams improve significantly. We all need to continue to work together to make their dreams a reality. That truly is our moral responsibility.

Before I came to North Haven, because I really wasn't familiar with the community, I reached out to superintendents in the area. Fran Rabinowitz was the superintendent in Hamden at that time. I phoned her just to see if she could shed any light on the community. I'll always remember this conversation. She said no, unfortunately she really didn't know too much about the district other than the acting superintendent was kind of grumpy in the morning whenever she called her on snow days. Eight years later, I know a great deal more about North Haven and prepare to leave confident that our students are in the most capable, most caring of hands.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for what you do each day. Once again, Happy New Year! It continues to be both an honor and privilege to work with you, and on your behalf, every day.

Good Luck on Wednesday. Thank you.