

Convocation 2012
"Placing Bets"

We have much to be proud of in Fairfield. As Superintendent, I have the dual role of trumpeting our achievements and successes and also motivating us to get better, and the latter requires that we confront where we can improve. But I don't start there, of course.

The longer I'm here the more I appreciate what we offer: a comprehensive program of academics, arts and athletics that stands up to the best in the State. A supportive community that has allowed us to have the resources we need to do our jobs. Supportive families. Fairfield is a great place to live, to send your kids to school and to work, regardless of your role in the school system. It's not Thanksgiving yet, but if it were, we would have much to be thankful for. We have a blessing of time and place that is uniquely ours.

By and large, we've taken advantage. Allow me to trumpet some of our recent successes in student academic achievement that is the work of teachers and administrators working together to come up with better ways of reaching all children.

There are many other measures of our success – but because the data is readily available and you probably don't want to be in here too much longer, I am going to confine myself to CMT and CAPT scores. Most people really don't want the superintendent to prattle on about test scores and data at this hour; however, since I am sharing good news, I find you'll be more tolerant.

- I know there are limits of the measure...consider a large "Disclaimer" shining behind me....
- We made six-year highs in percent at Goal in.....
- 3rd Grade Reading, 3rd Grade Mathematics, 4th Grade Mathematics, 5th Grade Reading, 5th Grade Science, 7th Grade Writing, 8th Grade Reading, 8th Grade Writing, 8th Grade Mathematics, 10th Grade Writing. That's 10 out of the 24 test/grade combinations with all-time highs. I'd say that's worth celebrating.

- I also point out while it was not a six-year high, 7th Grade Reading, for the third consecutive year, was over 91 percent at Goal. And in 10th Grade Reading, while not a new high, the percentage of students at Goal increased by more than 8 percentage points from 2011 to 2012.

So how did this happen? Well, if we did an exercise now, I hope you'd be able to come up with a list of changes you/we made to curriculum, instruction and assessment that contribute to these high scores. We would, naturally, take "credit" for this and we should.

Yet, we need to keep changing if we are to get better. Doing the same thing over and over again does not yield the same results (as the saying about insanity goes), it actually yields **worse** results. The nature of students, of the skills necessary for success in a flat world, changes in assessments – all of this will cause some of our practices that used to be successful to be less so.

With all of our achievements in student learning, Achievement Gaps that plague the country, and especially Connecticut, are also present in Fairfield. Poke around in our data and look at the achievement differences by sub-group (especially low income and minority groups) and you'll see what I mean. We are not on Fairfield Island.

If we're really good, we can lead the way in showing the rest of the State that all kids can learn at high levels regardless of their family's wealth or other demographic factors.

So, if I gave you the same exercise to explain where our students have not achieved as well as they should, it surely would be tempting to attribute this to factors beyond our control. While that may be true to some extent, we cannot, logically, simultaneously take credit for all of the successes and attributes our student achievement shortcomings to external factors. We own our successes – and there are many – AND we own our challenges.

So what to do? Or, what's the strategy? I ought to be able to answer that question and so should everyone in this room.

- We cannot work at everything. We need to make choices. One way to define a strategy is as “placing bets.” We have limited time and resources – where should they be dedicated? This is true of individuals for their own growth, a classroom or group, a school or a school district, or even an entire state education system. So the question I ask administrators as they look to improve student learning in their schools: what’s your strategy? The same question can be asked of teachers, individually or as a grade level or department. It’s hard to improve without some kind of strategy. And as a wise person once said, “hope” is not a strategy.

Some thoughts that undergird our strategy for improving student learning include:

- Working as solo practitioners has gotten us this far but if we are going to break through, we need to start working as teams.
- I place a lot of faith that the people in this room, with the proper support and structure, can put their heads together and make improvements in student learning happen in every classroom for every child.
- However, we cannot just put people in a room, call it a team, and say, “solve this.” That would fall under the category of “hope” (or pray).
- So the “elevator speech” version of the strategy is this: *Enable teams of teachers and administrators to examine student learning data, develop and implement strategies to make instructional improvements, and then evaluate the effectiveness of those efforts in a cycle of continuous improvement.*
- This is why we rolled out a new School Improvement process last year that included a school-wide data team and will be expanding it this year to include grade level and content area data teams. We’re *betting* that if we work to improve the effectiveness of teams across the district, student learning will improve. We’re *betting* that if we improve the ways in which we assess student learning, and use those results, then kids will learn more. We’re *betting* that teachers and administrators, putting their heads together, can share and come up with strategies that will give us breakthroughs in student performance. *In short, we’re betting on you.*
- And because we know that no strategy matters unless you see it enacted in the classroom, schools began last year to implement Instructional Rounds,

which many teachers told me was the best PD they have ever had. But Instructional Rounds are not a strategy. If you have a strategy, Rounds will help you implement it better.

There are a few other components: In other words, where else are we placing our bets? Well, many of you worked hard to develop new curriculum that was approved last year – elementary art, elementary music, mathematics grades 3-5, pre-k-5 language arts and 7-12 tech ed – we're *betting* that if we implement these new curriculums effectively, kids will learn more. We're *betting* on a common curriculum and in some cases on a common instructional model.

We may find that we need to adjust our approach. We need to admit when we are not making the progress we want and ask for help. This is true of the teacher in the classroom, the principal in the school, or the superintendent in the central office. I want to see a culture where innovation, risk-taking and teamwork is valued and where a cry for help – by a teacher, a grade level team or a school -- is not seen as an admission of weakness but as a sign of a healthy culture.

As I started I shall finish. We are a very strong school system. We have a lot to be proud of. But we can be even better.

There is a strategy. Working collaboratively we can do even greater things for the children and families of Fairfield. Thank you for your attention this morning and best of luck to you during this school year.