

# Convocation Speech

D. Title

Fairfield Public Schools

August 26, 2013

What a short summer! Let me begin by thanking you for your service to the children and families of Fairfield. Last year, collectively, we proved that, by working together, we could overcome everything that Mother Nature and others could throw in our path.

It's as if last year were one of those driving video games – you know, the ones your kids play – where everywhere you looked another obstacle was thrown in front of your vehicle, and just as you swerve to avoid it, some other crazy obstacle is in front of you. In our education travels last year, we hit more obstacles than I can ever remember in my 34 years in this business and, yet, we delivered a quality education for the children in Fairfield.

Some of you really distinguished yourself last year in meeting some unprecedented challenges. Think, for example, if you worked at Osborn Hill School last year: in the summer, we discover a significant amount of PCB's in portions of the school, threatening the very opening of the building in time for the first day of school. The Central Office Leadership Team, along with the principal and teachers and staff, worked not only to get the building open, but to work around large sections of it that were off-limits, some for the entire year, such as the gym. While I am sure that, inside their minds, the folks at Osborn Hill were furious with some of the teaching conditions; it never came across to the kids and families. If we were doing this speech "live," I would ask all of you to give a round of applause to anyone who worked at Osborn Hill last year, because every one of them did a great job of delivery a quality education under very trying circumstances.

Another example: think about the way the team worked at Fairfield Ludlowe High School last year, when, one morning in January, the school day began with the realization that a 15-classroom wing was completely exposed to soaking rain as the roof was dislodged. After ONLY ONE DAY of missed classes, the Ludlowe administrators and central office team had reconfigured the entire school,

contractors were replacing the roof, classrooms had been relocated temporarily and staff taught for a number of days in the corners of the library and shared common spaces – and delivered a quality education for children. Again, if this were “live,” I would ask all of you to give a round of applause for anyone involved in the education at Fairfield Ludlowe High School in January last year.

Let’s face it – we **all** became experts in one way or another in overcoming huge challenges last year. Just as we were getting back into the routine after SuperStorm Sandy – and you can insert another round of applause here for the staff at Sherman School whose families were hardest hit by this freak act of Nature – along came the tragedy at Sandy Hook. We had to take care of one another – a number of staff live in Newtown or knew someone there – and then take care of the kids and families here whose seemingly serene suburban bubble had just been burst. And to top it off we had the worst blizzard since 1978 to disrupt the schedule once again.

And despite these challenges -- you kept teaching and kids kept learning right up until the end of a very long year. So as we get ready to face this year’s challenges, remember this: if we could meet the challenges of last year, then we certainly have what it takes to meet the challenges for this year and beyond.

You know by now that significant changes in education are upon us. For many, this year will be the first one during which you really feel the impact. If you were thinking, “all these reforms we read about are for urban districts, I don’t have to worry about them “– guess what? Wrong!

As you know there will be significant changes to evaluation of teachers and administrators, as well as the transition to the Common Core in Math and Language Arts and new performance-based assessments in place of the CMT and CAPT. The intent of these changes is noble – higher standards of performance by our students. If we keep the end in mind, and use these changes to our advantage to leverage change efforts already underway, we can make education reform work for us, not something simply to be tolerated.

I firmly believe that we are positioned very well not just to see these education reforms as something that we must simply comply with, but we are in a great position to use these reforms to improve the quality of education here.

What causes me to think this way? Too much time on “Small World” at Disney this summer? Or is there a rational explanation? You are probably thinking, as I always say to our administrators (or you say to your students), “Show me the evidence.”

Here goes. There are four main reasons why I believe Fairfield is well-positioned to take the education reform movement and make it work for us.

First, we have a rock-solid educational system in Fairfield, with outstanding programs in the arts, academics and athletics. We are not trying to fix a broken plane while we’re flying it. The State is not in our face, monitoring our every move like some districts, and for good reason.

Just a little evidence: last year both of our high schools were ranked in the top 20 in the State and among the top 2 percent in the country; Dwight Elementary School was awarded the prestigious Blue Ribbon School; Sherman School was recognized as a State School of Distinction. Our students perform consistently well on all external measures, get accepted into great colleges and universities and consistently demonstrate excellence in art, music, sports and a host of other areas not measured by standardized tests and we do darn well on CMT, CAPT, SAT and AP tests. Despite some pretty lean budgets, we still offer a comprehensive, rigorous and well-rounded program that most other school districts in Connecticut would die for.

Second, we have been involved in improvement efforts over the past three years that align with these changes. Most of you have already started using data to inform and improve instruction at the school, department and grade level. Teachers have been writing so-called “SMART Goals.” School Improvement Plans have focused attention on changes in instructional practice that will lead to measurable improvement student learning. Instructional Rounds put teachers and administrators together to identify evidence of these instructional practices in classrooms. Principals have been working hard to make their observations of teaching evidence-based, with specific feedback based on such evidence and, not just hunches.

Curriculum has been or is being revised in a number of content areas to align with the Common Core. The transition to more rigorous, performance-based assessments has already begun. Ramping up rigor in classrooms has been a topic for several years. Common assessments have become more, well, common, although we still have a ways to go. While all of this is ongoing work, the efforts to date set the stage for us to use these reforms to continue and deepen the work we've already begun.

Third, the leaders in the district are committed to giving you support to implement these changes. The Central Office Team will do everything in its power to support school-level leaders, teachers and staff; school leaders will do everything they can to support teachers and staff. Our curriculum leaders are incredible resources to everyone because they keep themselves current on changes in curriculum, instruction and assessment in their particular field. In fact, the reason there is no live convocation this year is to maximize the time you have to digest this work.

Let's face it: we in leadership positions are learning about these changes and making meaning of them at the same time that you are. Nonetheless, like a teacher instructing a course for the first time, we'll stay one chapter ahead. If you need help, ask. I believe we have started to build a culture where teachers and principals are unafraid to ask for assistance, to admit that we don't have the answer to every problem that vexes us. That culture also positions us well to work our way through the uncertainties that lie ahead. (If you're counting, that was reason 3 and one half.)

And fourth, I believe we are prepared to take on the challenges of education reform – with all of its promise – because of the people we have working in this school system who proved, last year, that no challenge is too great, that if we can handle SuperStorm Sandy, Sandy Hook and Blizzard Nemo, we can take make education reform work for us in Fairfield.

We are motivated to embrace this reform work because, deep down, we know that, even with all of our successes, we can do better. Until 100 percent of our students are achieving at the highest levels, there is work to do. We have some stubborn achievement gaps that are masked by overall high student achievement, just like the rest of the suburban districts in Connecticut. It is not enough to

simply “offer” a quality education to every student in Fairfield; our target is to ensure that ALL CHILDREN achieve what that education has to offer.

It’s not going to be easy. There will be some tense and uncertain moments. But for all of the reasons I spoke of, I believe we are well-positioned not just to meet the challenges; we are positioned to leverage these changes to accelerate our current improvement efforts and make the Fairfield Public Schools a stronger and even more successful system in the future than it is today.

Thank you for your attention, and have a great year.