

OPENING DAY REMARKS AUG 30, 2010

Good morning again.

I would like to use this opportunity to tell you a little bit about myself, my background and my thoughts about how, together, we can make Fairfield THE premier school system not just in Connecticut but beyond. I promise to be quick: no PowerPoint, no fancy charts but I do talk fast, so hold on!

First, about my background:

- After graduating from Dartmouth College I began my career as a high school history teacher and then vice principal, coaching varsity girls' softball and soccer and officiating high school basketball where I learned to endure criticism (great training for this job!). I was born a Boston sports fan so that's in my DNA, but I'll keep that to myself.
- After I was married in 1986 – not a good omen in Red Sox Nation, by the way -- I went to Harvard, got my doctorate, and returned to CT in 1990.
- Assistant superintendent in Waterford in charge of curriculum, instruction, staff development, technology, personnel – you name it, I did it.
- Superintendent in Bloomfield from 2002 until 2010.

- Four children ages 7 to 21 and one of you lucky teachers and principal out there will get to teach my younger daughter! (I also have two poodles, one named Fenway and one named Wrigley.)

What you will learn about me is that I am relentlessly upbeat, which some of you may find a bit odd when you realize that I am now in my 32nd year in public education and a former high school teacher and administrator. By now I should be, by all accounts, a jaded cynic. No such luck.

What keeps me going is the knowledge that I individually, and we collectively, are having a positive impact on students' lives. The fancy name for it is "efficacy." Without a strong feeling of efficacy, we just go through the motions. If, for example, you believe that if you teach more effectively, students will learn more, then you are motivated to find new ways to teach. If you believe that student learning is determined exclusively by factors outside of your control, then why look for more effective ways to teach? Of course, if that is in fact the case, the next logical question is why teach at all? You have to believe – this sounds so obvious I feel embarrassed to even say it – that **instruction causes learning**. And its corollary – **better instruction causes more learning**.

Yet how many times have we heard that kids' learning is determined largely by outside forces – parents, siblings, economic circumstance, drugs, media, and peer influence. This hasn't changed since I started teaching in 1979 -- before the internet, video games, 4 ESPN channels and the Connecticut Mastery Test -- where the veteran teachers were bemoaning the decline in student learning caused by violence on television, a growing drug culture, and disco music and bell

bottom pants. We know that outside factors do play into the learning equation, but if we don't believe that we, as educators, can improve student achievement in spite of these factors, then we become cynical, jaded and, ultimately, burned out and ineffective. All of our change initiatives in the district must revolve around the shared belief that improved instruction will cause improved student learning.

How does this tie into becoming an even better school district than we are already? We are rightfully proud that we offer a comprehensive and rigorous program of studies for students in academics, the arts, athletics and many more areas. That's part of what makes the Fairfield Public Schools so attractive to families, teachers and superintendents. In my mind, the difference between a really good system and THE PREMIER school system is that the latter doesn't just OFFER a comprehensive and rigorous program, it ENSURES that ALL STUDENTS master it. And if all students do not, the *premier* school system is constantly trying to find ways to get them to do so.

So, it comes down to this: how do we improve student achievement?

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that two factors play a huge role: WHAT we teach and HOW we teach. You need both: teaching the right thing but teaching it ineffectively clearly won't work. Of course, teaching the wrong thing really well won't work either. (That would be akin to a car company doing a superb job producing a car that no one wants to buy.) The WHAT, in our case, is the curriculum. Once the WHAT is agreed to, everyone has to teach it. Teaching the agreed-upon curriculum is critical to both consistency across a given grade level and subject and critical to articulation between grade levels. To be a school "system" means

there needs to be something “systematic” about it, and implementing the written curriculum is a big part of it. In fact, if you really think about it, so-called horizontal and vertical articulation are two major reasons why we write the curriculum in the first place. But the curriculum – the what – is only part of it. Math teachers out there would call this a “necessary” but not “sufficient” condition.

HOW we teach is the other big driver of improved student learning. I could quote you numerous studies that show that student achievement rises dramatically when a child has effective instruction, but I’d rather draw on evidence from Fairfield. I am also going to use only test score data, even though there are many other important achievement measures. These are real, valid, hard data that you can “throw” at someone who says that we cannot influence student achievement. These are samples only. By next year at this time, I’ll have a lot longer list, I promise you. This is to be celebrated!

- At many grades, the percentage of students achieving Goal in Fairfield on the Connecticut Mastery Test has been rising for three or more years, and we started at a pretty high level. For example, in fifth grade math, there is a five-year uptrend, from 74 percent at Goal to 86 percent at Goal. Sixth grade math – a five-year uptrend from 74 percent to 85 percent. In 2010 seventh grade Reading hit 92.5 percent at Goal, up from 81 percent four years ago. There are similar trends in other years and other subject areas and I won’t keep rattling off statistics (unless you’d like me to!) Now the CMT is not everything but it does measure important skills and it’s one measure the public uses to judge public school systems. In any case, I doubt that these improvements in student

learning as measured by the CMT are NOT the result of changes in the students; it's changes in instruction.

- I'm also happy to report that this year that our students with disabilities made enough progress on the CMT for the district to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress. That is hard to do and is cause for celebration; it has not always been the case even in Fairfield. Our English Language Learners also made AYP. These improvements in student learning are the direct result of improved instructional practice.
- Not to leave out the high schools -- in 2010, more students in Fairfield took more AP tests than ever and the percentage of students scoring 3 or higher has actually gone up. In 2000, students took 227 AP tests with 83 percent scoring 3 or higher. This year, students took 1142 tests with 88 percent scoring 3 or higher. That is very impressive and cannot be explained by outside factors such as smarter kids showing up at the door.

There are countless other examples. We have proof, irrefutable proof, that with we can influence the learning of our kids by improving instruction. We have excellence throughout this district – in our midst – and any changes at the school or district level must result in ALL children in Fairfield receiving excellent instruction every day. Even with these gains to celebrate, there is always room for improvement. Until 100 percent of our students are achieving state Goal or the district standards and benchmarks, we have work to do to become the premier school system we can be.

That's why I'm here – not to turn everything upside down for the sake of making change. I'm in learning mode myself. If I learn something is working, I'm here to support it. If I learn that it's

not, I'm here to help improve it. I want our central office leadership team – and it's a good one – to feel the same way.

All of our change initiatives, whether at the district, school, grade level, department, or classroom level, must ultimately impact instruction. If we make a change, but it doesn't impact instruction, we won't see the results in learning. We can collaborate in teams, but if that collaboration doesn't result in better instruction, it won't improve learning. We can have small class sizes, but if we don't take advantage of them to improve the way we teach kids, there will be little impact on learning. We can implement a new curriculum and program, but if it doesn't change what or how we teach, it's not going to move the needle on whatever measurement we use. We can open a beautifully renovated school, but it will only make a difference in student learning if the quality of instruction matches the quality of the building. I will relentlessly advocate for the resources we need – that's a big part of my job -- but if we don't use those resources to improve instruction, it's a hollow victory.

Instruction causes learning. More effective instruction causes more learning, regardless of the outside influences. It's only taken me 32 years to realize something my seven-year-old could have told me. That's why you may see me visiting your classrooms periodically – first, for my own mental health and second, because that's where we make a difference for kids. I could go on about what I think effective instruction looks like, but I'll save that for another day.

This is an exciting time to be working in Fairfield, which is why I'm here. We have an excellent school system, we have great parent and community support and we can do even better. I challenge each of you to figure out how to get more students achieving our challenging

curriculum and for Fairfield to become the premier school district not just in Connecticut but beyond. I look forward to working with you to improve student learning not only this year but also for many years to come. Together, we can do this. Thank you for allowing me these few moments of your time. Have a great year!