

## Convocation August 29, 2011

I spent a great deal of time last year learning about the school system. I interviewed dozens of individuals from within the school system and outside of it – teachers, parents, principals, curriculum leaders, Board of Education members, politicians, you name it. I visited every school and spent time in classrooms with the principal and perhaps some of you even got the pleasure of my spending 15 or 20 minutes watching you in action. Some of you were even brave enough to ask me to provide you with feedback on what I observed. Those were great visits and great conversations.

At the same time I needed to lead the school system. The first year in any job is almost like two jobs – I would liken it to learning how to fly the plane while you're piloting it. For those of you beginning your first teaching job today, as I did only 32 short years ago, you will know what I mean in about three days.

While last year had incredible challenges by any yardstick, today for me is like Opening Day in baseball. The nagging injuries from the previous season have healed. It is the season of hope, where every team starts out undefeated.

I look back at last year and think about some of the progress we made, despite numerous obstacles. It gives me hope going forward.

This is not an exhaustive list so apologies in advance.

For instance:

- We gained approval for a new and improved model of staffing our elementary schools to provide additional support for struggling students in math and literacy; starting Thursday we get to see the fruits of that plan. This level of increased support hasn't happened in this school system in years
- We gained approval for a new model for our youngest learners – those in the pre-kindergarten programs. We will be serving more students who need early childhood education with improved curriculum and it isn't costing the district any more money. We know that high quality early childhood education pays off later in life in a big way.

- We're putting into place a new model for gifted and talented education. We'll have a more formalized model at the middle schools, with a gifted liaison working .4 at each middle school. Many districts are cutting these programs back; we are enhancing ours.
- Although it was a contentious issue, we did successfully develop the new feeder pattern for our middle schools. From late September until now the middle school faculty and administration have been working tirelessly to make the transition as smooth as possible. We're about to see the fruits of that labor. By the way, the Fairfield Woods addition looks great; getting that work done on time is a major accomplishment on the part of many people, and I know many of the Woods staff put up with a lot of inconvenience last spring to make this happen, so thank you.
- We made tremendous strides in implementing Scientifically Based Research Intervention last year at all levels. We developed more common assessments at each level in a variety of subjects and grades.
- Despite the large reduction in our requested budget, staying with my "glass half full" state of mind – we were able to preserve important initiatives that I noted before without having to cut technology and maintenance, two areas that often bear the brunt of reductions and would come back to haunt us very soon thereafter; despite the reductions in teaching positions, our human resources department led by Margaret Mary Fitzgerald, was able to work with principals to ensure that, while a couple of people had positions reduced, no certified employee was laid off. I'm not happy with any reductions to programs but we did build credibility with the way we built, defended and then reduced the budget. We remain a well-funded school system with outstanding programs and people that, based on our continually rising enrollment, is one that people move into Fairfield to take advantage of (including me). [yes, one lucky teacher got the superintendent's daughter in class; she knows who she is]

For us to keep getting better as a school system, it's clear that we cannot continue to do exactly what we did last year and expect improvements to happen by divine intervention. Because of changes in society, in our students, in expectations or in state or federal law, if we do exactly what we did last year we will probably experience less success in the coming years.

As I said last year, the school district does not need a complete overhaul, but change will be required if we want to significantly improve student achievement. And until we have 100 percent of our students demonstrating mastery of our challenging and rigorous curriculum, there is work to do. We offer a great program; our students do really well on most standardized measures of success. Yet you all know some students who are not achieving as well as they should.

Getting us to the next level of accomplishment is challenging. But there is one key ingredient that will help us get there: Teamwork. We cannot achieve greater success without effective teams throughout the district. No one can do this alone, not even your humble superintendent of schools. No principal and no teacher can do it alone – there is too much work to be done, too much to be learned, to break through the obstacles that block the achievement of some of our students. We all have a part of what we're trying to accomplish where we are "stuck." To get "unstuck," we need to work in teams.

By and large, I believe we close to accomplishing as much as we can by having everyone work alone with a private practice, individual schools or classrooms, without sharing that practice with colleagues. The problems that remain are just too sticky; they require professionals putting their heads together to come up with new solutions, examining evidence and asking for help when needed. We have some really effective instructional practices in classrooms in this school district; we need to find a way to get those efforts out of the private world and into the public domain. This requires teamwork but it also requires willingness to share and a willingness to admit that someone else might have an idea that's better than what you are presently doing. And this goes for all levels of the organization, not just classroom teaching. I expect our administrative team to model this attitude and behavior as well. There should be no shame in asking for assistance.

Teaching and learning is becoming much more of a team sport than ever. Most of us were not trained this way, and the default culture in schools is, in the words of Teddy Roosevelt, "rugged individualism." We were trained to work alone for most of the time and as a team member some of the time. Now we must reverse that thinking: you are a team member most of the time, of a grade level team, a content area team, a school team, a district team. It will take individual work, but that individual work only helps us get better as a school system if it's connected

to the team's work, the school's work and the district's work. Part of my job is to help you see that connection but more importantly, for you to see that connection yourself in your everyday work. We need to align the improvement efforts from the district level, to the school level to the grade level or department level and the individual classroom. From this alignment comes the power to really move ahead.

Last year you may recall I published a district improvement strategy (it's on our website for eager learners to read). One theme that cut across all the improvement efforts was that teams, throughout the district, use evidence and data in a meaningful way to examine the effectiveness of our practice and then, as teams, develop ways to improve our practice and evaluate the results. This year we are developing a more focused school improvement protocol that involves teachers in school improvement teams and grade level or department teams that really move us to the next level.

The best-intended improvement efforts, however, will not impact student learning unless they result in improved instruction. The only way to see improved instruction is by actually going into a classroom and looking at it. That's why last year school leaders (and I) spent so much time in classrooms looking for evidence of effective practices – not as a way to evaluate individual teachers but as a way to get a sense of the instructional practices in a school or across the district. That work will continue this year as administrators and teachers will have the chance to visit each other's classrooms in what's called Instructional Rounds. You'll hear more about it as the year unfolds.

We have a tremendous school system here in a fabulous town. If we work in teams, we can make it even better. Thank you for everything you do, and have a fantastic year.