

**Fairfield Public Schools
Office of the Superintendent**

Convocation Speech

August 25, 2014

Before I begin my thoughts on the upcoming year, I wanted to thank each of you for your work last year. I believe you made my words from last year's Convocation remarkably prophetic – yes, the one you saw on tape and I am sure you have committed to your long-term memory. But just in case, I said that our school district was uniquely positioned to absorb the unprecedented number and scope of changes occurring simultaneously in school systems in Connecticut and across the country.

I knew it wasn't going to be easy and it was far from it. Someone likened it to trying to drink from a fire hose. We all felt overwhelmed last year, including myself. For the first time in my career, I really struggled to make sense of the changes to so many elements of the educational landscape. And that's not easy for me to admit, since I started teaching in 1979, when I had hair down to my shoulders, danced to disco music, wore bell bottoms, had oversized glasses, made copies from my typewriter on purple ditto machines and threaded reel-to-reel film through a Bell & Howell projector.

But for the reasons I outlined last year, you – we – pulled through it stronger than ever as a school district:

- First, we have a strong educational system. We are not in crisis mode, trying to fix something ASAP because the State is breathing down our necks.
- Second, our previous improvement efforts align to many of the state's initiatives. For example, writing student achievement goals was not a new concept in our schools, nor was observing teachers and post-conferencing based on evidence.
- Third, we have the human resources to give you support. The Central Office Team, the curriculum leaders and the building-level leaders were prepared to get you the training and resources you needed as quickly and accurately as possible, even as the State continually changed the rules.
- And fourth, I said last year, if we could survive Hurricane Irene, a Halloween blizzard, SuperStorm Sandy, the roof blowing off of Ludlowe HS and the 40 inches of snow from Blizzard Nemo – hey, educational reform would be a relative snap.

I would also be remiss to take this opportunity to thank you all for the support that my family and I received as we coped with our personal family loss last year. While the sting will never go away, your support has helped immeasurably. In particular, I need to thank my central office colleagues for picking up the slack when the boss was either mentally or physically not "with it" for a chunk of last school year.

On a more upbeat note, I want to congratulate Dr. Anna Cutaia-Leonard for her new position as the Superintendent of Schools in Region 14. She has served this district with energy, intellect and vigor for

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the past six years and I am proud that she will be joining me as a colleague in the superintendency. Anna is leaving big shoes to fill. Congratulations to Anna.

So as I compliment each of you for a job well-done last year, the good news, as the saying goes, is that “no good deed goes unpunished.” We have some experience with curriculum aligned to the Common Core, successfully completed a test-run of the SBAC assessment and made it one time through the gauntlet of the new teacher and administrator evaluation systems. We do have some relief from the State on some elements of the new evaluation system; we have a 3 percent budget increase from the Town that will allow us to not just keep our fine educational programs but continue our improvement efforts. I am optimistic that we can leverage the external changes from the State and Federal governments to advance the improvement efforts already underway.

I get very excited at the possibilities for our school district at this time of year. In baseball terms, opening day is just three days away. In spring training, even the Mets and Red Sox are talking playoffs. Speaking of the Mets – I know that one of our esteemed headmasters has craftily used the letters of his school to communicate his message. You all probably know the WARDE acrostic by heart. Plus, I heard my 11-year-old daughter do a really cute acrostic in a public setting that I am sure was inspired by our rigorous Language Arts curriculum.

So in tribute to Mr. Coyne and my daughter, or perhaps as a sign that after my 13th Convocation speech as a superintendent, I have completely lost any normal way to communicate my message, here is my attempt at a school district version. I know this is goofy, but, what do I have to lose?

Disclaimer: I haven’t really got this down. So I am open to suggestions. If you have a better word for each letter, send me an email. I have run this by NO ONE in the school district, not even really important people like Karen Parks, Meg Brown and, most importantly, 11-year-old Robin Title.

One of our goals this year is to develop a District Improvement Plan that takes many of our improvement efforts and brings them together in a coherent whole, so that everyone – internally and externally - can understand our improvement strategy, how the elements of it fit together, and how we will measure our progress. For my attempt at an acrostic, I use each letter of the word “Fairfield” to describe one critical element we need to accelerate our progress in improving student learning.

Ready? Take notes if you want.

F **First Rate Faculty and Staff** (note the two “F”s here); hiring great people, supporting them in their work, investing in professional learning at all levels of the organization – we can’t lose sight that any improvements we make to our system in curriculum, instruction and assessment are ultimately implemented by our faculty and staff, and it’s our job to ensure that you are equipped for the tasks at hand.

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A Alignment

This means consistency within grade levels and courses; it also means vertically Pre-K through 12 within subject areas; it also includes alignment between the written, taught and assessed curriculum.

I Improved Instruction

This is a core belief: Instruction matters; better instruction leads to more learning; a perfectly aligned curriculum is ineffective if not delivered effectively. (Conversely, the wrong content, implemented brilliantly, is no good either.)

R Reflection

(I almost put rigor here.) Reflecting on our work is a key component regardless of your role. Reflecting on our practice – in the classroom, office, school, department or district – and then adjusting practice based on that reflection, is a core part of our improvement strategy.

F Facilities & Finances

(This is a brief respite from the intellectual to the practical.) We are committed to safe, secure, modern facilities and we will continue our work to convince the town bodies that investing in our facilities is crucial. We can't have a first-rate educational system in third-rate facilities. We also will pursue the appropriate level of financial resources needed to do our job, and use those resources wisely.

I Inquiry

This is a close cousin to Reflection but centers more specifically to our work in data teams which, when working well, identify gaps in student learning, hypothesize instructional practices that will improve it, determine the results and keep evaluating our work in a cycle of continuous improvement. That's the very definition of inquiry. We don't have all the answers individually; we need to seek them collectively.

E Excellence Everywhere

All aspects of our operations – curriculum, instruction, assessment, finances, purchasing, communication, parent involvement, you name it.

L Leading

This is in the “no brainer” category: you cannot improve student learning without strong, smart and skilled leaders throughout the organization – and those folks need to keep strengthening their skills as well, yours truly included. However, leading is not limited to those in formal roles of authority. The notion that leading only begins at the top of the organizational chart and flows “down” to the rank and file will limit our ability to bring about large-scale improvement. We have examples of in the school district, but here's just one: last year a cadre of teachers took on the responsibility for leading Instructional Rounds in their schools and did a great job of it.

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AND...

D Data

We do and will use data in all of our decision-making. We don't always have hard numerical data, but we have evidence. We also need to combine data and evidence, along with relevant research and our best professional judgment, to move ahead. We do a lot of this now; I just need to make sure it stays in your minds.

So there you have it: **First Rate Faculty & Staff; Alignment; Instructional Improvement; Reflection; Facilities & Finances; Inquiry, Excellence Everywhere; Leading; and Data.**

Anyway, that was my best effort. I'm open to suggestions. I am sure something really important is omitted. Once again, thank you for your dedication to the Fairfield Public Schools. Have a great school year.