

Opening Remarks AY2020

Good Morning!

Okay, this might be a bit of a stretch given that we've been educating our students for the past six weeks - However, I want to give you an official, warm welcome to the 2019-2020 academic year. I hope you have had a wonderful opening and you find teaching our students to be satisfying and fulfilling work.

This morning, I'm going to talk about our work and before I do that I want to recognize two groups.

First, our Professional Learning and Wellness committee, this committee consists of teachers and administrators who represent our schools. They think deeply and work collaboratively to design and offer what we need instructionally to move our work and schools forward. Many thanks to the committee members who dedicate their time and expertise to helping all of us enhance our knowledge and improve our practices.

I have joined the Math For All Learners Network strand and I will tell you I am very rusty on my mathematical thinking. I'm excited to learn how we can differently engage our elementary students in their thinking, problem-solving and skill development though and I hope you are similarly engaged in your strands.

The second group I am recognizing are the new teachers and staff members of the Two Rivers Supervisory Union (please stand). We're glad that you are here! I know the administrators and the members of our search committees worked to find the most qualified and capable teacher and staff members to work at our schools. Since the spring we have hired 51 new employees, 23 new teachers and 28 staff members. That is approximately 12.75% of our staff. We are glad you have chosen to work at our schools and we want to do all that we can to guide and support you in bringing your best work to our students. Teachers, you have fabulous mentors, colleagues and administrators available to you; ask for help. We all know about the complexity and challenge of the work and we will do all that we can to help you be successful. Welcome to the Two Rivers Supervisory Union, your principals will introduce you after my remarks.

We need to keep our mission at the forefront of our thinking:

The students and adults of the Two Rivers Supervisory Union will collaborate, think critically, acquire and apply knowledge and creatively solve problems.

For those of you who have listened to my previous opening remarks, you know I always reference our mission, with a heavy emphasis on collaboration. That emphasis is because I want us to move our schools for our students from "good enough to great." The only way that will happen is if we work together and if we work effectively. We need each other to be successful. Each and every one of us in our respective roles are important and vital to the success of our schools and the growth and achievement of our students.

I find this mission statement and the eight objectives to be more critical and meaningful to me this year than in any previous year. Those of you who worked on this mission, know it is as relevant today as it

was six years ago.

If this mission aligns with our belief system, our work system-wide, then our students will graduate ready for their next phase of life, be it a career, technical school or college. When we will fulfill our mission, we will be able to reflect on the fact that we created and built great schools. We, all of us together, accomplished and did great work.

Now some of us might not be here when our schools become great. As you know, we welcome enthusiastic and wonderful new educators every year. However, before any of us leave our current positions through retirement or resignation, we need to know we have done our utmost, I mean in our 'heart of hearts' utmost to contribute to our schools becoming great. The reason we need to do our utmost, is because we have precious 3-22 year old human beings who are counting on us to bring our best to work every single day.

We need to believe at our very core, that all of our students will learn to "collaborate, think critically, acquire and apply knowledge and creatively solve problems." If you don't believe that to your very core or if you aren't willing to understand and work towards that concept then you don't belong in public education. That statement might come off as harsh- it's not meant to be, it's a fact. It is our truth and our mission; it is true for public education throughout our state and our country. Our students come from all kinds of families, we were raised in all kinds of families and if we are here, if we have dedicated our lives and careers to educating the public then we have to believe we can educate the public, all members of the public.

As you know, we welcome all children, teens and young adults into our schools. They come to us with a wide range of developmental, social/emotional and academic needs and levels. We need to take care of their needs for our students to be able to access their academics. We need to accept them for who they are and meet them where they are to help them grow and be successful human beings. A few of them can meet us where we are; however, all of them need us to keep them in our minds and hearts to educate and help them be all they are destined to be.

This is very personal for me. From previous remarks you have heard some of my story. You might remember there was much pain in my childhood and there were also "lighthouses." Those people who were my "guiding lights" who helped me find my way. For me, school was a "breeze" and it was my "safe place." I knew how to "do school." All of our students need us to help them learn how to "do school."

When my partner and I chose to have children we chose children who needed us; their beginnings were horrifying. We wanted and continue to want to be a "guiding light" for them. One was severely abused, then returned to his birth family and abused again, the other was severely neglected and possibly abused. Typically, Jean and I don't share their experiences because we want to protect their privacy and we want them to share their own stories when it feels safe and comfortable for them.

I am sharing their beginnings because I know you see and work with children like my children each and every day. I know what traumatized children and children who have been raised in loving, joy-filled, safe homes need. They need you to bring your best every day, they need you to want to learn what they need and practice bringing your new learning to them in the form of the best, researched-based instructional practices. It's hard, it's complex, it's challenging and doing this work is so worth it.

When you see the difference you make in a child's life, when that same child returns to you and says

thank you, do you know your work has been valuable and worth every ounce of effort and time you put into it? Do you?

One of the reasons our mission feels and seems so critical and relevant is because of its personal importance to me today. I know public education failed my own daughter. I have devoted my career to public education and yet I couldn't help my own daughter be or feel successful throughout her education in public school. Yes, Jean and I worked with caring, dedicated education professionals. Only a few though, understood and worked to give her what she needed and those were brief moments when looking at the totality of her formal education. We were so very grateful for those teachers, and we did all we could to let them know how much we appreciated their work. My daughter shined in their classrooms, my daughter knew she was a success. When we talked about her work in their classrooms or we helped her with her homework at night from those classrooms, she was motivated, enthusiastic and feeling, oh so good.

The very sad fact is, there were too few of those teachers and so many nights of helping her with homework she didn't understand, or trying to boost her up when she felt like a failure and she didn't fit in. There can be much joy and heartache in parenting for all of us who are parents. Also, there is a type of heartache that I don't know if I will ever be able to describe well enough for you to understand.

Jean and I are first and foremost parents to our beautiful, amazing children. We are also educators, Jean after becoming an educator became a priest, but that's a story for another day. Please listen to my heartache, of working within a system that I serve and believe in, one that did not serve my child well, one that did not recognize what my child needed, one with many educators who did not accept my daughter for who she was and did not meet her developmental, social/emotional, instructional needs, the heartache of telling my child every day and night to do the "right thing" - do your best, work hard, be respectful, be kind when I knew my "system" was failing her, the heartache of bringing my child to the last possible bus stop on my way to work to serve as principal in a neighboring school after Jean and I tried mightily for intervention for our daughter who was being bullied only to be told by my colleague that "bullying happens in all schools" and that was the extent of help she was willing to give us, brought depths of pain to Jean and me.

Yet, because we continue to believe in and know of the transformative power of public education, I continue to work in it and we continue to support it. If you have paid attention to my previous opening remarks and been in meaningful conversations with me you know I have the highest respect and appreciation for the work that you do. However, I will no longer be patient for all of you to do the "right thing."

Six years ago, I was superintendent of Windsor Northwest Supervisory Union and Bruce Williams was the first superintendent of Two Rivers Supervisory Union. Both of us brought teams of educators to learn about and be trained in proficiency-based education and then brought that work to our respective supervisory unions. The Agency of Education (AOE) has been trying to get secondary educators and high schools to do the "right thing" for decades.

Some of you might remember their initiative in 2001, "High Schools on the Move." At that time I was a K-12 principal, I believed then and continue to believe in the principles highlighted in "High Schools on the Move." The AOE didn't have the capacity then and they don't have the capacity now to follow-through on initiatives. However, their lack of capacity doesn't negate their work. Unfortunately though, it puts more work on us. We are responsible for bringing what we know to be our best instructional and behavioral practices to our schools. I have been working to fulfill the tenets of "High Schools on the

Move, personalized and proficiency-based education for eighteen years. Some of you were educated about proficiency-based education about five years ago and the secondary teachers have been provided professional development work in personalized and proficiency-based education for four years.

We are entering the fifth year for our secondary teachers and the second year of proficiency-based training for our elementary teachers. You know this work, or you have a sense of this work. Research shows that when a new initiative is brought to school systems, teachers fall into three categories as far as their receptivity to the work, the early adopters and the wait and see group and the active resisters.

Our supervisory union is no different than what the research states.

To those of you who are the “early adopters” I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You are our teacher leaders. You have embraced our mission, continued to learn, collaborated with the administration, applied your new knowledge and help us creatively solve the problems of implementation. This work is difficult, complex and vital work for our students. Michael and our principals know who the “early adopters” are. I am telling you today I will do all I can to help you continue to be our teacher leaders. If I can help you in any way with this work, please let me know.

For those of you who are in the “wait and see” category, if this work had been introduced to me in AY2014-2015 and I was serving in your role at that time, I would probably be in this category. However, after a year or two, I would have been all in or have work that I found more suitable to me.

For those of you who are in the “active resistor” category. Get on board today, commit to doing this work today because you have harmed us. By not fully engaging in this work you have held us back. After four years of professional development in proficiency-based education our middle and high schools should be much further along. Our teachers who have committed to doing this work have been held back by your resistance. Your refusal to collaborate and engage in this work has rendered unnecessary challenges and difficulties amongst your colleagues and some of them just haven’t had the energy to battle with you or have been reluctant to speak up.

The harm you have caused has impacted our students; we haven’t given them our best because we aren’t where we should be. At this point in the implementation of proficiency-based education, at this point in our work, I should be able to tell my colleagues, our state, our communities, our families, and our students that we are on the cusp of having great schools. And, I should be able to share this with much pride, I should be able to share what our teachers did, these are the steps we took to make sure we fully implemented proficiency-based education. We share so we can learn from and help others; we collaborate with other districts and supervisory unions so we can have great schools throughout our state. We need each other, we need to work together to be effective and successful.

Those of you who are “active resisters,” I don’t know why you’re being resistant. We’ve never had a conversation about it and we never will. Personalized and proficiency-based education is our work. If this is work you will not do because you cannot wholeheartedly embrace it, you don’t believe all students can and will learn, you don’t value working with our administration and your colleagues to create and build great schools then I am asking you to leave our supervisory union and find a public school that will be a better match. I don’t think you’ll find one in Vermont, because this is state work, this is local work.

Also, if you are in the category of “active resisters” and you have harmed our work in the past. Please know, from this day forward, if you attempt to do anything to hinder our progress or pull your

colleagues away from this work, I will actively work to see that your actions are addressed promptly.

Professional dialogue is welcome, sabotaging the work by not doing it, passively or aggressively undermining the work we need to focus on and complete is unacceptable.

I respect and value each and every one of you. We need each and every one of you to do this work right and well. To create and build great schools, we need each and every one of you to commit to doing this work. We're all learners, we'll make mistakes, what's important is that we believe all of our students will learn, all of our students will grow developmentally, socially, emotionally and academically. We need to always remember that we are responsible for and we have a duty to provide our PreK-12 students with great schools. Please join me in providing the students that we love and care so deeply about with an amazing education. Please join me in providing our students with great schools!

Thank you for your work.