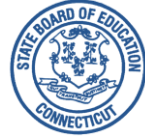




STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



**The Commissioner's Annual Back-to-school Meeting for Superintendents**  
**Keynote Address by Education Commissioner Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell**  
**August 19, 2015**

Thank you, it is truly an honor to be with you today and to serve in this role.

I also wish to thank Chairman Taylor and the entire State Board of Education—all leaders who are driven by a passion to do what is best for our students—for providing me with this opportunity to serve.

I'm also grateful to Governor Malloy and Lieutenant Governor Nancy Wyman for their leadership and unwavering commitment to equity and excellence in education.

I often comment that Connecticut is not only home to the greatest teachers and students, but also to the greatest educational partners. I'd like to take a moment to recognize and thank all our wonderful partners who have joined us today. Thank you for all that you do in support of our students' success.

I'd also like to thank all of you for what you do on a daily basis, as well.

As an educator with decades of experience in our state, I know firsthand the critical role that district leaders play in the improvement of our educational system.

I am very happy to be your partner in supporting our kids and their families.

As we consider the many changes in education in the past few years, the role of leadership and stewardship that district leaders play is more important now than ever. As you work to provide guidance for your districts and your schools, you bring together community values with educational policy and practice. Sometimes there are difficult decisions. Sometimes there are differences of opinion among leaders, or in the community you serve.

As we work together in a time of tightening resources and significant change, it can help us to reflect on our core beliefs about education in Connecticut.

In Connecticut, we believe that education matters. It is an engine that powers our economic stability and growth. A sound education helps us all be better citizens and strengthens communities.

We also believe education matters tremendously for us as individuals. It is the pathway to achieving our personal hopes and dreams. It unlocks one's inherent potential. And it equips a person with the tools and skills needed for lifelong success.

We believe in the power of expectations. We have a long history of high expectations in Connecticut—high expectations, not only for ourselves, but for others, and especially for our students.

We believe that when we align student learning expectations to those of entry level and college and career expectations, we are adding value to the educational experience for all our students. And we know that when we raise the bar, our students rise to meet the challenge.

In many ways, high standards are our promise to our kids, our families, and our communities—a promise that they will learn the things that will make them ready for life after high school.

We know, that to make good on this promise, we need to focus on the right strategies at the state and local levels. Our efforts must work in harmony and effectively support the partnerships between teachers and parents that are so crucial to our students' success.

We believe that our teachers and leaders are working harder than ever to deliver on our promise to kids and families. As we anticipate the results of our first round of new assessments, aligned to the more rigorous expectations our students deserve, it is important to remember that these results provide useful feedback.

In Connecticut, we believe that feedback is used for improvement. We will learn important lessons together—as a community. We will learn that our students have learned many of the things they need to know and be able to do. And we will learn that they haven't learned some things, *yet*.

It is very important to remember in education, and in life, that not having learned something *yet*, is feedback for future growth.

As an educator, I reflect often on topics such as learning from feedback, and the importance of struggle. I think if we all remember back to the beginnings of our careers, we each have our own story of receiving some tough feedback and learning some hard lessons.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about what we will learn from the new results and of the opportunity it presents. I find myself often revisiting my own story of initial struggle, feedback and growth from my early teaching experience.

I did my teacher preparation work in Massachusetts, and at that time UMASS had a requirement that secondary teachers do a relatively long student teaching experience. In my case, this was probably a really good thing.

Candidates were required to experience both urban and suburban settings, and at both the middle school and high school level. My urban high school experience went relatively well and after completing that, I began my experience at a suburban middle school.

The first few weeks were brutal. I chose that word carefully. I cried every day—not in front of my students, of course.

My cooperating teacher, Mr. Kostek, was amazing. I watched him the first week and he had that kind of presence that made kids behave just by looking at them. I later learned he had been a priest and he carried that kind of gravitas in the classroom.

As the weeks went on, I worked hard. As I tried to apply all the feedback from Mr. Kostek, gradually—*very gradually*—things got better. The kids seemed more engaged. I was able to give fewer detentions and use after school time for extra help.

At the end of the semester, Mr. Kostek and the kids gave me a surprise party. The kids wrote me poems and read them to me. It was absolutely wonderful. Later that day, after the kids had gone home, I thanked Mr. Kostek for the party and for all he had done for me.

I remember that I said, “Thank you for believing in me.” When I said that, Mr. Kostek kind of hung his head. I thought he was being modest. I said, “No, really. I would have given up if you hadn’t believed in me.”

He said, “That’s just it. I didn’t. I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

He continued: “For two weeks, I drove to work every day trying to think about how to talk to you about it. But then, I’d get here, and you’d have been here for hours getting ready, working so hard to give the kids useful comments and to be ready for the day. I just couldn’t do it.”

I asked him what changed his mind. He said, “It was Jimmy.”

Now, Jimmy was a student that usually had been assigned a detention within the first hour of school each day. So I asked him: “What do you mean, it was Jimmy?”

Mr. Kostek said he’d noticed that Jimmy was behaving for me. Jimmy didn’t behave for anyone.

So, he asked him why. And Jimmy said, “C’mon, Kostek, look how hard she’s trying. Anyone that wants it that bad, ‘ya gotta’ cut them a break.”

I owe a lot to Jimmy.

And before I embarrass those who later hired me, I want to assure you that I got better. Even though I didn't possess the critical skills yet in those early weeks, I did get much better.

Though it was a little tough to hear at first, I'm grateful for that feedback in the long run. It helped me improve my practice and better serve my students.

And I was so fortunate to become a teacher here in Connecticut, where we believe that struggle is a part of growth.

As you work with your administrators throughout this fall to understand this data from our first round of Smarter Balanced assessments, it will be important to keep in mind that data invites further inquiry.

As we receive this feedback, it will be tempting to try to use familiar methods of analysis and action planning. In the past, we would have been ready with our templates and spreadsheets, ready to download our data and turn it around for writing smart goals to improve our schools and district performance. We knew how to make incremental improvements in the old model.

One of the great opportunities of this new era is to leave these methods behind. They were useful for a different time. But, now, we have the incredible opportunity to change the conversation around student results in our districts.

This is not only a baseline year, it is also the beginning of a new era. This is our chance to resist old improvement habits, and instead, to use the state results to foster collaborative inquiry and collective efficacy.

The best use of the state results has always been to analyze the effectiveness of curricular programs for our students. These results can help us understand what our kids know and are able to do relative to grade level expectations. We can see how groups of kids performed to see if the curricular programs are equally meeting the needs of all kids.

It is my hope that you will use this feedback to support collaborative inquiry at the district, school, and teacher team level. As you review your data with your teams, some information will resonate with your experience and understanding of your district's common core implementation plan.

For instance, if your Grade 4 scores are better than your Grade 5 scores, that may make sense if the Grade 4 students have had common core curriculum since kindergarten and the older students were in a transition year.

Most important will be inquiry around data that surprises us. If we expected different information than we receive, it is important to review whether the new program was actually implemented. Was it implemented with fidelity? Is there a professional learning need? A resource need? This kind of inquiry will allow for the refinements that are part of any significant transition.

As you work with your state assessment data, please remember that, though this is important information, it is only one piece of the puzzle. Our annual state assessments have been compared to the practice of an annual physical exam. Some very important information is monitored on an annual basis.

At my physical exam, for instance, four key biometrics are monitored annually: blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and weight.

If my doctor has a concern with a couple of my indicators, the best way for me to improve my health profile is not by practicing my physical exam. The act of taking my blood pressure every other week isn't going to improve my results at my next physical.

Similarly, the best way to improve our results over this baseline year is not to practice the Smarter Balanced exam. The only authentic way to improve our performance is to emphasize rich, robust instruction and to personalize this instruction to address individual student needs.

Authentic, engaging instruction that meets students' needs will improve scores. More importantly, it will improve lives.

The new assessment information will provide useful and necessary information, but it will be incomplete. When you strive to complete this puzzle, please fill in the gaps with new information, not with redundant practice tests. Just as my health profile will be best improved by adjustments to my daily decision making about nutrition and physical activity, a student's learning profile will be best enhanced with daily experiences of rich, robust, relevant instruction.

And to be clear, test preparation is *not* instruction. Every class period spent preparing for the state test, is time stolen from quality instruction. We owe it to our students to provide as much quality learning time as possible so that they continue to grow and thrive.

In Connecticut, we believe that growth is as important as performance.

Let me say this one again. In Connecticut, we believe that growth is as important as performance.

Of course we care very much about keeping our kids on track to arrive at where they need to be. We care about knowing how well our students have learned the grade level material. However, we know that is only part of the story.

What matters much more is how much growth each student attained toward this goal. It may have been overshadowed by other aspects of the recent announcement of our ESEA flexibility request approval, but at the Department, we are very proud that we received the green-light from the USED on our new accountability system. This new system gives equal weight to student growth as to status performance measures. I want to acknowledge the work of CAPPs—and in particular, the Accountability and Assessment committee—for their feedback and collaboration in the development of our new system.

This approval means that beginning in 2015-16, the first year when we will have two years of assessment data from the new tests, the School Performance Index (SPI) for schools serving Grades 3-8 will equally weight the 2016 scores with the student growth from 2015 to 2016. We are very happy that our state is leading the way when it comes to emphasizing growth in school and district accountability systems.

In Connecticut, we believe that growth models will support improvement at all levels. At the state level, we commit to using this information to improve our efforts to support your work with students and families.

In Connecticut, we believe in collaboration, too. We know we will find that most innovation occurs closest to the kids. We know that teams of able educators are stronger than individual superstars.

We believe that the answers to our most vexing educational challenges are most likely to be found by the people in this room and the educators you lead.

We believe that this is a chorus, not a solo. We know that we are stronger together. Through our efforts to support innovation, we look forward to shining a spotlight on the successful innovations happening in so many Connecticut districts.

The new data—and especially the focus on growth—will help us identify promising practices emerging from districts. In turn, this will allow us to build on existing networks of support and expand communication efforts in order to share these successful practices.

In Connecticut, we believe in second chances and that mistakes present learning opportunities. This belief permeates our approaches with our students, both inside and outside of the classroom. As we support our students to reach high standards academically, we also recognize the importance of supporting social and emotional growth for all students.

Approaches that provide the opportunity for all students to practice restorative justice from an early age are making a difference. Schools that have adopted these practices are seeing a reduction in suspension rates. This is an example of the partnership between the Department and local districts that relies on accurate and timely data to support inquiry related to school climate approaches.

We celebrate this innovation that has had a grassroots beginning in Connecticut districts and is now becoming an important part of our approach throughout the state. We look forward to continuing to learn from your leadership and to sharing your successes.

In Connecticut we believe that leadership matters. Your leadership makes a critical difference for the kids and families we serve. We know the work ahead requires effort and courage. As President John F. Kennedy said, “efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction.”

This fall, our State Board of Education is engaged in strategic planning for the coming five years’ Comprehensive Plan for public education in Connecticut. The voices of Connecticut Superintendents will be a very important part of this process. Shortly, you will receive information from CAPPs or from your regional Superintendents group inviting you to a focus group session. We are hopeful that as many Superintendents as possible will participate in the focus groups.

The strategic planning process is being facilitated by the RESC Alliance and I would like to pause to recognize our RESC leaders who have been such great partners in this process. Thank you for all of your help and for the support of your talented staff.

In Connecticut, we believe in partnership. The work ahead of us is not easy, but it is terribly important. None of us can do this alone. The improvements we need to make for our kids can’t be done *for* us, and they can’t be done *to* us, they can only be done *with* us, together, in partnership.

At this point, I would like to recognize the state department senior leadership and management team. I am so proud of our team and of all of our staff at the State Department of Education. We are small, but we are mighty. We are your state department and we are here to support your work, in partnership.

We know that the work ahead is challenging. We know the stakes are high for our kids. They are depending on us to get them ready for their futures.

I believe that, together, we can do what’s needed for our kids.

I believe in you.

I believe in us.

All of us at the State Department of Education wish you, your staff, and the children and families you serve a wonderful school opening to the 2015-16 school year.

Thank you.