



THE CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS  
66<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP RECEPTION  
May 15, 2018

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT  
By Dr. Karissa Niehoff

I am grateful for the privilege of offering you a report as it gives me the opportunity to share reflections on this year, and on past years- highlighting successes and considering the challenges facing our profession and the association in the future. It also allows me to say “thank-you,” on behalf of our entire staff, to those of you present today, and to the membership at large, for all that you do to better the lives of Connecticut’s students and to enhance the work of our association. As this will be my final end-of-year Executive Director report, I’d like to do two things:

1. Revisit the challenges identified in last year’s report and briefly review the association’s work regarding those challenges.
2. Revisit a document that I received in 2010 from my predecessor Mike Savage that captures concerns he had regarding the future for CAS and offer my own thoughts; now eight years later.

Last year at this time we were gravely concerned about decisions made by Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, who famously remarked, “There really isn’t any Common Core anymore.” Under DeVos, the department reversed much of the Obama administration’s guidance on civil rights issues such as transgender rights, sexual assault on campuses, the DACA immigration program and the rights of students with special needs. Such decisions caused these issues to become critical flashpoints for schools; in many cases exploding the level of emotional stress among students and adults, and even leading to violent behavior.

As evidence of the impact on schools in Connecticut, since last May, the most requested topics for professional development were not evaluation, assessment, literacy, or curricula work. Rather, they were socio-emotional intelligence, dealing with incidences of hate and bias, the impact of trauma, social media challenges, educational policy and legal issues, and having difficult conversations- among others.

Thanks to the staff of the Center for Leadership and Innovation and the members of our various boards, CAS was able to respond; offering individual programs and informational sessions as well as multiple leadership series. We intentionally altered the structure of our programming such that we now engage a broader range of leaders- principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, guidance and support staff, district leaders and student leaders. We certainly still offer programs that target specific roles and levels, but much of our work in developing leadership and supporting leaders transcends all levels and many of the staff roles within our schools-

especially when we consider the unprecedented variety of civil rights issues and human issues for which our schools are now held accountable.

Last May we identified a number of other challenging issues that we would likely face in 2017-2018:

ESSA Reauthorization and Title grant funding; school safety and security; student data privacy; social media policy; gender identity issues; educator recruitment, retention and development- especially in minority areas- and of course, challenges to culture and climate.

Each of these issues has come to life in our districts and schools, and each was addressed in some form of policy and/or legislative action this past year.

With the help of sound guidance by our lobbyists Marshall Collins and Mike Rell, CAS testified either in person or in writing on nearly 40 bills. In addition, we spent many hours at the LOB and at the Capitol doing what Marshall affectionately describes as “picking off legislators”, or holding scheduled meetings with legislative leadership. We were invited to speak at multiple press conferences hosted by Governor Malloy. In all of these activities, CAS brought the voice and role of school leaders to the forefront. While we didn’t win ‘em all, we played a significant role in the re-drafting of bills or removal of bills, and we continued to grow the respect held for school principals and for CAS. When a legislator reaches out BEFORE floating a bill, that’s a big deal. CAS’s credibility is a precious asset!

A major challenge, of course, was and is our state’s fiscal situation. Connecticut’s financial emergency has led to school closings and consolidations; loss of positions, programs, and services; shifting demographics in our communities; and the uncomfortable exploration of regionalization of services. We are truly immersed in a period of transformation for our schools and districts- no matter what level, size, demographic or even type.

CAS is committed to being responsive to this fiscal crisis. Despite the rising costs for us to do business, we did not and will not increase dues or ticket prices. We will continue to offer programs and services at minimal or no cost for member schools. Stephanie and Mary Lee worked harder to increase sponsorship support and they secured new sponsors in a time when many of our “old faithfuls” have left us due to corporate decisions. Mary Lee’s background in news media has helped to broker new relationships with TV networks. We now have a weekly segment on WTNH “What’s Right with Schools” and feature stories about student artists on Fox 61.

These are just a few of the ways CAS addressed the challenges named at this time last year. And our work will continue as these issues are not easily solved or resolved. Just as the school years don’t end with an exclamation point or start with a clean slate, challenges can carry over.

I’d like to go a little further back in time now; to when I was coming into the organization eight years ago. Mike Savage who is one of the sharpest thinkers in our profession, as you know, is a

man of few words. Like EF Hutton...when he talks, you listen. I think a good part of the reason Mike didn't "say" much was because he was, and still is, very busy thinking...and thinking deeply and comprehensively. After I was hired at CAS, Mike gave me these two documents. I read them carefully, many times; even highlighted certain thoughts. Then things got busy, and I put them away in a file that included various documents related to the hiring process. A few weeks ago, I went back into that file to work with staff on a job description and found them. They are titled "Greatest Worries" and "Where's My Head At."

As I sat in my office reading over these documents, a number of thoughts came to mind:

1. Where in the world did eight years go? Lightning speed!
2. CAS and the CIAC have done well.
3. Many of the concerns Mike shared with me are the core concerns I will express, in writing, for the next executive director. The "optic" of the concerns may have changed over the past eight years, but the core issues are still priorities for our organization.

Mike's "Where's My Head At" outlined things he'd like to see done; programs and areas of emphasis that we have actually accomplished such as strengthening sportsmanship and leadership initiatives; supporting stronger certification for athletic directors and establishing a Hall of Fame (Hall of Honor). I think it's important for us to pause at important points- perhaps the end of the year- to ask ourselves "Where's my head at?"

Mike's five greatest worries were:

1. State Legislators
2. Courts
3. Budget
4. Sources of Revenue
5. Relationships/Opportunities

I am happy to report that over the past eight years CAS has made great strides in each of those areas; the strides all being careful, thoughtful steps. And while we have strengthened relationships, stayed out of court, and grown the organization financially, these five areas, in my opinion, will likely remain the five greatest areas of concern. The association must pay close attention to each; as there exists in any one of these areas the potential for great trouble.

1. Regarding the Legislature and legislators- CAS has positioned itself to be held in high regard. As we look ahead to significant changes in state governance and leadership, it will be critical that CAS remain a strong presence in Hartford. New relationships will need to be forged and existing relationships carefully nurtured. In our advocacy and policy efforts, it is important to voice support in addition to voicing concerns; to speak personally with legislators; to educate them and to provide them with the most important information in "elevator speech" format. Invite them to where we work, but certainly go to where they work.

2. The Courts. CAS- actually the CIAC- hasn't been in court for nearly 20 years. At least 15 state associations have lost all or part of their authority to regulate athletic activities, and they are at risk every day. We have been successful, so to speak, because we have solid policies and

procedures in place that we implement with care and consistency. While we must always consider the perspective of educational colleagues, it is important that the voting power rests with member school leaders. The CAS organizational structure is unique, and should be protected, as it allows for “both halves of the school day” to be governed by membership under one organization, it protects an education-based approach to co-curricular activities, and it keeps, policies, rules and regulations relevant and aligned to the mission of our schools.

3 and 4. The Budget and Sources of Revenue- We are in better shape than ever before, but we have had to pay very close attention to program costs- both actual expenditures and overhead. Years ago, we received more than \$1,000,000 a year from the state to provide the Executive Coaching Program at no charge to districts and to offer other professional development in line with state requirements. We now receive no state dollars. We rely solely on membership dues, ticket sales and sponsorships- and Cheryl Novicelli, our brilliant CPA to advise the entire staff on fiscal issues. Fiscal acuity is essential as we are watching with empathy the discouraging budget crisis that our member schools are experiencing. We are committed to doing our best to stay in the black while also offering meaningful, relevant services to our member schools.

On a positive note- Stephanie and Mary Lee have kept our sponsorship dollars healthy and increased our public exposure and messaging. We will be formalizing a relationship with PlayVS, an esports organization that has just partnered with the NFHS, and guarantees revenue sharing to partner associations. We will also hope for continued revenue from the NFHS Network.

5. Relationships/Opportunities: This is arguably the most important area of emphasis for our association, especially in unpredictable legislative and fiscal situations. We continue to have a strong relationship with the CSDE and our Coalition members- especially CABE and CAPSS. This has been critical not only for support of CAS and school leaders, but also for influence on policy and public awareness. The CIAC has strong relationships with the athletic directors, coaches and officials associations.

With many leadership changes taking place, and organizations competing for resources, we must maintain these relationships through continued communication and collaboration. Most important will be our interactions with school leaders; our efforts to listen and to respond through our programs and services. That builds credibility, which is a precious asset; an asset that I liken to a reservoir. It takes time to fill, and can be quickly depleted if there is a leak or a break in protective structure. Being responsive to membership is key to maintaining our credibility.

So, in summary, these five things- The Legislature, the Courts, Budget, Sources of Revenue and Relationships/opportunities should, in my opinion, continue to be primary areas of concern for the association staff, boards, committees and general membership.

Because our global society is changing at a furious pace, education has moved from a state of

episodic change into a state of continuous change. As leaders you all know that not everyone embraces change(!) You also know that whether change is well-received or poorly received can be less about the change itself than how the change was managed.

CAS is committed to being a change leader by looking forward and working forward; exuding vitality, and an energy that our schools want to be a part of.

GREAT ORGANIZATIONS KEEP CLEAR THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEIR CORE VALUES, WHICH NEVER CHANGE, AND OPERATING STRATEGIES AND CULTURAL PRACTICES, WHICH ENDLESSLY ADAPT TO A CHANGING WORLD.

If we can embody the wisdom to handle whatever arrives, and hold firm to the WHAT while being flexible as to the HOW, CAS can continue be a change leader.

It has been an incredible privilege to serve this great organization for the past eight years, and especially to get to know each of you as a colleague and friend. Please stay involved with CAS, and invite new members into the CAS family! Thank-you so very much for all you do to better the lives of Connecticut's children. Best of luck to you all!