

CAS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

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Karissa Niehoff, Ed.D.

I am grateful for the privilege of offering you a report as it gives me the opportunity to share reflections on this year, and even 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” to all of you, on behalf of our entire staff, for being present today, and for all that you have contributed to the work of our association- work which impacts schools at all levels across the state.

As I sat down to prepare my remarks I couldn't help but remember the CAS Annual Meetings of years ago- all day affairs which were well-attended. We had our business meeting, presented awards, and enjoyed a nice luncheon. The spirit was celebratory and relaxed. CAS-CIAC Boards and committees would frequently meet and then go out to dinner as folks seemed to have evenings free of activities. Gradually, as the responsibilities of school administrators have increased, time available for meetings and functions, and breaking bread together, has decreased. The “busy-ness” of our business means that schools are working harder than ever to meet the needs of students, staff and families. Despite the added demands, however, the passion and dedication of educational leaders have arguably never been stronger.

As this is the end of my fifth year here at CAS, I decided to look back at the meeting materials from five years ago. I saw that my report addressed “Goals for the Year” regarding CAS-CIAC initiatives supporting the areas of focus for educators at that time. Thinking back to five years ago-

- The Commissioner of Education was Mark McQuillan and the CSDE was structured and staffed very differently.
- The NCLB deadline was fast approaching and “Race to the Top” was a national effort. Through rounds one, two and three, Connecticut failed in its bid for a piece of the fiscal pie- which now we perhaps acknowledge that our “failure” was actually a blessing in disguise.
- A massive piece of legislation in 2012 brought “Education Reforms.”
- Connecticut's ESEA Waiver outlined our plans for a revised Evaluation System.
- We formalized a commitment to SBAC and Common Core.
- Governor Malloy had appointed Commissioner Stefan Pryor in 2011, who initiated many changes at the CSDE. We saw the arrival of very bright young people who brought with them unique perspectives on educational policy and practice. The department was restructured and “revised,” so to speak, and seemingly overnight, the already hectic pace of educational life accelerated. We experienced not so much a “roll out” of initiatives as a “blow out” and our collective level of anxiety rose to new heights, as did the “noise” around educational issues.

Now, in June of 2015, we have the chance to reflect on how we have performed, not just as an association, but also as a profession, and I think we can all say with the greatest confidence

that school leaders in the state of Connecticut have performed admirably- with grit and with grace- as we continue the journey through this very challenging time. I'd like to offer just brief reflections later on as to where the association is in terms of successes and challenges, but first I'd like to talk a little more about this anxiety that many of us are feeling and the concept of *conflict*, because anxiety and conflict aren't all bad, and sometimes it is conflict itself that causes a greater commitment to establishing coherence; coherence within the right professional culture. Perhaps at the end of the year when levels of energy and expectations are polar opposites, a pause to consider these discomforts in a different way is a healthy thing to do.

I think a lot of the angst and frustration that we may be feeling can be attributed to the over emphasis placed on reforming school from the outside through policies and mandates while too little emphasis has been placed on how schools can be shaped from within. We know that outside of school remedies rarely work their way into the real fabric of the life and culture of a school and that such remedies offer only a modest hope of leading to sustainable, meaningful change. Part of the reason for this is that decisions about change are often made by people who are not practitioners or by people who are untouched by the change process. How many times have we solicited the "help" of outsiders to tell us what we already knew? All too easily passion and good intention mutate into procedures, rules and roles. The focus is on policies rather than purpose, and those of us actually in the schools- instead of feeling free to innovate in ways most meaningful to our students and staff- fall prey to constraints that squeeze the life out of us. In an effort to address a range of challenges in our schools, we find ourselves in the presence of too many seemingly disconnected projects and initiatives. We feel as though we are in over our heads and this can cause some serious anxiety!

I'd like to share a few thoughts about the concept of conflict caused by anxiety and how leaders can embrace it. Truth be told-most conflict is unsettling so we tend to avoid it, or suppress it, and when avoidance fails, we work desperately to restore harmony. Trying to avoid conflict can drain our energy and the energy of our school and if handled badly can create rigid thinking and even hostility. Unfortunately, as we know, conflict is present in our schools whether we like it or not and school leaders face the constant challenge of balancing harmony and tension. Some tension is a good thing! We should not forget that often the very conflict we try to suppress may well have the capacity to advance our collective efforts or at least make us think more deeply. Conflict can actually become a creative force that could be to our advantage. So in some ways we need to maintain a constructive level of conflict- *creative conflict*. Maintaining an optimal level of creative conflict requires tremendous skill on everyone's part and a learning environment that is open and offers a respectful attitude to all involved- an environment in which there is an understanding that conflict is a dynamic process. I don't know that we can really carry out fundamental changes without the existence of a certain amount of madness(!). Sometimes the real trick is to maintain courtesy in the face of criticism.

So to cope with a challenging world, we must develop in our schools and organizations the capacity to shift and change; the capacity to develop new skills and attitudes; the capacity to learn. We as school leaders can't force commitment, but what we can do is establish a

learning environment within which we can nudge a bit, inspire a bit, and serve as role models as we navigate the difficult space between letting go of old patterns and grabbing on to new ones. We are familiar with the term “cognitive dissonance” as a necessary step to the brain’s learning process. Consider the idea of “cultural dissonance” in a school- just the right amount of tension that can engage stakeholders in authentic efforts to make meaningful, lasting change.

TS Eliot wrote, “Between the idea and the reality, between the notion and the act falls the shadow.”

Michael Fullan suggests that leadership in schools presents a paradox – how to develop a unified learning community while at the same time allowing for individual creativity. This tension is an ongoing dilemma, but he says, and we know, that it IS possible to create resilient and adaptive communities within which we value individuality- it’s just not easy. Success depends on respectful relationships resulting in the organization and the individual co-evolving such that diversity and uniqueness become contributions rather than issues of compliance, and there exists a high level of trust. All this being said, I think that exercising CREATIVE LEADERSHIP- which capitalizes on CREATIVE CONFLICT- is probably one of the most pressing challenges in education.

As I bring these thoughts to a close, I’ll go back to my initial remarks about grit and grace, and add to it that no stakeholder group in the state of Connecticut has demonstrated a greater degree of both grit and grace through these past years of massive change than school leaders. This comment is perhaps an appropriate segue into remarks about CAS-CIAC as I have heard similar compliments expressed on numerous occasions by the leadership at the CSDE, colleagues in other associations and even legislators- this past year more than ever before. This is a result, I think, of a few things of which our association can be proud.

- We have continued to strengthen our presence in the larger community- especially in Hartford- and our reputation for being a knowledgeable, diplomatic, professional organization continues to expand. When I say “organization” I mean the membership in its entirety.
- Principals are finally becoming central in the reform conversation. The role that school leaders play in student achievement is becoming better understood and valued. Folks are finally coming to us to ask our opinions and we have a seat at almost all of the “tables.” They reference CAS-CIAC and compliment principals when we aren’t even in the room.
- We continue to strengthen our relationships with CAPSS and CAFE especially, but also ConnCAN, CCER, the PTA and the CFSA.
- We have developed a very positive relationship with the CSDE, especially Commissioner Wentzell. She believes that leadership is a great lever for change and has committed tremendous support to our programs.
- We continue to increase our influence in the legislature. Many bills have been drafted, “re-drafted” or even destroyed as a direct result of our influence.

In terms of specific program highlights there are simply too many to mention in our short time together today. We will be sharing reports from each of our divisions once our year draws to a close; stay tuned! I must say that I am continually amazed at the number of initiatives going on in the broad scope of our work. Not only are we busy, but we are delivering high quality programs to our members. Feedback from program participants and member school leaders continue to inform and inspire all that we do within the association. Many of you are an integral part of our work; please accept our gratitude for your contributions!

Like most organizations we have not only successes but also challenges. Fiscal resources can fluctuate based on grant monies, sponsorships and even weather during tournaments. Our member schools are struggling with restricted budgets and costs associated with program implementation continue to rise. Thus, our biggest challenge at the present time is trying to grow programs while keeping costs to member schools at a minimum. We are in discussions with potential new sponsors, investigating additional grant opportunities and are working on marketing strategies that will hopefully attract more support from the business community and higher attendance at events.

Looking ahead, we have high expectations for our association because we know the expectations for all of you are higher than ever before:

- We are committed to directing our energies and crafting our programs around issues and challenges that you face, such that we enable your success, build your capacity, and grow the educational leadership profession overall.
- We are intent on engaging our membership more frequently and in new ways. We want to continue to bring principals together to discuss significant issues “in person” but we also want to host meetings and discussions via technology. In addition, we plan to host more events at sites around the state; bringing programs to people.
- We will do our best to communicate with our colleagues and the folks in Hartford; sharing the needs and concerns of school principals, as well as the ideas and strategies. When it comes to school change, you are the fulcrum; your voice should continue to guide the direction of CAS, and ultimately, the direction of education in the state of Connecticut.
- We will continue to strengthen relationships with colleagues, and while we may not agree on everything, we will look to find common ground and model collaboration at the association level.

These are just a few of the important commitments we are making for our members. We exist to support you!

In closing, thank-you for the dedicated work you do in your schools and for all you have done for our association. We hope that you can find some time for relaxation and much needed recharging over the summer!