

THE CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS
The Fifty-Sixth Annual Meeting
May 8, 2008

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT
By Michael H. Savage

George Burns once said that the secret to a good speech was to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.

1. Good morning and thank you for attending the annual meeting. I know that this is not a very tantalizing and seductive event for any of you - which makes my personal thank-you for attending seem totally inadequate. I do want each of you to know your time is precious to us and we greatly appreciate you making this meeting a momentary priority for you.

2. As you have witnessed in past years and will undoubtedly observe again this year, Karen Packtor spends untold hours attending to every last detail so that we are in compliance with our constitution and by-laws as we do our business today. This is just another example of the superb work that she does all year long. And for this and all the work she does so masterfully all year long, I wish to thank her, in front of all of you, because I know how much she means to all of you.

3. It seems like every where I go these days, I am constantly receiving praise for the work that CAS/CIAC does at the local, state, regional and national level. To say that it is really flattering would be a gross understatement. It's really wonderful to hear, but, as many of you know, I immediately deflect such remarks to those who are much more deserving of such praise than I - my highly talented staff. I wish I could take the time to talk about each of them today because they all possess some very unique talents that, when woven together on a strong backing made from a common board mission, a set of mutually supported objectives and a vision of what we need to be come to succeed in the 21st century, create an excitement in me every day I come to work. I am proud to tell you that my biggest job, other than to scout for future talent, is to constrain, and, in many cases, restrain my staff from assuming greater responsibilities and leadership roles in an effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning for the kids in our state. They are constantly being asked to fill important leadership roles both on the state and national level. And when that is not happening they are pushing me to move on new ideas and new initiatives because they believe those projects will serve our member schools in beneficial ways. We are truly blessed to have such a strong, respected, resourceful and scholarly team of talented educators leading your association. I only can hope that you are as proud of them and their work as I am.

It's clearly been a banner year for designing and promoting exceptional programs to serve the needs and interests of our member schools. Our association has changed so much over the last several years. We are doing so much more substantive work than ever envisioned by anyone. Your association is truly making a significant difference towards improving teaching and learning in our state. We have never before enjoyed the status we now have with all educational stakeholders, especially the state department of education and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. What an unprecedented ride it has been, but what an awesome task it will be to maintain that which we have build with few funds, limited staff and the reputation for great expectations.

4. Having said that nicely segues me to an opportunity to express my personal thanks to each of

you here today who have contributed countless hours of your time to serve your fellow principals and assistant principals through your involvement with cas and ciac. Your work is even more impressive when we know that you contribute your time for reasons that are totally different than that which was the case years ago when most did it for collegial reasons and to be a part of what was then described as the “old boys club.” Today, we know that you are not participating for the same benefits as offered through CAS in the past. You are not a bunch of joiners who are seeking social status or professional camaraderie among equals. No, you serve CAS because there is an opportunity to contribute your expertise for a common good and that will hopefully help improve the overall effectiveness of school leaders and promote highly effective schools where kids can achieve to the maximum of their individual capabilities. Your reasons for participating are much more altruistic than your predecessors. You are most willing to and most effective in helping CAS when you are asked to serve for a finite period of time and for the purpose of accomplishing a specific task or goal. The CAS leadership and staff tries to function with those new-age understandings.

Also, over the years, I have been blessed with highly effective CAS presidents and CIAC chairpersons which are the two most important responsibilities in the association. They have all been different in their leadership styles – some more creative than others; some more Rogerian than others; some more productive than others; some more goal-oriented than others. But all have displayed, in their own leadership style, a positive and supportive atmosphere for progress - for having a global perspective on matters after serving the association in several other capacities. We will be losing two of the most important leaders of CAS/CIAC this June as they finish their terms. Bill Barney, as the chair of CIAC, has proven to be a very strong leader; supportive of his board and the executive staff; analytical in his decision-making; ethical when dealing with all situations; candid and direct in his approach to solving problems; and unbelievably generous with his time and his money. Bill, quite frankly, has been one of our more effective CIAC leaders. He will be remembered more for his leadership as a board chairman, than as a board member. Bill ran his two-hour board meeting because he consistently demonstrated his ability to be a consummate democratic dictator. Bill, thank you for providing us with four years of stable, effective and productive leadership.

As CAS president for the past two years, Mike Rafferty has been one of those rare individuals who possesses both a strong mind and compassionate heart and who brings both to bear upon all decisions. Disarming and wholly unpretentious, as CAS president, he has engaged himself fully in an honest and persistent effort to simply do his best under any and all circumstances. We have been extremely privileged to have Mike serving in the presidency of CAS. His unequivocal support of the CAS staff, his passion for improvement, his conviction and his hard work have earned him an unprecedented reputation as a relentless advocate for children. Mike, thank you for your support, your leadership, and your constant and overarching thoughtfulness to the staff. Your generosity and friendship as CAS president will be cherished for many years to come.

5. In the April issue of the CAS BULLETIN, we printed an article authored by Dennis Duquette and Robert Spear entitled “When the Principal Sneezes.” It was about middle level leadership. I loved the article. I wish I had written it. It expresses everything I believe in about the important role of the principal. Therefore, I thought I would conclude my report by adapting it, mostly through plagiarism, so that it addresses all principals.

Adapted from "When the Principal Sneezes - Middle Level Leadership"
by Dennis J. Duquette & Robert C. Spear, Ed.D

When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. This is neither good nor bad; it is just the truth. The impact of the principal on a school is significant; the principal's focus becomes the school focus. If principals have great credibility and foster good relationships, people work to please them. If, on the other hand, they lack credibility, people work against them. Once principals make it clear what they want, supporters will work for it and opponents will drag their feet or head the other way. The relationships principals establish will determine how many are in each camp. Principals must keep their attention on the issues that matter, not divert their effort and energy to trivial annoyances. They are educational leaders, not school managers.

George Washington was not always a great tactician, but all historians agree.... he was a great general. Why? His soldiers loved and respected him. He lived with them. When they were cold, he shivered with them; when there was not enough food to go around, he went without. He knew that to win the revolution he must first win the hearts of his soldiers. His self-sacrifice and concern for them as human beings made Washington one of the greatest generals in history. I believe effective principals emulate Washington's character.

Leadership is a complicated topic, because there are probably as many definitions of leadership as there are leaders in the world. That's because a leader is a person with many roles... exclusive officer, superintendent, principal, teacher, coach, parent, spouse, etc. I have come to believe that great leadership is a special quality in people. People that want to make a positive difference in the lives of others become successful leaders. Simply said, leaders care about others; they walk the talk; they keep things simple; they keep hope alive; they take responsibility for their actions; and, they make a difference whenever and wherever they can. George Washington did just that! His methods were simple: he treated people with respect and made people feel valued and excited about what they were doing.

As a school principal, I hope that this is your leadership philosophy. Once you have created a positive atmosphere in your school and established clear expectations for staff, students, parents, and the community, and followed them consistently, you will have established an atmosphere that is conducive to people who want to succeed - which includes students who want to learn. Teachers and parents yearn for a school atmosphere where kids want to go to school and where teachers feel supported and enriched and where parents are welcome. These concepts are nothing new; they are concepts that have been proven to work for thousands of years.

Just as a great teacher creates magic and excitement in a classroom, principals as school leaders need to create the same type of excitement at staff meetings and professional development workshops and in daily school routines. As principals, you are provided with the chance to do what few people ever get the opportunity to do - change the lives of others forever. The kids in your charge are ready and waiting to be led down the path of discovery and all principals have to do is excite them. Inspire the kids to have a purpose and a goal and they will surprise you beyond belief. A great leader can make any new program or new idea work. It is a matter of creating the environment where everyone cares about each other. My wish to all of you is that you will sneeze often and hard and that the whole school will catch your cold.