

## THE LETTER “V”

By Tom Galvin

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In thinking about today’s remarks, I decided to have just a little fun and place my thoughts about a few things I think are really important for us to think about in our education lives in a less serious format. And so, for some reason I can’t explain, I decided to organize my thoughts around the letter “V” -- a good and useful letter, I think, despite Nixon’s exaggerated “V for Victory” pose and, of course, a lot of people ignoring it, including the Greeks. In addition to Nixon’s “V” for victory, we have lots of good V words: valor, valedictorian, vacation, vaccine, value, veteran (one definition of veteran is growing old in service, that surely works for me today), virgin (a much more common “V” word in my youth than today), and, of course, volleyball for the CIAC folks.

Today I’d like to talk about two special V words. The first has two faces-the word “virtue” which has as one of its meanings moral excellence. This is the serious part! I chose this V word because of my concern that we may lose or misplace virtue as we concentrate in our professional lives as educators on achievement and accountability. They will stay on a radar screen for quite a while I believe, but virtue belongs there too. The possible lack of virtue hit me strongly a few years ago after hearing a speaker extol the merits of a particular school program which, in his view, highly successful. It occurred to me that this program, sure, would work in many settings- including in a school serving a totalitarian Nazi regime or maybe at a terrorist training camp. The students learned their math well - as did they learn their foreign language, reading, and science. But this learning was grounded in a selfish vanity, serving the ambitions of the student and the goals of the state. Virtue was not included and, as a result, the program was shallow and materialistic. Maybe this was what a German student meant a few years ago when she asked me during a stay in Paris why America was so materialistic. I gave a poor, thoughtless response, turning the question back on her. But I should have asked myself if this is true. Are we too materialistic? Are we more so than other countries like, for example, Germany? I fear we will be if we choose to raise our children in learning settings that have flat dimensions. When I ask myself what is really important in providing a good educational experience for our school children, I reply, the inclusion of virtue, the practice and teaching of moral excellence as an integral ingredient of a person’s education, not a stand alone program, which is okay if that’s not all

you do. It needs to be an inclusion that is so embedded it could be taken for granted.

The other face of virtue, and I'm going back to the Latin roots of the word "virtus," is the meaning courage. Those entrusted with the education of our youth cannot get through the day without virtue, without courage. Knowing the right thing to do is fine; to do it requires courage. Of course courage can be foolhardy. Please avoid heroics . . . don't take a knife away by grabbing onto the blade. Likewise, as big as the temptation is, don't decide what is good for your school or association from your royal throne in isolation and just go ahead and do it without including and considering the ideas and contributions of others. Courage can take many forms. It may mean accepting the recommendations of an empowered committee even though they didn't endorse your favorite ideas. It can mean speaking out on an issue you believe in, losing popularity as a result. Sometimes it's not unlike the process for non-violent change as described by Gandhi. And I share his interesting wisdom with you: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win," he said. I have a lot of questions about my courage or lack of it over the years. Did I show a lack of courage in not overturning a decision of the NHS Advisory Council when they did not admit a student and I could not convince them they were wrong? A problem with courage is that shades of gray very often color our decisions about taking courageous action. Making decisions in black and white situations is rare, at least for people older than 10! As a school attorney told me years ago, don't try to be a lawyer. Do what you feel in your heart is the right thing to do.

The second V word I like to talk about with you is the word voice. We have to remind ourselves to pay attention to the voices of others. The organization and procedures of CAS and the Principals' Center are lubricants that makes this easy here. I heard a principals' center director a while back lament the lack of participation and involvement of principals of his state in his center. Upon inquiry I found out that his organization was all top down. The planning and implementation was done in the office by staff. Now, admittedly, committee control can be the bane of existence for those executing programs. Sometimes you just want to get it done. But we know that giving voice to our members works. Of course, members have to be willing to use their voices. And we need to be creative in encouraging this. You are the choir when it comes to the annual meeting but clearly we have a voice problem with our members here. The voices of administrators in large

urban areas is so low they can hardly be heard. Creative approaches and solutions are needed. This of course applies in your schools. We know that the best schools are Sergiovanni's top tier schools where active commitment and involvement of the school's constituencies in an atmosphere of moral authority are almost subconscious. But this does not happen easily, by accident or without effort. When a school's voices are not being heard, it's time for creative action.

So there are some V's I think are important in our schools, in our association, in the Principal's Center. Virtue as moral excellence and courage and voice. You have been great to work with and I thank the Association staff, especially Mike Savage, for my good fortune in having had this opportunity over the last 6 years. This veteran is happy to have grown old in your service and I will look on from a distance, always proud of you, at your continued efforts to improve the learning and virtuous growth of Connecticut's children.

Thank you.