

William P. Davenport

2004 Connecticut Teacher of the Year.

BUSHNELL SPEECH

I have lived in Litchfield my entire life and I graduated from Litchfield High School. I attended UCONN and received my Bachelor's and Master's Degree in Animal Science in 1985 and 1986

In July of 1986, I began teaching Agri-science in Woodbury at Nonnewaug High School in the Ellis Clark Regional Agri-Science and Technology Program and have been there for the last 17 years. I currently teach Animal science in grades 9 to 12 as well as freshman plant science and ag mechanics.

My message to you is divided into three parts:

First of all, I need to talk about our nation's largest industry, Agriculture, because am a teacher, and for the next few minutes, you are my students. Agriculture has been an instrumental part of my life.

I was born and raised on a dairy farm in Litchfield, and I am still involved with my brother's dairy farm in Eastern New York, where I own about 20 head of dairy cattle in his herd.

Our country was built on agriculture, we depend on it and we truly can't survive without it. 21% of our citizens are employed in agriculturally related careers, making it the nation's # 1 industry. Now I have a question for you: How many people enjoy eating food on a regular basis? That's what I thought! Pretty important to us, huh? Has anyone ever seen supermarket shelves empty lately? Besides that, we always have food available to us at all times, even 24 hours a day now in many stores. What a country! Did you know that only 1% of our population is actively producing food on farms and they produce enough food to feed themselves, the other 99% of us, and exports to other countries? The United States is the breadbasket of the world. No other

country even comes close to our level of efficiency, productivity and ability to feed ourselves with the safest, least expensive and most abundant food supply in the world! American agriculture is truly the envy of the rest of the world. Let's face it, everyone has to eat. We are so lucky we don't even know it.

The only **problem** with our country being so good at producing food is that 99% of us are very unaware of what goes into producing food and the challenges of farming these days. Many of us take for granted the food we have readily available to us because we are so far removed from its production. **My first message is to please always understand, appreciate and acknowledge the farmers who work extremely hard to feed us. Remember, no farms, no food.**

However, I need to add that the agricultural industry has evolved over many years to include **A few more questions for you:** How many have **sent flowers** to a loved one in the last year? How many have enjoyed a **round of golf** on beautifully maintained courses? How many have brought their **cat or dog to a vet's office** or to be groomed or boarded in the last year? How many have hired someone to **mow their lawn** or do some landscaping work in your yard? How many have enjoyed a **hike through some of the state parks** and forests? How many have gone **horseback riding** in the last year? How many have bought **geraniums at your local nursery** in early May to plant around your home because you were so sick of winter you just needed to add some life and color to your life?

How many of those same people had to go back to the same garden center and buy the same geraniums again in late May because you jumped the gun the first time and lost your first purchase from the last spring frost that occurred on May 14th?

You see, you supported that agricultural business twice, good for you!

I think you get my point. Agriculture includes all of those businesses and occupations I mentioned and several more, that every one of you in this room use and enjoy throughout the year as part of your daily lives. Besides the obvious food, agriculture touches all of our lives more often than you realize right here in our state. This point leads me to the second part of my message to you this evening.

I've said it once, and I'll say it again, but this time, I get to say it to a lot more people at once. Our state's Agri-science programs are Connecticut Education's **best kept**

secret! There are 20 agri-science programs located across the state and I happen to work at one of the largest and most diverse for the past 17 years, so I know what I'm talking about. **Since 1920**, the Ellis Clark Regional Agri-Science and technology center at Nonnewaug High School in Region 14 in Woodbury has been successfully preparing high school students interested in pursuing a career in an agricultural field. Our program currently has 260 students enrolled, making up close to one third of the entire high school population. However, many of you will be surprised to learn that **out of those 260 students, only 9 of them live on a farm!** The other 251 are interested in preparing for careers in floriculture, landscaping, conservation and natural resources, vet science, horse management, ag mechanics and ag production. We accept students from **26 surrounding towns** ranging from Danbury to Watertown. Students in our program become part of the comprehensive high school called Nonnewaug, but they are able to take agriculture as their elective for career training. This past year, we had **145 applications for 70 openings** in the freshman class alone. While students range in ability level from honors to general level, the one thing they have in common is that they are interested in a career in agriculture. Currently, **62 of our agri-science students are enrolled in honors classes, 130 are in college level classes and 68 are in general classes.** Each year, we average **over 70% of our graduates** continuing onto colleges all across the country. In the last 7 years, we have had **two agri-science students be valedictorians** and each year **at least 4 of the top ten** in each graduating class are agri-science students. Our students are fully integrated into the high school, taking part in all student activities including sports teams, student council, school plays, and band and chorus.

In 1993, the state legislature doubted the effectiveness of the agri-science programs and required us to conduct surveys of our graduates five years after they left high school to see what they were doing. We now have **six years of trend data showing that on average, 70% of the respondents surveyed** are employed in agricultural careers. Also, **99% of the respondents** said they would recommend the program to others.

The state legislature didn't know what to say. We gave them the answer they didn't expect.

The success of the agri-science programs are built upon the three integral parts of the program;

The **hands-on instruction in the classroom and labs**, the **Supervised agricultural experience program** or work experience component, where students must accumulate **at least 200 hours** each year in an agriculturally related job outside of school in order to remain in the program, and **the FFA**, which is the student leadership portion of the program. The FFA is the most visible part of the program and it used to stand for **Future Farmers of America**. But, in 1988, because of the growing number of members nationwide who were interested in other agriculturally related careers in addition to production agriculture, the name was changed to the National FFA Organization. In Connecticut, **FFA stands for “For the Future of Agriculture”** because that includes the production of food on farms as well as all of the other ag-related careers mentioned earlier. The FFA teaches **premier leadership, personal growth and career success** through ag education. Students learn public speaking skills, teamwork, citizenship, parliamentary procedure, leadership skills and the importance of community service.

Because of the national level successes of our program and our Woodbury FFA chapter, the National FFA Organization chose our school as the **only one in the country out of 7,300 ag programs** nation-wide to be the subject of a half hour documentary by PBS about Ag education programs in the U.S. We were filmed by PBS last April and the show will be broadcast on PBS stations across the country beginning this month. The show is in a series called **Voices of Vision** and was premiered last week at the National FFA Convention. Please watch for this program on PBS because it was very well-done and that **a Connecticut school called Nonnewaug is telling the rest of the country how it should be done.**

In our program, students learn how in the classroom or lab, they experience it in real situations in real businesses with their SAE component, and the skills they learn in the FFA completes them as mature responsible, well spoken individuals ready for life after high school. **The agri-science program gives students employable skills upon graduation** to either continue in college or enter directly into the workforce. **Not many programs can do both so well.**

No matter what the subject area, I doubt many would argue that an educational program that offers a diverse, in-depth, constantly updated curriculum, career exploration and work experience training, leadership development and citizenship training, a

community service component, industry-based advisory committees, an active parent and graduate support group, and graduate follow-up feedback is **truly a successful and worthwhile program.**

Now, this best kept secret is out. It is time for people to realize the **value of these programs as models** for others to follow. Similar successes we have seen with our agri-science programs can be accomplished in any subject area or any grade level.

Now, for my final message concerning the teaching profession in general. Boy, what a **walk in the park** this job is, huh? We work 4 hours a day, babysitting kids, we get summers off, snow days off, we never bring home any work, we leave that office each day and don't have to think about our job until the minute we walk back in the next morning, if we're sick, we can just stay home and catch up the next day, right? Right! Aren't sub plans a blast? If all of this is true, my question is this: If it is such a walk in the park, **then why aren't there 500 applications for each teaching job opening? Maybe there is more to it, huh?**

Last week, at the national FFA Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, one of my past students now attending Cornell majoring in agricultural education was wearing a great t-shirt from the Cornell ag ed department that simply said, **Those who can, do; those who can do well, teach!**

I truly believe that there is no greater and more **personally rewarding profession in the world than teaching.** We are the only ones who are given the opportunity each day to touch so many lives and help shape children into the adults they need to be. There are many people in our profession who have forgotten just how influential we can be and that now, more than ever, our students come to school starving for role models and adults who will listen to them, believe in them, and are willing to take a sincere interest in them.

In order to succeed as a teacher, you must have a **passion for both your subject area and for teaching students** in that subject area. Once you have that, the opportunities for success in the classroom are endless. Effective teachers have positive attitudes, are open-minded about change and are always willing to try new methods to reach even more students. However, teachers within schools need to help each other more, support each other, and share ideas more. A gym teacher's day is much different than a school

nurse's, or a math teacher's or an ag teacher's. Yet all are equally important in the education of the students involved. When I hear a teacher complaining about a student missing their English class because his soccer team had to leave early for an away game, or a student missed history because of a play teaser or a student missed Spanish class because of ASVAB testing, I can't help but want to quote Warren Oates in the movie **Stripes** by saying **"Lighten up Francis!"** That student's life **will not end because he missed that class!** He is learning from the entire high school experience and will be better off because of those experiences. We encourage cooperative learning and teamwork in our classrooms every day, but we are sometimes our own worst enemies within faculty groups in schools. We need to **communicate more** about what we do in each of our subject areas or grade levels by sharing the successes and the challenges of our similar yet very different school days. This will encourage an **understanding and appreciation for each of our jobs within a school** that will in turn foster a cooperative attitude between teachers, departments and schools within a district. By doing this, we will also **boost morale** within each school and foster the critical **"we're all in this together"** attitude, which builds stronger schools, more public support, and that, in turn, creates **more opportunities** for our students.

We also need to **tell people about what we are doing in public schools** and share our success stories. The **biggest critics of public education** are those who haven't stepped foot in a school since they graduated years ago. Invite **parents and community members** into your classrooms to show them how truly effective we can be. Help them understand the challenges of today's classrooms. I promise they will leave school at the end of the day with a much more accurate picture of public education and a new appreciation for our jobs as educators.

For all of the **principals in the audience**, I have a challenge for you: Come up with creative ways to **tap the expertise of your staff** in helping to promote the school and increase public relations. Instead of having four teachers assigned to cafeteria duty to watch kids eat, or three teachers patrolling the halls or checking lavs, create a few duty positions to **publish a monthly parent and community newsletter** highlighting the exciting things that are happening in every classroom. Have someone use their duty period to be responsible for **creating news releases** to the area newspapers about what's

going on in your schools. Have one or two people **research and write grant proposals for technology funding**. I guarantee it would work and that you would have **long lines of teachers willing to help you** make the school a better place and inform the community more about your school's successes, simply because you asked them to and **you value their opinions**. In this business, it's all about public relations.

I believe that the **greatest challenge in education** today is the increasing **lack of parent involvement** and support of the educational process. Parents are busier and the percentage of parents who are directly involved with their child's school is far too low. The effects of this lack of interest and involvement include a void in parental support and understanding of the academic demands on students to perform to the best of their abilities, which in turn gives some students the excuse they are looking for to be unmotivated to succeed. Also, uninvolved parents are often the most vocal critics of public education because they simply have no **firsthand knowledge** on how schools are operated and, more specifically, what their child's classroom experiences are like.

Therefore, it is vital for **parents to become active partners** with schools and specifically with their child's teachers in order to ensure that their child succeeds. If all parents would take a sincere interest in what is going on in their child's classroom, they would not only be able to help their child more with learning, classroom management expectations and behavioral issues, but also their child will be more compelled to achieve once they see their parents playing an active role in the educational process. Most children, while maybe not wanting to admit it, would respond favorably to more parent involvement and a renewed feeling of purpose to try harder and become more motivated to learn. **Increased motivation will promote more learning**, and in turn **more student success and achievement**. This will not only produce a **better understanding** of the educational process by the parents, but also will help convince the parents about the **merits of public education** since their more motivated child improves in grades and test scores. It is certainly a **win-win situation**. Here's a perfect example of how beneficial parental involvement can be. In 1988, during a parent's open house, **two mothers** of students I had at the time came up to me and said that their children loved the program and my class so much and they asked me what could they do to help their children get more out of the program. We decided right then, with the help of these two mothers, to form a **Woodbury**

FFA Alumni and Parent Support Group. The group started off with two dues-paying members and now has grown to currently **215 dues-paying members** for the 2003-2004 year! The group's primary reason for existence is to help students in the agri-science program. This group meets once a month at night at the school and conducts activities such as raising over **\$8,000 for scholarships** each year for graduating seniors, providing refreshments at student activities, and organizing an annual **Agri-Science College Fair**, and serving as chaperones and transportation for students to FFA events after school or at night. The membership is made up of several graduates of the program, parents of current students, agri-science teachers, and community members who want to help. The **most impressive fact about this group is that over 45 of the members** are parents of students who graduated four or five years ago. These amazing parents still pay their dues and attend meetings to help other students they don't even know because their child benefited so much from the program. That alone speaks for the **power of getting parents hooked on their child's education**. All of these parents and community members see these students continually succeed which motivates them to join this supportive group and be an active partner in the students' achievements.

Also, we can improve the teaching profession by **involving the community** more in what we do. This includes our local legislators who are elected representatives of our school communities. We hold a legislative breakfast each spring for the past 15 years to invite local legislators into our school to show them **one successful example of public education**. In 1988, the **representative from Brookfield** attended our breakfast and was very impressed with our program and our school. She told me how impressed she was with the students and the program and mentioned that she seldom was invited to visit schools. From that day on, she became an avid and vocal supporter of agricultural education programs and FFA chapters across the state. She is now **Lieutenant Governor Jodi Rell** and has attended several of our functions since then to present my students with **state community service awards** and to **publicly offer her support for our program**. **Community connections are key** to making the teaching profession and public education shine brightly in the eyes of some of our most influential community members! I have done a lot of work with getting legislators into our school for many years and **I can't tell you how many have told me they never get invited** into schools

and how much they enjoy it when they do. These people **decide on state education spending.** They need to be made welcome in all of our schools so they can see firsthand the great things that are happening in our public schools each and every day. Then they will have firsthand knowledge that this is **state money well spent.** **Before I close,** I need to recognize some important people in the audience that share this recognition with me. **My fellow ag teachers:** **Alex** Thomson, **George** Lyman, **Liz** Webb, **Eric** Birkenberger, **Amanda** Thomson, **Cindy** Walstedt.

I would not be standing here if it weren't for you and how well we all work together. This recognition is **for our program and the dynasty we have built in Woodbury together,** I'm just the guy who has to do the speeches!

Region 14 Superintendent **Dr. Pendleton,** Board of Ed members, **Carol Rector,** and our principal **John Vecchitto,** for all of their continuing support of our program over the years

Colleen Palmer, our former principal for her unwavering support, leadership and cheerleading efforts for the expansion and continuation of our program in the past which led us to where we are today. You truly were instrumental to our success and I personally want to thank you for your inspiration.

My **brother Jim,** for carrying on the family farming tradition and for working **harder and smarter** than anyone I know, He's one of the 1% I talked about earlier. Be sure to thank him later for feeding us all.

My **sister in law Karen,** who suggested to me in college that I ought to become an ag teacher. There are days when **I blame her, but most of the time, like tonight, I need to thank her.**

My parents **Bud and Sue Davenport,** who raised four boys on the farm and did everything right because we all turned out so well, especially me. Dad, thanks for passing on the bald gene, I really appreciate it.

My Wife Jill who is the **most supportive and most patient person I know**, and who was instrumental in helping me produce two perfectly beautiful daughters, Megan and Allison.

And last, but not least, **my students**. You and I know that the Woodbury FFA is the best in the country!

Simply put, **you are why I teach!** THANK YOU!