

I would like begin tonight by thanking Commissioner McQuillan and the entire CT Teacher of the Year Council – in particular Chris Poulos, Patti Avallone, and Susan Pelchat. I would also like to thank Joanne White from the State Department of Education and, of course, all of the sponsors and friends of the CT Teacher of the Year Program. Most especially, I would like to thank all of the district teachers of the year - you are shining examples of all that is great about public education. I am truly humbled and honored to be representing all of you as Connecticut's Teacher of the Year.

Someone once said that my family is a Connecticut teaching dynasty, and I guess that's pretty accurate. My father has been a high school physics teacher for 40 years in Portland and my mother has taught elementary and middle school math and science in Cromwell for nearly 30 years. My brother Dan and I grew up in an environment that respected education and revered teaching. It may not surprise you to learn that both of us became teachers, but it probably will surprise you to know that both of us became physics teachers, myself in Stratford and Dan in Darien. Dan even married a teacher, and I am proud to work along side my sister-in-law, Jenn, every day at Bunnell High School. Between all of us, we have about a century's worth of teaching experience. From my family I have learned that teaching is the single most important job one can do in the service of others and I thank them for the tremendous influence they have had on my life.

I would also like to thank my Stratford colleagues. To paraphrase a quote of Isaac Newton's, I have gotten this far in my career by standing on the shoulders of giants. You are my giants. For the past 11 years you have lifted me up, challenged me, and supported me. Most especially, I would like to thank the teachers, staff, administrators, parents, students, and alumni of Bunnell High School. You all rallied around me during the extensive selection process that brought me to this point. You are at the core of why I come back day after day, year after year.

A question asked of each CT Teacher of the Year candidate was, "What makes an outstanding educator?" I think we can all agree tonight, after hearing about so many impressive teachers, that there really is no one thing that makes a teacher great; rather it is a vast combination of things. Though we all lead very different classroom lives, something that each of us shares in common is an understanding that education is not a product - it is a process. An outstanding teacher is someone who understands that no one can ever predict what kind of knowledge will be useful in life. Outstanding teachers have many responses to the popular question, "Why do I need to know this?" – none of which are "Because it will be on the test." Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment, but I encourage students to ask me that question over and over throughout the year. Perhaps it is because I understand where that question comes from, as I remember asking it myself. I remember questioning why I had to spend so much time studying grammar, vocabulary and essay writing, but now I write about 2-dozen college letters of recommendation every year. I remember wondering what use I would ever have for the Spanish I was required to learn, but now I use that Spanish when I call home to speak to a student's parents. I remember thinking that my required 8 credits of chemistry in college were pointless to my physics degree, but now I've spent three summers doing fuel cell and hydrogen production research with chemical engineers at a national laboratory in Colorado. Through life experiences I have come to understand that no one can ever know what knowledge will be useful. Thus, there is always a point during the school year when a group of students comes to the conclusion that "Ms. Record knows

everything!” While I certainly don't dissuade them from thinking this, I do take the time to point out that the reason it seems as though I know so much is because I have taken the time to learn about many different things - not just physics - and how important continuous learning is to growing as a person. As teachers of the year in our individual districts, each of us now has the responsibility to model that kind of continuous growth. We do a disservice to our profession by simply hanging our plaque on the wall and being satisfied by the wonderful job we have done. We now need to step up and demonstrate leadership for positive change in our schools and in our profession.

So how exactly do we go about doing that? I believe it all starts with partnerships. Most of the non-teaching public thinks every teacher's day is pretty much the same. But we know that's not true at all. Just as I know there are many of you out there tonight thinking, “Physics - my god, how does she teach THAT?”, I also know I would be at an equal loss trying to figure out how to teach a lesson on Shakespeare, how to instruct 100 kids playing a dozen different instruments all at once, or how I would even survive being with the same 25 first graders for an entire day. We are not all the same – we all have unique needs, challenges, and strengths. We need to communicate more with each other about what we do in each of our unique “classroom worlds”. When budgets are low, classes are large, and public expectations seem unreasonable, we need to rely on and support each other. We do amazing things every day in our schools, but we cannot say it is enough to just go to work and teach our students. As teacher-leaders we need to take more responsibility for educating the public about the challenges of today's classrooms and for publicizing our success stories. We need to speak out about what is best for our students and our schools.

There is a very charged word that floats around out there when someone starts to speak about public education and school reform. That word is accountability. When applied to education, the word “accountability” often brings with it a negative connotation. In fact, one synonym for it is blame. Webster's dictionary, however, defines accountability as “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions”. I believe teachers are and should be accountable for their actions, but I also believe that holding teachers, or even a school or school system, solely accountable for the education of our young people negates personal responsibility on the part of students, their parents, and the broader community. It also ignores the complexities of societal factors that are beyond the control of today's educators.

And so, what is a teacher-leader – a teacher of the year – to do? The answer lies in the words of Francis Keppel, U.S. Commissioner of Education from 1962-1965, who once said, “Education is too important to be left solely to educators.” Everyone needs to be accountable for the successes and the failures of our public schools; everyone needs to get involved. The first people we have to get on board are our **students**. We have to encourage them to take responsibility over their own learning. As teacher-leaders, we need to help students be accountable to themselves and help them understand that they are in control of their future. The decisions students make now about their education can effect them for a lifetime. Teachers and schools can provide children with amazing opportunities to grow and learn and achieve – but students have to make the choice to participate, to take advantage of those opportunities, and be an engaged learner.

The next constituency we have to engage are **parents**. Parents are the single most important factor in a child's success, but not all parents show an interest and involvement in their child's education. This void of parental support sometimes gives children the excuse they are looking for to not take advantage of their educational opportunities. Thus, it is vitally important that every parent gets involved and becomes a partner to their child's school and teachers. As teacher-leaders we should encourage parents to ask themselves, "What am I doing to support my child's education?" Parents need to have high expectations and need to show their sons and daughters through their own actions how vitally important education is. Though most kids will refuse to admit it, children really do want their parents to show a sincere interest in their school lives – it gives them a feeling of worth, and a reason to try harder and become more motivated for success.

Finally, as leaders in our school districts, we must encourage involvement from community members and community leaders. We need to remind the public that parents and teachers should not be the only adults invested in educating our youth. We've all been to school budget hearings, so we know that the biggest critics of public education are often the people who haven't set foot in a classroom since they, themselves, graduated high school. Let's talk to these people, invite them into the schools. Allow them the opportunity to talk to educators and students – encourage them to ask how the public can better support teaching and learning. Our community members need to take the time to see for themselves what is going on behind the clever sound byte they heard or the newspaper headline they read. Strong schools do more for a community than almost any other investment that could be made. More public support creates more opportunities for our children, more opportunities create better futures for everyone.

I chose a career in public education not because finding a research job or a position in academia was too difficult, not because I wanted my summers off, and certainly not because I wanted to make a lot of money. I chose a career in public education because I found intrinsic value in sharing my love of learning, my ideals, and my life experiences with teenagers. Thus, the greatest reward I have in my profession is in knowing I have made a difference. To rephrase Forest Witcraft's famous quote, "It will not matter how many papers I have graded, how many lessons I have taught, or what awards I have won, but the world might be different because I was important to the life of a child." Tonight we can all celebrate the impact we have had, and will continue to have, on the lives of our students and also our colleagues. We celebrate the fact that, as district teachers of the year, we have begun a new journey as leaders in our communities. Tonight we celebrate the fact that, as a teacher, you never truly know where your influence will end.

Thank you and congratulations to you all!