

Plainville Citizen Op-Ed, September, 2014

As we begin 2014-15 school year, I would like to share a number of thoughts that I have had since our graduation ceremony last June which concluded the 2013-14 school year. The experiences and interactions throughout our schools last year provided me with plenty of evidence to support my new assertion that “**Plainville is GETTING IT RIGHT.**” This was the theme of my address to all school district faculty members on August 27, when we assembled for Convocation and the kick-off to this school year. The event was a celebration of our staff’s hard work, dedication to our district, and commitment to the students of Plainville. I am extremely proud of the work this community has done to take the vision we have outlined for our schools and turn it into a reality - - a blueprint for success. We are **getting it right** through the connections we have established between our work to improve our schools and our Board of Education’s commitment to ensure we have the resources we need to turn those efforts into success for our students. This is the start of my fourth year as Superintendent of Plainville Community Schools, and I am proud to say this community has provided the necessary resources and support for the school district each of those years. Thanks to this continued collective support, effort and focus, we are well positioned to continue our success as we move through the 2014-15 school year and beyond.

This year we will continue our early childhood initiative that began two years ago with full-day Kindergarten. This September, we had approximately 100 four-year-old Plainville children, nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the future kindergarten class, enter our schools through the expanded preschool program now available at each Plainville

elementary school. The advantages of quality preschool experiences are undeniable and this is an incredible opportunity for our youngest Plainville students. We will also see a higher level of coordination in the support we provide for struggling learners, as we now have a new structure and the capacity in each school to provide, sustain and assess the effectiveness of support for these students.

We will also continue to support our faculty members working in Data Teams across the school district throughout the school year. These meetings are scheduled on a few early dismissal days for students, and provide the venue for faculty collaboration and planning through the review and analysis of key district data. The time our teachers spend together during Data Team meetings is vital to the success of our school system. I will not allow our school district to be defined or categorized by the Smarter Balanced Assessment (the new State approved standardized test replacing the CMT and CAPT) alone as we move forward. We have an opportunity to decide for ourselves what data is important to gather, how it is analyzed, and how we incorporate it into our continuous improvement plans.

Students will also benefit from the expansion of our efforts in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) areas. Thanks to our Board of Education's support and a State grant, we have a new, state of the art STEM Lab at Plainville High School, and additional enhancements within our Technology Education Department, continuing our commitment to create opportunities and strengthening our ability to build 21st century skills in our students.

Finally, our deployment of technology tools that fit our teaching and learning needs have expanded once again this year. All students in grades 6-12 have their

own Chromebooks. In addition, we have expanded the availability of technology at all elementary schools to include class sets of Chromebooks for all fifth grade classrooms, desktop and laptop computer centers in all first through fourth grade classrooms, and sets of iPads to be used for reading and math instruction in each kindergarten room. We have become a model in Connecticut for implementing technology integration and deploying these tools, but our work in this area is still just beginning.

Even with all that is happening in our school district, what makes me so sure that **Plainville is getting it right?** I'll begin with the climate and culture we have developed district-wide. We have conducted a number of surveys over the last two years, gathering data on the perceptions of all constituent groups on a variety of issues across our schools. The evidence is overwhelming. Regardless of who we ask, people associated with our schools in all capacities feel good about working here, teaching here, learning here, and having their children educated and cared for here. When asked their level of agreement to positive statements about all aspects of our schools, nearly 90% of students, teachers, staff and parents responses were favorable. If you have been involved in other school districts this might not strike you as significant. But those of us with experience in other educational settings truly see how amazing these survey results are. **Plainville is definitely getting it right!**

If that is not enough, talk of a school's success at the state level is often centered on "closing the achievement gap." The gap is the difference between the performance of students from economically disadvantaged families and their peers from wealthier homes. But the reality is that when looking at testing data from the

CMT and CAPT over the last six or seven years, up to the end of 2013, very little has changed on the state-wide level, despite the talk and efforts. A review of the percentage of students performing above the proficient level on the reading and math portions of the CAPT in Connecticut shows students qualified for free or reduced lunch consistently 30%-35% behind those students whose family income requires paying full-price for lunch - - basically unchanged over seven years. Further, looking at our District Reference Group (DRG-F), the gap has been slightly less at 20%-25%, but still there has been little or no progress towards closing the gap in these other Connecticut school districts that are most like Plainville demographically and economically. **But Plainville is getting it right.** Over the same period of time and particularly over the last four years, Plainville has significantly closed our gap from about 25% seven years ago, down to about 10% last year. Keep in mind that this was done not by bringing one group down to meet the other, but by simultaneously raising performance in both groups, for all students.

From expanded early childhood education, to exceptional school climate and outstanding academic achievement – **Plainville is getting it right!** I look forward to the 2014-15 school year with much excitement and pride, as we continue on the path to even greater success.