

Good morning.

Thank you for this truly amazing honor. It is an incredibly humbling experience to accept this award in a room full of such phenomenal educators. I am blessed to represent all of the hard working and dedicated teachers and staff here in Torrington. I would like to extend my gratitude to our Board of Education members, representatives, Superintendent Lubomski, Assistant Superintendent Fergusson, Mrs. Creedon, Mr. Deacon, and the committee members who helped pave the way for my opportunity today.

I would like to extend a very special thank you to our Forbes School staff and our Principal, Michael Clyne. I learn from each of you every day and am so fortunate to have the opportunity to stand by you as we help to change the world one child at a time.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their unfailing support and belief in my potential and I would like to share my gratitude and this honor with my music colleagues. I truly wouldn't be here without you, your mentorship, and your friendship. I am humbled to share this honor with Wayne Spletstoeszer, a Grammy nominated educator who works so tirelessly for the students of Torrington, and Michelle Castellano who was also named the Southwest Teacher of the Year. Congratulations to Mrs. Gelormino, Mr. Skinner, and our talented students on their performance of Moana this morning and summer. The Pride of Torrington starts with my colleagues, and I am so privileged to be in your company.

We are here today eager to begin a new year. It's always the same excitement whether you find yourself on your first day of your first year or the first day of your last year. I wish I could bottle this enthusiasm so that I can dip into it on the most stressful days. This summer, I was scrolling through my feed when I came across a quick video that spoke to the weight of stress. I'd like to share the message with you now.

Pick up glass

How heavy is this glass of water? You might respond 8 ounces, 12 ounces, or even 16 ounces. The absolute weight of the glass doesn't matter. It depends how long I hold onto it. If I hold it for a minute, nothing happens. If I hold it for an hour my arm will begin to ache. If I hold it all day long my arm will begin to feel numb and paralyzed. The weight of the glass hasn't changed, but the longer I hold onto it, the heavier it becomes. The stresses and worries of life are like this glass of water. If you think about them for a little while, there's no problem. If you think about it a little bit longer, it begins to hurt. If you think about them all day long, you'll feel paralyzed, incapable of doing anything. Always remember to put the glass down.

As humans, we sometimes forget that everyone's glass is different. It holds different substances; each glass can be a different weight or size on any given day depending upon who has taken from it or added to it. It comes from different manufacturers and is made of different materials. Equity is a word we use frequently in education. It means understanding our students needs, meeting them where they are and understanding that they are each holding a different glass. It is our job to be able to recognize that glass whether it is visible or invisible. Each day, we need to remember that our students enter our room and may have already been holding the glass for an incredible amount of time even at the youngest ages. Sometimes what our students need most has nothing to do with what's on the lesson plan. Sometimes, they need help to put the glass down first.

Students who feel strong personal connections in their school, speak frequently with teachers, and receive positive and constructive guidance will achieve higher levels of academic success. If they know their teachers genuinely care for them and desire to help them succeed, children grow into healthy productive members of society. They work their hardest for teachers they like and respect and that requires us to like and respect them first. Visible child states that authentic connection is defined by what the child perceives as connection, not by what we intend as connection. To connect with a child, we must observe, slow down, understand them, and meet them where they are.

In 2020, society was confronted with a pandemic that moved our profession online and physically distanced us from our students. During that time, they felt scared, isolated, and unsure of what the future held. As a result, educators have witnessed increasing mental health struggles manifesting in our classrooms. Students in Killingly, Connecticut so desperate for support, have urged their local board of education to provide a mental health clinic in their high school. They reason that having mental health

services benefits students by keeping them in the classroom while supporting their needs. Students, educators, and communities recognize that schools are designed to provide an inclusive environment in which the educational, social, emotional, and developmental needs of children can be met.

Custodians, secretaries, cafeteria staff, instructional assistants, specialists, administrators, and classroom teachers are all stewards of a school's culture and climate that directly impact student engagement. "Research has shown that strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with adults in schools consistently predict students' capacity for resilient behavior, even in the face of traumatic experiences ... [students are] ultimately creating long-term pathways toward healthy, thriving school communities". I encourage all staff members to continue to collaboratively invest in creating a caring and nurturing environment, in which students and families become more deeply engaged in and supportive of educational opportunities.

Building connection with and amongst our students is more important now than ever before. Our lessons may be rigorous and robust, but if we overlook building connection with our students, they will not be engaged in the content we address. Student learning cannot take place without establishing a safe environment that focuses on the unique attributes that our children bring to the table. We need to recognize that our students enter the school building with diverse abilities and backgrounds that impact each interaction of their day. As educators, we need to explore new ways to engage students and make it a priority to discover different types of instruction, teaching strategies, resources, and professional development opportunities that speak to the diversity of our student population. These conversations amongst colleagues are vital to cultivating positive bonds with our students and their families. Together, we can take an interdisciplinary approach so that the message of diversity affirmation is pervasive throughout our school climate and culture. As a result, staff, students, and families will feel empowered and represented within our school community.

In closing today, I'd like to take a moment to remind you to put your own glass down from time to time. Educators often feel as if we NEED to hold our glass for an insurmountable amount of time. We feel like we need to pick up and hold onto the glasses of others as dedicated public servants. I'd like to remind us all that it is imperative that we set our glass down in order to make ourselves a priority. Set time aside for yourself and do the things you need to do in order to reset and recharge. Make it a great year everyone, I wish you all the best for 2022-2023!