Good afternoon and welcome to the twelfth annual State of the Schools address, held for the fourth consecutive year here in the Troy High School Student Commons. A special thank you goes to the high school staff for making this space available to us today and for setting it up for us. Thanks also to the Troy Area Chamber of Commerce for sponsoring this event and for the unending support it provides for us throughout the year. I also appreciate Kathy McIntosh and the Troy High School Jazz Band for performing for us.

I’d like to introduce our board members who could be with us today. Welcome to Board President Joyce Reives and Reverend Jim Wilson. Board members George Dearth, Doug Trostle, and Stephen Lucas were not able to be here with us today. Many of you may know that Reverend Wilson has been given an opportunity to serve in a much larger church in Westerville beginning this summer, so he will only be on our board until the end of June. I’d like to take this opportunity to wish him the best of luck in his new endeavor and thank him for his years of service to us. The board will have his replacement decided by the July board meeting.

I’ve made no secret of how I feel about our board. I have been blessed during my tenure as superintendent to have worked for a group of people who have served for all the right reasons and who bring a wealth of skills to the schools thanks to a variety of business and life experiences. Their only goal has been to make our schools the best they can be. They’ve never lost sight of their responsibilities, and there hasn’t been a single time when their goals or motives have been anything other than doing what is best for the students in the Troy City Schools. Not all school superintendents can make that statement.

In fact, in my opinion, school boards have two primary responsibilities. One is to ensure that students are provided with excellent educational and extra-curricular opportunities and the other is to make sure the
district is well managed financially. Our board deserves an A+ in both categories. Our schools are excellent in many ways. Our students are provided with a variety of programs, both curricular and extra-curricular, they have outstanding facilities in which to engage in these activities, and, at a time when many districts are undergoing drastic cuts in programs and services, we are as solid financially as a district can be. What more can we ask of them?

While I’m recognizing people who have played a significant role in the success of this school district, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention one more. After twenty years with the Troy City Schools, Don Pence is retiring at the end of July as our school treasurer. Don is widely respected around the state as one of the best in his field, partly because of his outstanding technical skills, but just as importantly, because his personal and professional ethics are above reproach. He has successfully managed hundreds of millions of dollars in his time as treasurer, and he has done so with the utmost integrity, honesty, and efficiency. In addition to his school duties, Don has recognized the importance of being involved in the community by serving on the United Way board and as a Chamber Ambassador. The biggest compliment I can pay Don is that had he not been sitting in the treasurer’s seat five years ago, I would not have taken this job as Superintendent. That’s how much I have trusted him.

I am happy to report that because of the job he has done and because of the excellent reputation of both our school district and our community, we have had an outstanding pool of candidates apply for our treasurer’s position. I have faith that our board will find a person with the skills and integrity that Don has displayed to help us continue our excellence.

In 1983, a landmark report on public education called “A Nation at Risk” was written in which it was noted; “We are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate.” Now, thankfully, I’m old enough to have graduated before, apparently, being illiterate became a way of life in this country, and I am grateful for that. But some of you were in school when that report was written and others have graduated since, which apparently places you squarely in the “illiterate” category. What? Don’t you find that a little insulting, and more importantly, don’t you find it untrue?
Well, today, nearly three decades after that original report was written, the teeth gnashing has gotten even louder, the hand wringing has gotten even more intense, and the political rhetoric has gotten even more bombastic, and with all due respect to the “experts,” it is no more true in Troy today than it was in 1983. In my thirty-three years here I have seen thousands of students pass through our doors that are destined for success, and they are certainly not illiterate. In fact, you have met some of them today.

I understand that my defense of public education may seem a little self-serving, so I have provided you with an article in which Dr. Yong Zhao, a professor at Michigan State University, discusses the perceived international achievement gap between the United States and other nations. Dr. Zhao, who went to school in China and whose children attend public schools in the United States, has a little different, and, in my opinion, more realistic, perspective than many of the so-called experts who talk about how bad our educational system is. He also expresses concern about how the standards that have been devised to improve schools, the very standards that are used as the only means of evaluating us, are actually holding us back. At the same time he points out that countries that are often pointed to as those having schools better than ours are in reality looking to imitate how we work with children. He also discusses some areas in which public schools need to improve, and he is right, but the irony of his message is that what he feels we need to improve are not even areas of emphasis for the people rating us. It is a rather enlightening article that I believe may provide you a little different perspective on education than you are used to hearing.

I wish you all could spend time with the young people in our schools like I can. You would see that our hallways are filled with bright, energetic, polite, compassionate, articulate, skilled young people who are destined for success. I can tell you that many of them have more skills than I had at their age; their knowledge of technology certainly surpass mine; and I occasionally sit in classes in which it is quickly apparent that their knowledge is superior to what mine was at the same age. In other words, I can assure you that the students I see in our schools are not illiterate. Many of you know that what I say is true, because your own children and their friends graduated from Troy or are currently attending our schools.
To be fair; not all of our students are high achievers. (Now I must admit to you I took this photo off the Internet, because I couldn’t find any Troy students actually sleeping in class.) Some of them don’t work particularly hard and some don’t value education as much as they should. Some are slow to listen to advice, whether it comes from a teacher or their parents, and some aren’t as prepared for life when they graduate as we wish they were. But, this generation is no different than the generations that preceded it. Years ago, those kids simply quit school before reaching high school age. Today, that is not an option. The fact is a greater percentage of kids graduate today than they ever have because they are given so many more opportunities to succeed and because schools are penalized for every student who drops out.

I wish I could tell you that we can force all young people to be successful through sheer will, but we can’t. We all know adults who, for some reason, seem to refuse to do what they need to do to be successful no matter how much assistance they receive, and kids are no different. Being successful at any age is a matter of choice, so while we can’t guarantee a student’s success, what we can do better than anywhere else in the world is offer them the opportunity to succeed. We take all comers. No one is excluded because their parents don’t make enough money, or their clothes aren’t fancy enough; or they don’t live in the “right” section of town, or someone decides they don’t have enough ability to come to school. All our young people need is a commitment to improve and a willingness to work, and they can be whatever they want to be and do whatever they want to do. There are examples all over the world of Troy students who have taken advantage of their opportunities and have achieved great success. Likewise, the vast majority of young people in our schools today will do the same thing.

I stand before you today as the superintendent of a district that was classified last year as “Excellent” by the Ohio Department of Education. We were rated “Excellent” based on three criteria; how our students in grades three through eleven performed on achievement tests, student attendance rate, and graduation rate. Now, don’t get me wrong, if the ODE is going to rate schools, I’d rather they rated us “Excellent” than something of a lesser quality, but I realize that, with the way they evaluate schools, our rating could change next year and it wouldn’t necessarily reflect the job we have done. So, I have to be honest with you, whether we have been rated “Effective,” “Continuous
Improvement,” or “Excellent,” and we’ve been rated all three, I have never been a fan of this system because I believe it measures just a fraction of what we are doing for kids. Sure, we should provide outstanding academic opportunities, and we do. But, we are also expected to provide emotional support for students in need; well-rounded extra-curricular programs in many areas, not just in athletics, to allow students to discover and expand on their creative skills; and social assistance, life skills, and character education programs, to help them become well rounded adults. Heck, we even provide nursing services in all our buildings to support students with fragile health. For the ODE to rate schools on only three of the things we do for kids seems particularly shortsighted and, frankly, unfair, so while I’m grateful they think we are excellent, I believe we are for a variety of reasons beyond test scores.

Also, the concept of rating a school as if it is independent of its community makes no sense to me. Our schools cannot be excellent unless you are excellent. To rate us as if we are independent entities, as if we are not impacted by where we sit and who we serve is, in my mind, ignoring reality. I told you earlier that schools are rated on student attendance, and, thankfully, we always rate high on that standard. But, when I was a student in the Covington Schools, I rarely missed a day, but my excellent attendance had very little to do with the Covington staff and everything to do with my parents, who made it very clear that I was to be in school, on time, every day. So, while I appreciate that we score well on that indicator, the fact is that is more about the parents of our students than it is about us.

So, I suppose I could stand up here and take credit for the thousands and thousands of former Troy students who have led successful lives upon graduation from Troy, but it would be pretty disingenuous of me to do so. Of course, we played a role in their success, but certainly not a bigger role than they or their parents played; or the hundreds of people who donate both time and money to our schools; or the members of our community, who actually set the expectations we have for both students and staff. We have academic, behavioral, and social expectations for our kids, to be sure, but if you don’t believe in and support those values, then we will not be excellent. The fact that our schools are in lock step with our parents and community, not how a bunch of eight year olds did on tests, is what makes us excellent, and the moment our values are not
in line with yours is the moment the schools and the community become less than excellent, because, make no mistake about it, this is a team effort!

I’ve said before how unique Troy is in that the civic and school leaders understand that our success is dependent on each other. There can be no better example of how our working together has benefited all of us than the recent announcement of expansion at ConAgra. Mayor Beamish and Mr. Titterington involved us in those discussions from the outset, because they knew how important it was that we all worked together to bring more jobs to this community. Because of that attitude, we are all better off, and I’m confident that this united effort did not go unnoticed by the folks from ConAgra. That, not how a bunch of eight-year-olds do on tests, is what makes us excellent.

No discussion about schools would be complete without the obligatory conversation about school funding, and for that I apologize. But, there are two issues to discuss on this front. The first is our upcoming renewal levy on May 4th. It is a 5.9 mill levy that has been in effect for two decades and allowing it to expire would result in a loss of $1.1 million per year in operating revenue. While 5.9 mills sounds like a large levy, in this case, it is not, because allowing it to expire would reduce my property taxes and yours by only .41 mills, because we are collecting at nearly the state minimum already. So, allowing it to expire would have a major, negative impact on our budget, while saving you and me a minimal amount of money. We cannot afford to lose this funding at the same time our payments from the state are declining, so I hope you will support us on May 4th.

The second financial issue I want to discuss today is the federal Race to the Top grant for which the state of Ohio applied and did not receive. A couple of weeks ago, Governor Strickland challenged school districts that did not sign on with the state to explain to their constituents why they didn’t go after this “free” money. I’d like to take this opportunity to do just that.

When local school districts were approached by the Ohio Department of Education to support them during a very short window a few weeks ago, Eric Herman and I sat in on an audio conference that lasted over an hour. During the entire session, we heard few, if any, specific answers to questions that were asked of the people conducting the
conference. We could not be assured that the costs to implement this grant wouldn’t be greater than the amount of money we would receive, and we couldn’t be assured of exactly what the requirements of the grant were, because they were still being written. So, in a nutshell, we were being asked to sign up for something for which no specifics could be offered. Now, mind you, this is occurring in roughly the same time frame when both federal and state politicians were being skewered for signing off on bills without knowing the details. We felt it was bad form to put our name on a grant before we knew what the expectations and costs associated with it were. So, we, along with nearly two-thirds of the other public schools in the state, didn’t sign up. I find it ironic that some of the same media outlets that have loudly criticized politicians for passing bills without knowing their contents are now critical of school districts for doing just the opposite. That seems a little disingenuous to me.

Having said this, since Ohio did not receive the first round of grants, it has decided to register for round two. So, I sat in on another audio conference just last week. Frankly, the presenters were a little better prepared this time, but there are still some questions to be answered. We’ll study this further in the coming weeks.

I’ll admit that we enter into these kinds of discussion somewhat gun-shy because of past experiences with mandates and funding. This grant comes on the heels of a new mandate requiring school districts to implement all-day, every day kindergarten beginning next year, unless a waiver not to do so is granted by the ODE. We have applied for that waiver, because implementing all-day, every day kindergarten in Troy next year would result in an increase in costs of a minimum of ½ million dollars per year, and we do not feel now is the time to increase costs. Now, there are those in Columbus who claim that the state is already paying for that implementation with its new funding formula, but it is not. We have more students this year than last, and if kindergarten students were being funded at twice the amounts as last year, then it stands to reason that our state foundation payment would have increased this year. In fact, it has been reduced by 1%, so all-day, every day kindergarten is not being fully funded.

As you might imagine, I’m involved in many conversations about the challenges facing us in education. Often, I’ll hear that schools are out of date and that we are not preparing students for the future, because they
will experience things in their lives that we haven’t even dreamed of. But, I have to ask myself how that is any different than any other time in our history? When I think about the things that we take for granted today that didn’t even exist when I went to school, I realize that nothing’s changed. Just because a cell phone or a PC or a Kindle or a VCR or a DVD player or any one of a thousand other things didn’t exist back when those of us who are more mature were in school doesn’t mean we haven’t had the skills to learn about them. That’s because education isn’t about just teaching facts and figures. It’s about teaching young people how to use their imaginations, allowing them to be creative, providing them social and emotional guidance, teaching them how to work cooperatively with others, and helping them learn how to solve problems. Those skills never get out of date, and those are the skills we teach in schools today. Our kids will be prepared for their future, just like we have been.

One of the great joys I get as a school superintendent is shaking the hands of the more than three hundred graduates as they cross the stage at Hobart Arena every year. Thousands of Troy High School students have walked across that stage and have continued right on to lead very successful lives. I am confident that, with your help, they will continue to do so.

Thank you very much for your time today. Have a safe trip back to work.

Tom Dunn

Superintendent

Troy City Schools