I want to share a few thoughts about the New York State Council of School Superintendents (THE COUNCIL) and the superintendency with you, but let me start by telling you a little about my own roots in education.

My maternal grandmother was a widely respected teacher in a one room school house beginning around the turn of the last century in Arlington, Vermont. Her husband, whom I was named after, was a hard-working carpenter, with a driven intellectual curiosity.

My father was a high school dropout who was awarded a diploma when the school found out he had been cutting school to hang out in the town library so he could read to his heart’s content unbothered by the annoying interruptions of classes and teachers. During the Depression he and his brothers ran a House of Hospitality for the bums on Burlington, Vermont’s Skid Row as members of the Catholic Worker movement – a radical, anarchist, pacifist group that embraced voluntary poverty, and profoundly shaped the life my family lived – as well as my own passions and values. He was a union organizer in the 1930s, when it was a life threatening occupation. He lived out his life as a lumberjack, farmer, shop worker and finally a school janitor. He was a master conversationalist, deeply religious, a reflective, philosophical thinker, and one of the great intellectuals and wisest men I’ve ever known.

In the 1930s, my mother started teaching in her own one room school up in the Vermont mountains. Once her nine children were all in school, she returned to the profession as a third grade teacher – one of those legendary teachers who took in all the difficult kids in the days before special education and still ended up with the top reading scores in the school. Although she eventually retired, she never really stopped teaching. The last time I saw her, a few days before she died, she was sitting up in her bed. The entire Wetlands Commission of the town sat around the bed attentively as she guided them through the map of the town spread out over her bedspread, identifying all of the wetlands they would have to carry on protecting once she had passed away. Hundreds of people showed up for her funeral, some who had sat in her classroom and many more who had been taught by her in the school of life.

So what else could I do? Like half of my siblings, I turned to schools to make a living. Public education threw one opportunity after another at me – in alternative education, in the arts, academics, sports, policy making, grant writing, research, school design, curriculum development, teacher and administrator development, program evaluation – a dazzling array of fascinating opportunities – and I embraced them all. And thanks to your kindness and support, I arrive here before you tonight, deeply appreciative of the opportunity you have given me.

I’m honored . . . but it does raise the question, what is a THE COUNCIL’S President supposed to do? In a way, I guess, it’s pretty simple – support you, the New York State superintendents. But what does that mean?

- Does it mean help you to thoughtfully implement the reform agenda . . . or does it mean defend you against ill-conceived directives from on high?
• Does it mean lead you towards an embrace of challenging national standards, or does it mean support your defense of the historically effective role of local control of schools?

There is, in fact, at the core of the superintendency, a deep division, a structural – and even personal – schizophrenia, that I share with every superintendent in the state. That’s the bad news.

But the good news is that this fundamental paradox of our lives is nothing new.

If you’ve been in the business for almost half a century, the current set of crises look oddly familiar. Think about what we have lived through:

• There are our philosophical roots: John Dewey and his critics, and the skirmishes around Vygotsky, Piaget, and I’m sure you can make your own long list of other controversial thinkers.

• There are the battles fought over the idealisms of the sixties. Think of Summerhill, open classrooms, the demand for political and social relevance, or the countercultural alternative schools.

• There are the academic wars: phonics versus whole language, the math wars, the testing debates, constructivism versus content mastery, the place of special education and bilingualism.

• There are the culture wars: sex education, evolution, prayer in schools, diversity, American values, charter schools, vouchers, funding inequities.

• We have even been called to engage in the wars of the larger society: civil rights, Vietnam, the War on Poverty, integration, the income gap, immigration.

And – more subtle and more dangerous – is the now decades long, pervasive loss of respect for some of the historic and fundamental purposes of education – for the ability to reflect at length, to engage in thoughtful, respectful and constructive debate, to enrich oneself through a well-developed and critical embrace of the arts, to nurture creativity, complex problem solving, self-discipline and self-regulated learning, to awaken a sense of morality rooted in a culture of diversity and tolerance – the habits of mind and the habits of the heart that our students need to thrive in the world of the 21st century.

Paralleling this for the past half century is the gradual diminishment of the American intellectual – a status that one aspired to in the time between the 1930s and the 1960s, but since then, a status that has become more and more disparaged, shunned first by pressure groups, then by politicians and finally, now, all too often, shunned by the broader culture itself.

So there is at least some meager comfort we can take in remembering that the current battles are simply the next chapter in the profoundly important work that becomes the American history of education, a history that will continue to be written long after you and I – and the Race to the Top and Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) — have been patted on the head for the last time and been let out to pasture . . . and the next round of battles – on entirely different topics – has been engaged.
For THE COUNCIL, for me, and for each of you, the superintendents of New York State, we will continue to straddle these paradoxes. Our common task is to find our balance through a fearless focus on the well-being of our students, on creating professional environments of support for our teachers and administrators, on fighting for the resources needed to meet their needs.

Because we live in a real, political world, we must both constructively and critically engage the federal and state reform agenda . . . never in passive compliance, but rather always as critical partners who demand equality of place in the cacophony of voices swirling around our work. As those most deeply immersed in the infinitely complex, ever shifting, current reality of public education, ours is the essential voice in carving out the actual, practical, effective path to greater excellence in our schools and for our students.

So what is the work of THE COUNCIL this year?

- To provide guidance and support through the thicket of an all too hasty implementation of APPR.

- To work with the State Education Department to ensure that the day-to-day reality of our schools informs the reform agenda.

- To confront the broad brush, one-size-fits-all reformers with the remarkable diversity of quality and need and challenges and resources in our schools.

- To champion the actual, proven models of excellence that exists in so many public schools across the state.

- To expand and deepen the concept of accountability beyond a test score or an APPR number.

- To lead the development of a rich and efficacious definition – one that is respectful of the creativity and entrepreneurship that is a uniquely American product of education – of what it means for a graduate of our schools to be ready . . . for college, for a career, for life.

And as we face these challenges together, let us never lose sight of one of the most important bedrocks of public education -- the brilliant, mysterious and unquenchable radiance that illuminates each successful encounter between a student and a teacher. It can’t be quantified or measured or tested. But it is the beacon that draws us forward. It is the true source of excellence. It points us ever onward toward that place where our dreams for our students and their dreams for their future become so intertwined as to be indistinguishable.

We superintendents work each day to clear away all that stands in the way of thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students achieving this vision. It is hard work, sometimes draining, and too many of us have been wounded or even destroyed by its dangers. But in the end, what could be more noble more satisfying, more profoundly enriching than to engage in this struggle, the daily work of a public school superintendent in the State of New York?