From the President’s Pen

BY DR. AMY SICHEL, SUPT., ABINGTON SD

It is my pleasure to write this first column as the newly elected President of PASA to my colleagues from across the state. I hope throughout this year to provide some thought and inspiration to our very busy days.

As we all know, the positions of Superintendent and school administrators are the most noble of all careers—affecting the generations of tomorrow—but yet so difficult and tumultuous! This combination of polar opposites often causes one to reflect on why we continue to serve each and every day! Although these positions can be difficult, it is exciting and rewarding when students and staff strive to achieve—and, in fact, do achieve—excellence.

Public education is changing, whether it be Race to the Top, Common Core Standards, Keystone Exams, or increased PSSA proficiency targets.

However, in the words of Horace Mann, a father of American public education, “Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen.” We cannot adopt a “wait and see” position. We need to be proactive, keeping our “eye on the prize” and working toward increased achievement. We need to be focused on the “right work” for the results.

Shift happens, and the world around us is changing very quickly. Thus, how educators teach and how students learn needs to adjust accordingly.

The nation’s changing demographics, the changing economy (including a declining middle class and increased globalization), and shifting skill sets among American workers are described in a 2007 ETS study as “America’s Perfect Storm.” This “perfect storm” has the potential to impact education through a continued decline in district budgets, an increase in English language learners, and a shift in the skills that students need to learn in order to be competitive in a global market. While not all school districts are facing this storm as significantly as others, we must all be aware of the changes occurring around us and the need to adjust and adapt to meet current challenges facing public education today.

Even while this shift happens, we need to continue to concentrate our efforts to stimulate progress and make the right things happen in our schools. Stimulating progress requires engagement, not only engagement of school board members, administrators, and teachers in setting goals, aligning actions, and promoting achievement, but also, most importantly, engagement of students in quality and effective instruction. We need to continually ask these questions:

• What are we doing to engage the students of today?
• What do we need to do to meet the needs of today’s digital learners while we continue to increase student achievement?

Clearly, in education we face many threats and challenges. As jet fighter pilots do, we need to “turn in toward the threat and face the challenge!”

As an example, we all know the pros and cons of No Child Left Behind, and they are numerous. However, whether we like it or not, the one great pro was that it made us “accountable” for the achievement of “all” children.

Now, if you have not seen “Waiting for Superman,” I implore you to see it, for that movie holds us “responsible” for providing quality instruction for “all” students in this country. The film sparks the continued debate about American education, why we rank near the bottom of industrialized countries in reading and mathematics, and why some charter schools like Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, are working. I think Davis Guggenheim, the director and co-writer, simply asks the question, “Why can’t we have more great schools?”

In his text Good to Great, Jim Collins speaks to “the magical combination of preserve the core and stimulate progress.” He would suggest, and I endorse, that schools and districts will only endure changing times if they have core values that go beyond the Superintendent and school boards. These core values, purposes, and principles must guide all decisions and inspire students, staff, and the community. Collins’ commitment to continuous improvement provides us with a model to design and implement change.

Think of the changes that have occurred over the course of your involvement in public education as an administrator, teacher, or parent. Remember when it was “new math,” “hands-on science,” and Radio Shack computers? Today’s students have been born into a world where computers and the Internet are their norm!

It is imperative that we continue on the pathway from good to great. We must turn in toward the threat while still maintaining our core values. A perfect storm may be coming. Shift may be happening. But we must persevere with our mission to “promote excellence as our standard and achievement as the result!”

(As the 2010 PA Superintendent of the Year, Dr. Sichel presented these remarks during the PASA Recognition Luncheon on October 14 in Hershey.)