

State of the School Address – May 17, 2010

Good morning and welcome to the State of the School address. Much has happened since I was introduced as Keith's 15th Head of School back in August. The school year started with a bang! 30% of the Class of 2010 were named Illinois State Scholars, meaning they ranked in the top 10% of all high school seniors from 711 Illinois High Schools. Our teams thrilled us with sectional and regional titles as well as appearances at the state level. Homecoming produced an Alumni Soccer game, and the 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders participated in the Peace Plaza Performance. With classroom activities and assignments, sports, musicals, art shows, field trips, guest presentations, interim, college visits, AP testing, the school year has progressed quickly because it is a busy place. This is truly a remarkable school and I am pleased and proud to be here.

A school is a story. It is an unfolding and evolving drama with no script but plenty of actors and actresses and plenty of scenes. There are no rehearsals and no endings. My comments this morning reflect one person's view after being here for nine months. There are many impressions of this story that are emerging for Keith School and all of you are involved with it. I have only been here a relatively short time in the school's history, but I appreciate the warm and friendly welcoming that I have received and especially the oversized bow tie given to me by the seniors.

I wanted to divide this morning's presentation into four areas:

- 1) my initial impressions of Keith;
- 2) some highlights from the year;
- 3) an update from the strategic plan;
- 4) what's ahead moving forward.

Having lived in a southern climate for the past twenty years, my wife and I were hesitant to make a big move to the Midwest. She had grown up in Kansas City and had graduated from Rockford College, but other than that, we had no formal attachments to this area. After visiting the school and learning more about Keith's rich history, many successes, and great reputation, I felt as though this was a good place for me based upon my background and experiences in the independent school world. I have not been disappointed and you should be very proud of what you, the faculty have created here; of what the students have accomplished; and what current and former Board members and parents have helped to create. This is the 7th independent school in which I have worked as a teacher, coach, division head, or headmaster. Keith can hold its head high compared to any of them. The students bring a positive energy with them everyday to school. They are bright, engaging, welcoming, friendly, focused, and service minded. The faculty has a passionate belief in the worth and value of each individual student at school, and this is seen in its dedication, commitment, and loyalty. During the interview process, I met with the department heads and asked them why they kept returning to Keith year after year. Every one of them said that they returned every year because of the students. Their collective desire to work with and influence these children in positive and enriching ways is the level of depth that one looks for from a core faculty. You won't find that level of devotion just anywhere. The quality of performance by the students whether in the

classroom, on the athletic field, on stage...and how about “Cabaret?” I brought an older couple to see the show and they claimed it was better than the Broadway show they had seen. And how about those Lower School musicals. WOW! Whether promoting service organizations or supporting local charities, our students do this with a sincere desire to help others. While the service hours are required, I see the students recognizing the value of this service and completing the hours with a sense of accomplishment. Sportsmanship shows on and off the field whether a team wins or loses. I have seen our students handle victory and defeat with honor, maturity, and poise. This is a wonderful place to come to every morning, and I am happy and honored to be part of such an incredible school.

The faculty was assigned to read Dr. Carol Dweck’s book, *Mindset*, prior to the opening of school. The theme of her book is that hard work, realistic expectations and goals, and a can-do attitude are the prevalent factors in an individual’s success and not one’s native ability. We have tried to emphasize these skills and attributes throughout the year.

I could speak for hours about the achievements of our students this year either individually or collectively, and we are creating a “brag sheet” to highlight these accomplishments. Individual and team academic awards, athletic team recognitions, and art honors seem to be presented with each morning meeting.

- * Seniors (almost 70% of them) have been awarded academic and leadership scholarship grants to colleges and universities throughout the country.

- * 30% of the Class of 2010 were named Illinois State Scholars, meaning they ranked in the top 10% of all high school seniors from 711 Illinois High Schools.

- * Over 50% of the Middle School qualified for the Midwest Talent Search based on their spring standardized test scores. The Midwest Talent Search is conducted by Northwestern University with the primary objective to identify gifted and talented students to offer educational opportunities on their campus. (Duke, Stanford, Johns Hopkins)

- * The high school math team won the Illinois Council of Math Teachers 1A regional Math Championship and advanced to the state finals where they finished 8th. The top ten finish marked the 4th consecutive year that Keith’s team placed in the top 10 in the state.

- * The World Youth in Science and Engineering (WYSE) team won its 10th consecutive regional Championship in February by earning a perfect score of 500. The team finished 2nd in the sectionals and advanced to the state finals.

- * The Keith IHSA Scholastic Bowl team won the Class 1A Regional Championship in February. This was the school’s first adventure in this competition.

- * Several 4th graders tied for 1st place at the Youth Groundwater Festival Quiz Bowl. The event was designed to teach the students about the importance of groundwater and how it impacts the environment.

- * Basil, Dodecaphonics, and the Mixed Ensemble all earned Division 1 ratings (the highest score possible) at the IHSA Solo and Ensemble Contest.

- * A small group of 5th grade girls was chosen to perform as an “Honors Choir” at the Midwest Kodaly Music Educators Association.

These achievements are a proud part of the school's story. Individual honors were also earned by several students:

- Lamise Al-Basha was one of 26 students named to the Illinois High Schools Association all-state academic team. (711 Illinois High schools)
- Nishwanda Smith was one of 27 students honored at the Rockford Association for Minority Management Scholars Banquet for demonstrating outstanding leadership through academic achievement and community service.
- Katie Schulz is a National Merit Scholar Finalist and her classmates Lamise Al-Basha, Farzeen Huranani, and Jessica Ross were named Commended Scholars.
- Katie also earned a RAMI Award under the Classical Instrumentalist category.
- Paul Steffan won the Mayor's Art Award.
- Nuha Ahmed earned a 1st place ribbon at the Rock Valley College Juried High School Art Show for her photographic portrait entitled, "Josh."
- Sarah Ikenberry and Tim Gustafson were recognized by Downtown Rotary International for their Community service work.
- Julio, Luis, Josh, and Bruno earned 1st team, all conference honors in soccer; Rachel and Devon captured 1st team, all conference in volleyball; Sam and Jessica earned 1st team, all conference in cross country.
- Katie and Luis were recognized by the *Rock Register Star* with Young American Awards.
- Arib Jamal won the Keith Spelling Bee.
- Gina Pernacciero was awarded the DAR medal for service and leadership.

Student achievement extended beyond Keith's walls and into the Rockford and Winnebago County areas where the school has had a positive impact. Community service projects flourished from Keith students this year.

- The entire Keith campus participated in a Food for the Needy drive to benefit the Salvation Army.
- Keith's Cottage students collected items to support Noah's Ark Animal Shelter.
- Keith's junior Kindergarten donated 15 Teddy Bras to needy families at the Rockford Rescue Mission.
- The Student Advisory Board donated more than 60 frozen turkeys to the Rock River Pantry.
- More than 15 students helped the Salvation Army Toy Drive in December.
- The LS students raised over \$600 to aid Haitian families through the "Friends of the Children" program.
- Energy Net organized a "Pledge to Save the World" campaign one light bulb at a time.
- The 5th Grade class served meals to 60-70 people at the Emmanuel Mission House soup Kitchen.

- Interact and Lower School collected gently used coats and sweaters for the Koats for Kids campaign.

And this list does not include everything. Clearly, Keith has made a commitment to helping students understand the spirit of volunteerism and the joy of doing for others. I have been in larger schools but none of them comes close to performing the altruistic deeds that Keith does from its youngest students to its oldest. This is truly remarkable and appreciated by all recipients.

The Strategic Plan is a guiding beacon for the school as we march forward. Many of you in this room helped to craft this document which contains many constructive ideas. Some of the areas in which we have focused include:

Curriculum: The entire faculty from Lower through Upper has been engaged in the curriculum mapping process this year which involves a comprehensive look at what we are teaching across grade levels to validate a sequential flow of content and skills from one level to the next. Teachers across the grade levels have been in conversation during Monday morning meetings as well as during institute days, and they have worked diligently, carefully, and conscientiously with the process. We hope to have this concluded by the end of the year and placed on the web site for all to view. This curriculum needs to be dynamic, not a finished product, and always improving and serving the needs of the students.

Net Classroom: Has been initiated this year in the Middle and Upper Schools to help improve communication between home and school and to keep parents informed about their child's progress and to help them stay current with assignments. Feedback from parents has been very positive about this new process and we will continue to fine tune it next year.

Linking LS/MS/US: The faculty has worked on establishing better communication across divisions through the curriculum mapping process and department meetings, and we have to continue to understand and realize the importance of maintaining the communication links between buildings and divisions. The curriculum has to flow smoothly from Cottage through senior year. We will continue to build on the progress made in this area for next year.

Development Efforts: The strategic plan called for hiring of a development director and an increase in fund raising efforts. We now have a Director of Development who has been in place for over a year and the school has raised more money this year than last. The special events: International Food Festival and the Classics and Chrome Car Show each raised more money than the previous years, and the Annual Fund is on course to surpass last year's total though we still need approximately \$40,000 to reach our projected total. If you have not yet sent a tax-deductible contribution to the Annual Fund, it's not too late. We have also increased the endowment by \$100,000 with two \$50,000 gifts: one for scholarship and one to support the music program.

Communications/Marketing: In the area of communications and marketing, the school has had a remarkable year. With the students achieving so many milestones, it's easy to see why the Rock Register Star would have Keith in the paper so often. People that I meet in the community, who have no affiliation with Keith, when they find out that I am at the School, comment on the positive publicity. A Technology Committee is also working diligently on a 3-5 year technology plan which will include hardware, software, instructional, and financing needs in this area along with an overhaul of our web site.

Board Governance: One of the issues that the Board has focused on throughout this year has been to develop a list of potential Board members based on a set of skills and characteristics needed for Board work. The group would like to add four or five new Board members to the Board of Trustees. It has also clarified and re-written many of its own governing policies.

Finally, moving ahead, what are some of the challenges that we face as a school and as a community of learners.

Curriculum: As a school that prides itself on a strong and rigorous academic program, we must continually look at what we are doing in the classroom, how we are doing it, and how we assess what we are doing. The curriculum mapping process, mentioned earlier, allows us to hold our teachers accountable for specific content and skill areas. The overall program is very rich and full but have we raised the bar high enough for our students? We must continually challenge ourselves to be the best we can be for the sake of our students.

Development: Development and fund raising will continue to be high priorities for the school. Tuition alone only covers about 82% of the total expenses involved in educating a student at Keith, so technically everyone is subsidized by the fundraising efforts of the school. Currently, Keith has a very low return from parents and alumni in its Annual Fund. Approximately 25% of our parents contribute to this fund while NAIS suggests that the goal is 90% participation. What's the challenge here? Everyone needs to know that he/she plays a role in development whether you are a teacher, administrator, parent, alumni, former parent, or trustee. Even if an individual can't make a large personal donation, maybe one knows someone who sits on a foundation board, or who has other resources to share. Jeff Reinke and I are working hard at establishing and building relationships with alumni, former parents, and friends of the school. A past trustee breakfast is planned for tomorrow morning to continue to foster good will among those individuals. The bottom line is that the school lags far behind in its endowment and its Annual Fund participation. NAIS uses \$25,000 per student as a benchmark for a school's endowment. Even if \$10,000 was the benchmark, meaning we would need approximately \$3.3 million in endowment, Keith still has a long way to go with an endowment of less than \$800,000.

Finances: The Board is concerned about the tuition price tag and is investigating our price position in the market place. Keith is more expensive than any other independent school option in this community. How can we make ourselves more competitive and more

attractive to additional families. This is one of the items on the agenda for the Finance Committee. And, with the recent acquisition of Amcore by Harris Bank of Chicago, we have begun conversations with Amcore representatives to see if we can negotiate a lower rate on our loan. Our teachers are our greatest strength. Parents laud and praise the good work done by the faculty, and the students enjoy and appreciate the challenge that the teachers provide and the willingness to offer extra help or to talk and share ideas. They are underpaid, and this is another area that needs serious attention. Salaries and benefits for all teachers and staff need to be priorities.

Communications: The school needs to continue to fine tune Net Classroom and to work diligently to make sure that communications home are clear and consistent. We rely on email messages, daily bulletins, weekly e-blasts, and Newsletters to keep parents informed as well as plenty of informal conversations. There should be no surprises along the way if we are maintaining close and regular communication between home and school.

New Families: We need everyone's help in spreading the good word about Keith and the myriad of good things that happen here everyday. Providing Marcia Aramovich with names of friends, bringing acquaintances to school events, speaking positively about your experiences at Keith in the community help promote the school and introduce new families to the school. We have incredible summer programs for all ages, and each of these programs offers a glimpse into the quality of experience a student has at Keith. Share information about these programs with your friends. Help us promote the school. You will be receiving a four page document entitled, "What's the Buzz," which will include the many accomplishments of our school this past year. Please read it carefully and use it to talk with your friends about Keith.

Keith needs to stand out... we do. Must stand tall, aim higher, and challenge ourselves to be a leader in the educational community. This is a happy place to grow and learn; it is an engaging place where students have a plethora of opportunities to discover and enhance their talents; it is a caring community where people truly show compassion for one another and the community of Rockford. The school is committed to its students; to provide them with a safe and caring environment full of professionals who choose to challenge and respect them. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be part of Keith's story and to play a part in moving the school forward. With everyone doing his/her part we can continue to have Keith in the forefront of educational institutions in this area. Thank you for coming this morning.