

## **Teacher Keynote Award Recipient, Mark Ziminski's speech**

Thank you Sam and welcome esteemed, enthused colleagues and nervous rookies alike. We all know nothing arrives more slowly and passes more quickly than summer vacation. But I know what many of you are thinking – What is Ziminski doing up there and believe me I'm thinking the same thing. I think Sam went through his alphabetical list of potential keynoters and somehow I was the last one standing, maybe because I now fall into the minority of South Brunswick teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience. Actually, this is my 12<sup>th</sup> year at SBHS – all of them truly great ones both professionally and personally. I work with truly outstanding people and have met many great folks over the years – and I say that because it is the truth. Overall, this is my 24<sup>th</sup> year in education. Anyway, I'm not senile enough like maybe some of our past keynoters to think you will actually listen to what I have to say. I've been in that audience and I know what goes on – this is a tough crowd and what is tough about a day like today is we all are forced to realize we must shed our summer persona (whatever form it may take) and get back into our teaching persona. However, I am naïve enough to accept this daunting challenge and take advantage of this serendipitous opportunity. Forgive me if I display my teaching persona too severely in speaking to you; my wife from time to time reminds me “Don't talk to me like I'm one of your students Mark,” but sometimes we all carry our educational role too far and I want to apologize in advance if I pontificate, once you become a teacher it is tough to stop.

My Ziminski education observations/ideas are humble ones. They are quite simply enthusiasm, serendipity, and lunch or ESL for short. And I will explain what I mean in a minute but I need to digress for a bit here just to clear something up between Sam and me and I thought doing this in front of almost 1,000 colleagues would be appropriate.

Sam called me at 9:00 in the morning over the summer and asked me if I would give this keynote because no one else wanted to, and he said I could speak on any topic I wanted as long as I kept it under 10 – 15 minutes. At the time, I had my four year old son in the bathtub and my other two kids were downstairs eating breakfast since I was taking them to a 9:30 dental appointment and my wife already left for work. I, of course, said yes and being in a bit of a hurried state, I forgot to ask Sam this very important question – “Sam, am I getting paid to deliver this keynote address?” “Is there a voucher waiting for me somewhere to sign?” I think one of the reasons why the district went to in-house keynoters is to save money not because we have anything special to say. I heard a few years ago, and maybe Willa can clear this up, that David Sousa, the brain man who gave a keynote speech a while ago at the old high school, received \$5,000 plus expenses, plus all he could eat at Pierre's. Now he did a great job, even though his book says nothing about engaging the brains of teachers on their first day back from vacation – I checked. What do you think a South Brunswick teacher is worth? Colleagues – any ideas? Anyway Sam, I don't want to put you on the spot just yet since we all know we are not into education for the money, some members in the audience might say we are reminded of this every two weeks, although all of us wouldn't mind leaving this meeting with a check instead of waiting until the 15<sup>th</sup>. But instead of monetary compensation for this speech, I would like the following – a free pass one time this year for all the teachers in the district to either sleep late for two hours, take a two hour lunch or leave school two hours early on any one day they would like. All that we would do is call Mrs. Furch –

“Hello Mrs. Furch, this is teacher #666. I am invoking the Stewart-Ziminski Agreement today.”

And that would be it. What do you think Sam? I know you have to check with Willa about this, but I will continue this speech on good faith.

Humble Ziminski teaching observation #1 - “Nothing great is achieved without enthusiasm.” This element of our profession being enthusiastic, motivated role models every single minute of our teaching existence is probably our greatest challenge. Sure we need to be experts in our field, know sound methodologies, but the ability to not only be enthusiastic and motivated ourselves but to be masters at making our students enthusiastic motivated learners is, to me, our toughest job of all and really a daunting task especially for new teachers. Rookies, soon the glow of youth and exuberance younger teachers have towards their students will wear off, or so I’m told, and the students want and need knowledge. I’ve heard some newer teachers say “they’re not motivated, they don’t want to do anything” as if students are prepackaged learners. My question to those teachers would be, and I apologize for pontificating – the teacher persona thing – What are you (we) doing to motivate your students? All of us have the creativity to be great motivators and many of us are – just think of some of the reasons we give Mrs. Furch for being sick when we are really not. It is up to us to motivate students and teach them the value of self-motivation. The longer I teach, the more I think – All is fair in love, war and education. Whatever it takes to motivate we need to do. We are all motivated by different, crazy things. Our own director of guidance here at the high school was so motivated by a \$5.00 major league baseball that he fell down stairs at Yankee Stadium dropping \$100 of stadium food in the process of chasing a foul ball – all of this was caught on video tape. Students, as we know, are no different. They will stop at nothing to get what they want. As a student, I had a college professor, a great teacher, a Steinbeck expert, who would from time to time bring in some candy for his students. The man was brilliant, but the mere congeniality of his act made me want to work even harder for him. Think of how we feel when we see this (HOLD UP THE SNOWFLAKE). The unbridled enthusiasm we feel for a snow day is how we want our students to feel coming into our classes. I mean sometimes I would call a fellow teacher at 5:30 in the morning to tell her “no school today” and I don’t have the words out of my mouth when I hear “I love you Mark” on the other end. I’m in love with half the English department based on snow days alone. I’ll consider it an achievement when Harry Schultz says the same thing to me. Jim Ryun, the first American runner to break the four-minute mile barrier, said this “Motivate is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.” The toughest thing we have to do is teach students the value of habitual self-motivation. Considering less than 50 percent of students entering four-year colleges or universities actually graduate, reveals that all educators have a difficult job to do.

Second humble Ziminski observation/suggestion this year- Enjoy serendipitous moments. Serendipity-the faculty for making desirable discoveries by accident. Sometimes teachers and I know this is hard to believe, myself being the classic over planner, there might be something more important going on in your classroom than what is in your lesson plans. Let’s face it. Most of us are control freaks, anal to an extent (thank English department for explaining to me the connotations of that word). We want control of every moment and the students want to live in the moment, spontaneously, serendipitously. An example comes to mind when Willa was principal of the high school, the students printed an underground newspaper called Willa’s World. Wayne’s

World-clever? And therein lies our educational battlefield-somewhere between control and spontaneity education occurs. I offer this thought maybe once in awhile, a moment will occur in or out of your classroom, something as simple as a comment a student makes, that could turn out to be more educational and insightful than anything you planned. Case in point. My classroom is next to a genius of a man, Harry Schultz. Our rooms only divided by a narrow partition. On occasion when Harry does a dramatic reading of say Macbeth “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time....” This is not about how teachers feel about Mondays. My class will shut down for the moment to listen to the beauty of his reading. This starts a serendipitous discussion of the play almost always prompted by the students. Of course, when he yells Stella! At the top of his lungs (Harry care to demonstrate) my class has to stop but that’s ok too because another impromptu discussion begins. This moment creates intellectual connections between our past reading of the plays and the present and this equals, in my mind, learning.

Fire Drills. Fire drills drive some of us control freaks crazy. Possibly, just maybe a fire drill is a moment to enjoy the weather, talk to colleagues, stretch your legs or do something positive instead of seeing how disruptive it is to your classroom. The Star Ledger obituary gives each average deceased person about five one sentence paragraphs and I have yet to see one which said the following: South Brunswick Teacher Dead = paragraph #3. She was remembered for how much she hated it when fire drills interrupted her teaching.

Final humble Ziminski observation/suggestion – Lunch. This year try eating lunch with people outside your department or outside your comfort zone. Great things can happen. I love my English Department colleagues however, I usually don’t eat lunch with them because I don’t want to talk shop or discuss work related issues. Do we really want to talk about the committee to review the committees we have been on at lunch? We are concerned about making big schools small for the students, but it is just as important to do this for teachers and one way is to meet people outside our departments, grade levels or units. We’ve had outstanding, engaging discussions at lunch. In fact one I remember well at the end of last year was where we tried to answer the age old question. Does size really matter? Now it is not what you think. Some of us returned from chaperoning the senior trip to the Philadelphia Zoo and were discussing the Silver-backed gorilla’s dominance because of size. Anyway, one of the tougher things to do is try to start a class after lunch but you can’t because you are still chucking over lunchtime talk.

Thank you for your divided, I mean undivided attention. Take care of each other over the course of the year. Pass on the good things people say about us and to the new teachers- enjoy the beauty of your challenge, teaching truly is a unique and rewarding occupation and if you need help ask any veteran. Think ESL – enthusiasm, serendipity and lunch and don’t forget to use the Stewart-Ziminski agreement when you need it this year. Thank you.