



**2015 Distinguished Service Award
Acceptance Speech
Michael Ford, Phelps-Clifton Springs**

**Annual Banquet – Hall of Springs
Saratoga Springs, NY
September 27, 2015**

Thank you, Bill and Tom. I am honored to be this year's recipient of this award.

I appreciate this nice award, but I was really hoping for Mets playoff tickets. As a lifelong Mets fan, this is an exciting time. This Mets season has taught me three things

1. Patience is indeed a virtue
2. Magic happens when you least expect it
3. Bartolo Colon has reassured me that old fat guys can still contribute in this world.

When I got the call from Bob Reidy letting me know I was this year's recipient, he was met with absolute silence on my end of the phone. He may have thought I was in shock, but in reality I was overtaken by grief as I assumed if I had been selected for the award all the other retirees must have passed away.

Seventeen years ago I attended my first fall conference. I was walking down the hall of the host hotel and I saw a gentleman who looked vaguely familiar. As we got closer to one another I could see he was looking at me thinking I looked familiar, and I was doing the same. Finally, I realized he was my high school biology teacher and he was a superintendent on Long Island.

He looked at me and asked, "What are you doing here? What vendor do you work for?" I looked at him and I said, "I'm a superintendent." His response was, "No...get out of here." He laughed, shook his head, and kept walking. See, I was the improbable superintendent.

Throughout my days as a high school student at West Islip, I was a kid from the wrong side of the tracks who was at the bottom of my class. Granted, I was in the "top group," but I was the buzzard among the eagles. Our class, homogeneously grouped, included students who would become a member of the House of Representatives and later candidate for Governor, a New York Times columnist and bestselling author, the top cabaret artist in New York City, and leading attorneys and surgeons in our nation...and there was me...holding up the bottom of the class.

If the truth be known, a classmate named Emily is the one who got me through that biology class. We had a quiz every Friday of biology vocabulary, and Emily, who sat directly to my right, had a plan to pass those quizzes. I was the most appreciative teenage boy. She would always wear a skirt to school on Fridays, and that was because she would write all the definitions on her left thigh. As she took the quiz she would slide up her skirt to see her answers and I would appreciatively acknowledge her nice legs and correct answers. I was especially grateful when our teacher gave us a fifty question mid-term as it required more surface area to fit all the definitions.

After college and a relatively short stint as an English teacher, I found my place in professional development. It was the right setting for a guy who had been a theater major in college. I moved from there to the superintendency without any building level administrative experience. And though it was an unconventional pathway, I believe it provided me the foundation to be successful for fifteen years in the superintendency.

During those years, I was often asked if I liked being a superintendent, and I usually gave the same response. I love it three out of five days per week, and if I were in the major leagues, I would be batting .600 and on my way to the Hall of Fame

As you all know, not everything we do is joyful...but it is the greatest job in education. I like to quote the great researchers, and Dolly Parton once said, "If you want to see the rainbow, you have to put up with the rain."

As I reflect on the superintendency, I offer you these thoughts:

1. Always remember why you got into this business in the first place. It was about making a difference in the lives of others. As superintendents, don't put yourself first, always put the children first. If you take a superintendency with the full intention of staying a couple of years before moving on to a bigger, higher paying job for your own benefit look in the mirror and ask yourself "is this what's best for kids?"
2. Remember who's important in a school. It's teachers and kids. The teachers do the work of the school we do not. We are merely human bulldozers who move things out of their way so they can get the job done and put things in place so they can maximize their efforts.
3. Value and recognize the role of the board of education. They put the public in public education. And though we may sometimes think how much better our lives would be without them, without them we don't have "public" schools.
4. Michael Fullan in his book *Six Secrets to Change* implored us to "Love your staff." I have never found the research that says be miserable to the people who work for you. Instead, our number one goal as leaders is to ignite the people who work with us so they want to do more, give more and make a bigger difference. For us as leaders that means we must honor those who work with us. We must promote those who work with us and we must bring joy to our organizations.
5. We must close the knowing/doing gap. We all know better than we do and our job every day is to just close the gap between the two.
6. Finally, love what you do and who you do it to. If you love your job you'll never work a day in your life. And I've been blessed to love what I do.

As I wrap up, I would like to say thanks to those who have contributed to my journey.

First, thank you to my wife, Tina, who is here with me tonight. Like all our spouses, she provided the stability in the crazy life of a superintendent, and I am so appreciative. She has made it possible for me to do all that I do. She took 20 years off from her career to raise the three great kids that we have. There is no doubt that she laid the foundation for our children to be the people they are today.

I am also grateful to our kids who could not be here tonight, and from all that I have learned from them.

Joshua, our twenty-six year old, has taught me, "When the door opens, go through it." Embrace opportunities as you never know what you will gain if you just got through the door. And he's right because you can't steal second base with your foot still on first.

Sarabeth, my beautiful twenty-four year old daughter, is completing her doctorate in physical therapy at Duke University after graduating with an undergraduate degree in piano performance and swimming on a nationally ranked D-2 team. From her I have learned if you work harder than anybody around you, you will achieve greatness.

And finally, Jacob, our little guy who is a junior at the University of Massachusetts. Tina and I have just loved watching him the last few years blossom. He has taught us to find what you love and go at it with all your heart

Thank you to my colleagues from the Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES region. Your support, encouragement, and friendship have meant everything to me. This is not a job one does alone; we do it in partnership and I could not have asked for better partners in my career. And to each of you, who have so graciously come tonight, I'm so sorry I have messed up our usual Sunday night tradition of going to the Stadium downtown.

I also think my colleague, and past recipient of this honor, Steve Uebbing. Steve was the superintendent in the neighboring community and from the moment I became a superintendent Steve looked out for me, guided me and has opened pathways for me. He brought me to the University of Rochester with him, invited me to co-author a book with him and continues to be a trusted friend and colleague.

Finally, to the Council, I thank you so much for your nurturing and support of me and all superintendents. I also want to particularly thank Bob Lowry who always made me look a lot smarter than I was by providing incredibly insight and information. And, thank you Kelly Masline for your support and encouragement and for providing me with wonderful opportunities to contribute to the field.

Thank you all for this honor tonight.