



2008 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINALIST

MAKING A DIFFERENCE - SHAPING THE FUTURE



THOMAS SMIGIEL JR.

2008 Virginia Teacher of the Year
Norview High School
Norfolk, VA

School Profile: Urban
of students in District: 36000
of students in building: 1900

Teaching area: Teen Leadership/Earth Science
Teaching level: 9,10

of years in teaching: 8
of years in present position: 8

Thomas Smigiel - II. Educational History and Professional Development Activities

A. Education History

Master of Education in School Administration, Cambridge College, August 2005

Bachelor of Science in Middle School Science and Social Studies, Old Dominion University, May 2000

Minor: Geography and Add-on Teacher Endorsement in Earth Science

B. Employment History

- Teen Leadership Teacher, 9th Grade, Norfolk Public Schools, September 2005 – Present
- Earth Science Teacher, 9th – 12th Grade, Norfolk Public Schools, June 2000 – June 2007
- Advanced Teen Leadership Teacher, 10th Grade, Norfolk Public Schools, September 2006 – Present
- Teen Leadership, Rising 9th Graders, Norfolk Public Schools Junior University Summer Enrichment Program, June 2006 – July 2006, June 2007 – July 2007
- Environmental Science, 9th Grade, Norfolk Public Schools Junior University Summer Enrichment Program, June 2005 – July 2005
- Yearbook Teacher, 9th – 12th Grade, Norfolk Public Schools, September 2003 – June 2005

C. Professional Association Memberships and Offices Held

- Education Association of Norfolk, Political Action Committee Chairman, May 2005 – May 2007; Director At-Large, May 2003 – May 2007; Lobby Team Member, January 2003 – January 2007; Meet and Confer Team Member, November 2005 – May 2007
- Virginia Education Association, Political Action Executive Committee Member, April 2004 – April 2006
- National Education Association, Member
- Norfolk Federation of Teachers, American Federation of Teachers, Member
- Tidewater Association of Science Educators, Virginia Association of Science Teachers, Member
- Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honor Society, Member
- Gamma Theta Upsilon International Honor Society in Geography, Member

D. Professional development leadership activities

- Norfolk Public Schools Professional Senate, President – August 2007 - Present
- Norview High School Teacher Mentor Program, Coordinator – August 2007 - Present
- Norfolk Public Schools Teacher Mentor 2003 – Present
- Norfolk Public Schools Earth Science Curriculum Writing Team, Member – April 2007
- Norfolk Public Schools Earth Science Quarterly Assessment Writing Team – 2007
- Norview High School Freshman Transition Camp, Coordinator - July 2006, 2007
- Solutions Incorporated, 9th Grade Transition Workshop, Attendee - April 2006
- Mentor for Earth Science Middle School Teachers – 2004 - 2006
- Virginia Department of Education/National Governors Association Honor Schools Symposium, Attendee - December 2005
- The Flippen Group Teen Leadership Instructor Training, Attendee - August 2005

- “Capturing Kids’ Hearts” Training, Attendee - June 2005
- “Making the Move” Ninth Grade Transition Conference, Attendee - April 2005
- “Cutting-Edge Strategies for Gifted and Highly Capable Students” Workshop, Attendee - February 2005
- NPS District-wide Science Professional Development: “Effective Questioning Strategies,” Presenter - 2003, 2005
- Norview High School Small Learning Community Development Team, Member – February 2005 – June 2005
- Norview High School “Effective Questioning Strategies for New Teachers,” Facilitator - 2003, 2004
- ATLAS Communities Principal’s Institute, Panelist - March 2004
- Norfolk Public Schools Earth Science Textbook Adoption Committee, Chairman - February 2004 - April 2004
- Norfolk Public Schools Earth Science Team, Coordinator - 2001-2003
- Norfolk Public Schools Earth Science Curriculum Writing Team, Member - May 2002-June 2002
- State Board of Education, Eastern Shore, “Classroom Instruction that Works,” Presenter and Consultant - 2002
- New Teacher Orientation “Reflections of a First Year Science Teacher,” Presenter - 2001
- Norview High School Earth Science Curriculum Writing Team, Chair - June 2001

E. Awards and other recognition

- Association of Secondary School Principals MetLife Break Through School Award Finalist – October 2007
- 2008 Commonwealth of Virginia Teacher of the Year – October 2007
- Commonwealth of Virginia Region II Teacher of the Year - 2007
- Norfolk Public Schools Teacher of the Year - 2007
- Norview High School Teacher of the Year – 2007
- Relay for Life Team Captain, Top Fundraising High School Team for Norfolk Public Schools – 2006, 2007
- Who’s Who Among American Teachers Award - 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007
- Norfolk Public Schools Jack and Jill Award for Teaching Excellence - 2007
- Appointed to Norfolk Environmental Commission - January 2007
- Wrote and Received: National Association of Secondary School Principals MetLife Bridge Builders’ Grant to Expand Norview High School’s Small Learning Community: \$5,000 – June 2006
- Regent University Grant Team Member: Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs Grant to Expand Norview High School’s Small Learning Community: \$34,000 – June 2006
- Fordham University School Change Award Committee Member – 2005
- Norfolk Public Schools School Bell Award - 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005
- Norfolk Public Schools Science Teacher of the Year Inspiration Award Winner - 2003
- Disney American Teacher Award Nominee - 2002
- Norfolk Public Schools First Year Employee Inspiration Award Finalist - 2001

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – III. Professional Biography

It was not until my sophomore year that I realized teaching would be my future career. Two months into my second year of high school, I was the victim of a racial attack. While minding my own business, I was brutally beat up by a group of eight boys because of the color of my skin. They did not know me and I did not know them. I was able to see one of the boys and later identify him as one of the attackers. When I went to court to testify against him, the judge asked him why he did it, the boy responded that it was because I was white and they had nothing else better to do. It turned out that he also had a very long criminal record and he was only 16. After that incident, I changed as a person. I wanted to know how a kid just one year older than me had such an awful life and did such awful things. It was from that point on that I knew I needed to be a person who influenced change.

Shortly after this realization, I helped start a student organization called the Leadership Council. As a member of this group, we created and facilitated a workshop called the Respect Institute. The Respect Institute took all types of students and teachers to a location outside of high school where we conducted team-building activities and meetings to help teach respect. I was only 16, and I was able to tell my personal story to use it to help educate and influence others to make change. I continued facilitating until I graduated and my high school continued doing Respect Institutes for over 10 years. I discovered a passion for facilitating knowledge in front of groups of people.

During my last two years of high school, I was inspired by great teachers and administrators to continue with my goal of becoming a teacher. As a member of Future Educators of America (FEA), I was able to volunteer and get experience tutoring students at an elementary school. I also spent my summers volunteering for a local recreation center youth program and worked with caring adults who inspired me to teach. I also received a teaching scholarship which helped pay my way through college. All of these experiences helped me see that teaching would help me fulfill my goal of influencing change in others.

As an Earth Science teacher, I have contributed greatly to the success of my students and my teaching team. As the team leader, I worked to develop a curriculum that would make Earth Science relevant to our students and developed objectives that could be taught in a way that would allow creativity and rigor. I helped create lesson plans that met the needs of all students and worked on strategies to help close the achievement gap. I helped bring the pass rates on Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) tests up from 49 percent to 84 percent. From my experience, I was able to mentor Earth Science teachers across the school district and teach strategies so that they could have success in their classrooms. I have taught questioning strategy skills to hundreds of teachers and facilitated workshops on best practices to schools outside of my district. I have mentored teachers in pedagogy so that they can communicate their lessons effectively. These are some of my contributions to education.

As a Teen Leadership teacher, I have worked to teach my students to make positive choices in their life and teach them the skills needed to overcome obstacles. I have empowered them to turn failure into success and use the necessary tools to affect change in their homes, school and community. I have shown students the way to help build positive relationships with their teachers and other adults, which has returned huge gains on their grades and success. As a teacher mentor, I have modeled a process that can transform a classroom environment, paving the way for high performance, involvement and success. As the lead Leadership Teacher, I now positively influence a team of leadership teachers who are impacting the lives of over 500 freshmen at our school.

My contribution to education is my personal impact on the lives of my students. Cary was one of my students who was involved in a gang and wanted to get out. He also wanted to repair a broken relationship with his father who was coming back into his life after 14 years in jail. Cary tells people to this day if it were not for my involvement in his life and giving him positive advice, he would be locked up just like his father. Mark is a student who does not have a positive relationship with his father. Mark was getting in a lot of trouble, doing drugs and failing his classes until he met me. Mark's English teacher recently handed me a paper entitled "My Role Model" in which Mark had written about how I had impacted and changed his life. When I think I am just doing what I normally do, I get surprised with a wonderful write-up from a student about how I helped him. When Betty's dad was verbally abusive and she felt like she was not important anymore, she came to me and I gave her advice and comfort so that she could move beyond this negativity. When Philip's parents were ready to move him away from the area because he was hanging out with a bad crowd, getting suspended from school and making failing grades, I empowered Philip to turn his life around. Philip has stepped up and is now a respected leader at school, home, and his job. These are just a few stories that show how my students have demonstrated resiliency and how I impacted their lives in a positive way. These stories are what I believe are my contributions to education.

Right now, I am fulfilling one of my life goals. I wanted to be a teacher to "pay-it-forward" for my own teachers believing in me. Because I was given the tools to reach success, I found no other way to repay my teachers for what they gave me, except by doing the same thing for my students. Coming back to teach at the high school from which I graduated, and being able to inspire my students to do great things is my biggest accomplishment. It is my hope that the work of my students now and in the future will spread that same inspiration to others and make an even larger contribution to society. Late last school year, the superintendent came to one of my leadership classes and asked my students what they wanted to do after they graduated from high school. It brought tears to my eyes when two students raised their hands and said that they wanted to motivate students and be a leadership teacher just like Mr. Smigiel. That is my greatest contribution to education.

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – IV. Community Involvement

Giving back to my community is an important part of my life and something that I believe should be part of a well-rounded education program. I believe I make my community better by instilling a sense of commitment in my students. When I teach about the qualities of leadership, I find that a word that most of my students do not know is empathy. Having empathy helps lay the foundation for resiliency, which is an essential vocabulary word I teach my students. Since my first year of teaching, whether in Earth Science or Teen Leadership, I have always found a way to add an aspect of community service to my lessons. For example, I have motivated my Earth Science students to get involved in a community litter pick-up in which hundreds of pounds of trash are picked up annually.

Starting with our freshman class two years ago, all students involved in Teen Leadership classes were required to volunteer in some aspect of community service, whether fundraising, promoting a charity or actually volunteering. Although there were many people who said it could not be done, I did not give up on the idea. I worked with my students to coordinate a presentation directly from the organization they picked so that they could see first-hand what a difference their service would make. My students developed empathy and became motivated beyond my expectations. In the last two years, my students have helped raise over \$10,000 for Operation Smile, SPCA of Norfolk, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association (ALS), American Cancer Society (ACS), Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia and the Hope House Foundation.

I believe in the importance of modeling service leadership. It would be hard for me to stand up in front of my classes and ask the students to volunteer their time if I did not provide an example. After moving into a neighborhood with a bad image, I knew I needed to get involved with my civic league to help influence change. It was not long before I became the neighborhood trash clean-up coordinator. I also took a floundering newsletter and revamped it to help promote a positive image of our community and became the vice president of the group. Last year, I designed and implemented a Web site for our community to use as a resource to get others involved and active in the community. The Norfolk City Council also heard of my efforts and appointed me to the Norfolk Environmental Commission. In this new volunteer position, I am working to spread environmental stewardship beyond my neighborhood. I have also had success planning and running impromptu community events. In August, I organized a neighborhood town hall meeting that resulted in over 500 community members, city council members, press, and our mayor listening to major concerns of our community. This successful event was organized in less than a week. Last year, the ACS started a Norfolk Relay for Life and each school was asked to form a team. I volunteered to be the team captain and helped organize our fundraising efforts. By getting my students involved, our team raised over \$5,000 and received an award as the top-fundraising high school. As the team captain again this year, I helped motivate my team to raise \$6,400 and we were ranked 15th out of 125 teams; next year we will raise even more. In addition, my school was the host site for the all-night event and I worked with the ACS and arranged for more than 75 students to help out with various aspects from team registration to lighting candles. The ACS staff was so impressed with my help that they asked me to be the Logistics Chair for the Relay this year. I will continue to do my part and stay active with the community.

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – V. Philosophy of Teaching

I believe my students face challenges each day that create obstacles and keep them from reaching their personal success. Their unique personalities demand individualized attention, and their personal, educational, and emotional needs must be met in the classroom. I believe that my students want more than just a quality education. Sometimes they are just looking for a person to make a connection with someone who cares. I must engage students in rigorous academic pursuits while helping them to challenge themselves to work hard and be successful. I must facilitate knowledge and develop a classroom atmosphere that creates a thirst for learning. I believe that teaching is being demanding of students, but at the same time making them feel important and valued. When I set high expectations for my students, they can succeed. When I challenge my students in appropriate and meaningful ways, then they will accomplish the unexpected. I believe that when I can get my students and the community to interact, they can learn skills that will help them triumph over all obstacles. This is my philosophy of teaching and what I strive for each day when I enter my classroom.

In 2005, I was fortunate enough to participate in a professional development opportunity that enhanced my approach to teaching and the learning of my students. The training was called “Capturing Kids’ Hearts.” The founder of this training, Flip Flippen, states, “If you have a child’s heart, you have his head.” I have adopted this statement as part of my philosophy of teaching. Since this training, I have seen first-hand how getting to know my students’ strengths, weaknesses, passions and life experiences, helps me find ways to empower them to find success. I teach my students to utilize resiliency and to adjust their self-concept to change their perspective on learning, individuality, and personal value. With the Teen Leadership class, I took students that were labeled “at-risk” and turned them into what I like to call “at-promise” students. I believe that this is laying a foundation for success for my students and the people they will impact as future leaders. I want my students to leave my classroom understanding that they control their learning. I empower them to connect their learning with real-life situations. I want them to set realistic goals and learn how to be productive, responsible citizens in our democratic society.

When students come into my classroom on the first day I do not label or categorize them. I have high expectations for all students and I communicate this to them. I also tell them to not hold back on their goals and dreams. I teach them to set realistic and measurable goals. I work each day to empower my students to find their path to success. My students know this, and I believe that helping them realize their potential is part of what makes me an outstanding teacher. When my students leave my classroom, they see a sign posted above my door that says, “Return with Honor.” I work hard to make sure my students have the tools to meet this challenge.

My reward as a teacher is seeing the behavior of my students after using the tools I have given them. Quantitative data is a powerful way of measuring success, but it is the qualitative data that brings me the biggest return on my teaching. I am rewarded when I see my students give speeches in front of other adults, sharing their life stories about how they have

been resilient. I am rewarded when Operation Smile or Relay for Life honors my students for their dedication and service. I am rewarded when another teacher contacts me to tell me that one of my students showed leadership skills in her classroom. I am rewarded when parents call me and want to know what I did to help their child change his attitude. When a student comes to me, seeking advice about a problem, that is my reward. Recently, during a visit from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, one of my students was asked about his opinion of me and he responded, “Mr. Smigiel is someone who cares about students and our grades. He cares about me more than my parents do. If I am failing a class, he stays on me until I am passing. I know that when my grades are good he is proud of me, and when they are bad he may be disappointed, but he doesn’t give up on me.” A comment like this is my reward.

Being recognized as the Virginia Teacher of the Year has also rewarded me. In this role, I will be able to share my students’ stories and my success in the classroom. It gives me more opportunities to advocate for students in my school, Virginia, and the whole country. This honor is a reward for me because I get to celebrate with my students and acknowledge their help in making me an outstanding teacher. I am rewarded when I get to share this honor with all of the teachers and staff who support my students each day. I know that I could not be in this position if it was not for the support of my education family.

My style is about making my lesson invigorating. Worksheets out of ancient filing cabinets do not teach students. Students need opportunities to discover who they are as thinkers and learners. They like to be challenged with real-life scenarios and develop solutions to authentic problems. It is about making learning relevant. My style of teaching is about letting them learn from their mistakes and teaching them that failure can lead to success. My style allows them to take hands-on approaches by using pragmatic learning to encourage lifelong learners.

I think it is important to convey my philosophy of teaching to my students, so that they understand me better as their teacher. Doing this also helps build a stronger connection with my students. Because of these beliefs, I try to exhibit honesty and trust through my personal teaching style. This allows the opportunity for my students to know that I care about their success. I also understand that actions speak louder than words. If I expect my students to be leaders and be responsible citizens, then I must model these traits by demonstrating leadership skills in the classroom, in my school and in my community. My philosophy is about empowering my students by giving them the opportunity to be leaders in the classroom, school and community. This philosophy encourages me to be creative everyday with my lessons, whether in Teen Leadership or Earth Science. Being creative is not just thinking outside the box. It is about thinking outside of the room that the box is in.

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – VI. Education Issues and Trends

From my years of experience working in an inner city school, mentoring teachers, and attending professional development workshops, I found that there are several major issues impacting public schools. Some of these issues are: a shortage of highly qualified teacher applicants, the achievement gap between minority and majority students, and the increase in high school dropout rates. I have worked to improve all three for my school system, but I feel the dropout rate is the most pressing issue. Someone has to take ownership of the problem and look at the direct causes. From my experience and research, the underlying cause of increasing high school dropout rates is the lack of motivation on the part of ninth graders to succeed and make lasting connections.

My interest of the topic came from an experience as a homeroom teacher distributing progress reports. While giving the progress reports to my ninth graders, I noticed that, of 27 students, all but three had failing grades. I was shocked. If those results had been the final report card, over 70 percent of my homeroom alone would have been retained. I continued to monitor the grades and my curiosity continued to grow. I began my own unscientific survey of my students and found out some interesting answers. At first I got answers such as, “I don’t like school,” or “It’s the teacher’s fault.” As I began to pry I heard some more honest answers. I remember a student saying, “Why should I care about school, no one cares about me.” Another student replied, “That teacher doesn’t like me, so I’m not going to try.” I also read an alarming statistic in a 2004 *Christian Science Monitor* article. The article stated that Boston College conducted a national study that indicated the rate at which ninth-grade students did not reach the tenth grade has tripled in the past 30 years. In the 2004-2005 school year, my school had a ninth grade promotion rate of 38.4 percent. I was surprised, considering my school had been fully accredited and maintained some of the highest Standards of Learning scores in the city. I became motivated to change the statistics.

As part of my master’s thesis project, I proposed a mandatory ninth-grade transition class for all incoming students. It was important that highly motivated teachers teach the class and that students felt like someone cared about them. The class was for students to connect with either an adult or a peer, which would help them increase their chances to succeed. Fortunately, our school was receiving a federal grant at the same time to create small learning communities. In addition, I had just attended a workshop called “Capturing Kids’ Hearts,” which focused on teachers making connections with students. With a motivated principal and a team of professionals, the Teen Leadership program for ninth-graders was established. My principal entrusted the class to me, and I was able to lead the program in its initial stages and development.

A supportive and nurturing environment in which students were made to feel important seemed to be the key to success. After piloting the program with a quarter of the freshman class, our promotion rate jumped to 55 percent. Last year, half of our freshmen took Teen Leadership and our promotion rates increased again. Because of the success of the program, we decided, as a school, to put our entire incoming freshman class in Teen Leadership. We continue to use data to adapt and make necessary changes for our students to be successful. This is a promising start and there are other innovative ideas that can help us get closer to a 100 percent promotion rate.

Last year I wrote and received a \$5,000 Bridge Builders' grant from MetLife and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). One of the key parts of the grant was to help fund more ninth-grade teachers to attend the "Capturing Kids' Hearts" training, which we could see was making a difference. The grant also helped fund incentive programs for our students. The implementation of the grant was so successful that our program was featured in the NASSP *Principal Leadership* Journal. After nominating my school for the MetLife-NASSP Breakthrough grant, I just found out last week that our school is a finalist for the award.

After receiving the NASSP grant, I worked with another leadership teacher to secure a \$34,000 grant through the Department of Justice and a local university. The grant served a similar purpose of funding training for teachers and helping motivate our students. The grant allowed me to be flexible in presenting creative ideas to help our ninth graders reach success. Last March, I developed a proposal to start a program I called "Second Chance," which would offer night school for freshmen. It targeted students that failed classes needed to get promoted to the tenth grade. I presented a plan to the grant provider, my administration and central office, and it was approved. I coordinated meetings with the students and required a parent meeting. Most of the parents who attended the meeting had never set foot in our building earlier. In the end, the results were remarkable. For example, all 15 students in World History who failed first semester passed their Standards of Learning Test. In both English and Mathematics, 80 percent more received credit. It worked!

This year, I also helped start a program for our ninth graders called "Pilot Produce." Working with a local university's staff and students, community leaders and my students, an organic garden business was started at our school. This project was truly a community effort, but it was the work and belief of 25 students that made the project happen. Within a few months, my students were growing organic romaine lettuce, arugula, cilantro and tatsoi, just to name a few. Students sold their produce on Saturdays at the local farmers' market and learned the skills of running a business and reaching out to the community. The students were also off of the streets, doing something productive with their free time. This project teaches our students the skills to be entrepreneurs. We can teach our students to be the employer instead of the employee. The project was very successful and was featured twice in local newspapers. This past September, the students' efforts were featured in a local teacher magazine.

With the assistance of a National Governors Association grant, I proposed and implemented a "Freshman Transition Summer Camp." The three-day overnight camp held at Old Dominion University helped our ninth graders adjust to high school. We invited all freshmen to the camp regardless of their academic or discipline history in middle school. Our camp counselors were the freshmen who went through our program the previous years. The camp has been a huge success. Last year over 100 students attended. This year we are expecting 125 freshmen and will continue to help these students build relationships.

It is with innovative ideas like "Second Chance," "Pilot Produce," and the "Summer Transition Camp" that I believe will ultimately help lower dropout rates. We need to start offering more programs for our students to be successful earlier. We have to be proactive instead of reactive in order to solve our dropout problem.

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – VII. The Teaching Profession

I am a strong believer in the idea that schools with effective mentoring programs have huge success with their students and with teacher retention. As a mentor for five years, I have been able to help new and inexperienced teachers with their delivery of instruction and classroom management skills. I have helped strengthen the teaching profession by guiding teachers in the right direction. By sharing my classroom success through workshops and professional development programs, I have been able to improve teachers within my school district and state.

As the current lead mentor in my building, I have created a new mentoring program at my school that not only helps our new teachers with their content, but also their pedagogy. In an age that is getting harder for schools to recruit and retain quality teachers, we have to offer strong support networks for them. I believe that I have strengthened the teaching profession by organizing a mentor system that gives each new teacher a mentor for content and a mentor for pedagogy. Our mentor system starts giving support early. We meet with new teachers and guide them through their initial week of school; we give them an opportunity to discuss failure and success at various team meetings. It is important to convey the school's expectations early and give them a foundation for success by giving them curriculum guides and allowing them meeting time with their content teams. Our program gives teachers support not just horizontally but also vertically. I believe that our new teachers need to know whom they are teaching. Our mentor program allows an opportunity for our current students to have a forum with our new teachers to give them advice on what makes a good teacher in their eyes. Our mentor program also allows the teachers to take a tour of the neighborhoods from which our students come. They need to visualize our students' obstacles so they can help them overcome them. Our mentor program continues to offer weekly professional development in the initial months and then monthly afterwards, to help teach practical ways to engage our students. Support for new and inexperienced teachers needs to be ongoing and has to be at the highest level possible. Strengthening our mentor program is one way that I have helped improve the teaching profession.

Even as a first year teacher, I understood the importance and value of getting involved in teacher professional organizations. These organizations give the opportunity for teachers to network and share valuable teaching tools to strengthen the profession. They also educate teachers about current issues affecting public schools and the challenges facing education. Two organizations in particular that taught me the necessity for teacher involvement at all levels are my local affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teacher (AFT). Both organizations have educated me on current issues and trends in education and have empowered me to be a proactive voice for my students and colleagues. I have used the skills and advice learned from attending NEA and AFT workshops and meetings to improve the teaching profession. For the last five years, I have traveled to my state government to lobby and educate my state legislators on issues affecting public schools. From my experience, I am considered a mentor by colleagues; I am able to give them professional advice on handling situations in their classrooms, with parents, and administrators. Having the knowledge to help my colleagues troubleshoot dilemmas is another way I have enhanced the teaching profession.

With the success of the Teen Leadership program at my school, I have become a spokesperson for the concepts taught to me through the "Capturing Kids' Hearts" training. As mentioned in my other essays, I was changed as a teacher when I went through this program. I have had the opportunity to share my experience and promote this training to other

teachers in my district and state. I have even worked with teachers in other states to show them the positive influence this training could have on their school. There are not too many professional development opportunities that I felt taught me the necessary skills to be an effective teacher. This training absolutely taught me these skills and I want to share it with everyone. I believe that when we find something that works in education we need to share it with all to affect the greater good. I have helped improve the teaching profession by sharing with teachers the importance of building positive relationships with students and helping them find the right professional development opportunities to help them learn the process that they can then implement in their classrooms.

There are teachers who are hurting the success of our kids and are not making any effort to change or better themselves. That is why it is important that there is an effective accountability system in all schools. A good accountability system should emphasize early intervention, peer support, and recognition of teachers who serve as mentors or lead teachers. A good accountability system starts with a high-quality mentor program and should identify appropriate areas of need for teacher growth and improvement. It must include meaningful professional development that gives under-performing teachers the opportunity to improve. I believe that data is a powerful way to document teacher performance and can be used to help a struggling teacher find the areas of needed growth. Accountability is not an administrator walking into a room with a checklist and making an evaluation during a 10-minute window. Accountability is peers and administrators observing not just teaching, but also the learning of the students. Accountability is asking how the students are being held accountable and observing their interactions with the teacher. When entering a classroom, I always look for a teacher who is engaging all students. They should not be calling on volunteers, but should look for the answers from the students who might not know. This is how a successful teacher holds all students accountable.

When you find a teacher who is struggling, they need help in understanding how to improve. It is not just about capturing kids' hearts. We also need to be capturing the hearts of our teachers by convincing them that they are capable and can grow. Sometimes some of the best professional development can be found at the school level. Mentors could videotape teachers and then give them positive feedback as well as constructive criticism. Help them see how they can improve. Teachers who fail to improve, whether from poor preparation, burn-out, or lack of professionalism and who are judged to be ineffective must be counseled out of the profession in order to ensure students' success in school. This consequence should only be the last resort of accountability after the steps listed above have been taken. Accountability should be viewed as positive support as well. We need to offer recognition and incentives for good teachers. We need to focus more time on positive attributes of effective teachers and not get bogged down with always addressing the ineffective teachers. Keeping accountability positive will help retain quality teachers and help teachers strive for success. Positive feedback will keep teachers motivated and encourage more teachers to share their success with teachers who might need it and benefit from their success.

Thomas R. Smigiel, Jr. – VIII. National Teacher of the Year

Just this past week, my high school was listed in a Johns Hopkins study as a “dropout factory,” a term coined by the lead researcher, for high schools in which no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen graduate. Although I did not agree with all parts of the study because of how the data was collected, it did bring attention to an issue that I am passionate about and feel needs to be addressed at an even greater level. Last year, a Time magazine report highlighted some disturbing facts; one million American students drop out of school every year—that is one every nine seconds. This is not a problem only in urban schools. This is not a problem facing only Virginia schools. This is a national problem. We have to do something about this crisis now.

I recently read a Gates’ Foundation article about student achievement, which referred to an educational philosophy of rigor, relevance and relationships. I believe that these words are the foundation for reform in education. In today’s data-happy era of accountability, testing and No Child Left Behind, I believe that rigor has been implemented. Therefore, my message as National Teacher of the Year will be about how to make learning relevant, and how building positive relationships with our students will change learning for all and ultimately impact everything from success in first grade to lowering our dropout rate.

Before I adopted the philosophy, “If you have a child’s heart, you have his head.” I was always caught up with our standards and testing. I realized that I was missing out on the real reason why I became a teacher. I wondered if I was doing enough to capture the hearts of my students. I learned the power of building positive relationships with my students. I soon realized that smiling and greeting my students at the door before class might make the biggest difference in their day. I learned that I should be listening to my students more and their stories of struggle and strength. I learned that my students need and want to be taught leadership skills so they can live a positive life. I learned to teach them resiliency. I learned that getting them involved in community service projects can teach them empathy and compassion.

From my experiences, I believe that truly remarkable outcomes are possible in a classroom when trust, respect, and caring relationships are allowed to flourish. I have seen first-hand how this approach has changed my Earth Science and Teen Leadership students. Think about how communicating a message building positive relationships could change our education system! I believe we can repair our dropout issue by not only continuing our rigor, but also by capturing our kids’ hearts and giving our students personal attention. Let’s focus less on a “one size fits all” approach to teaching and more on “one student at a time” teaching.

As the National Teacher of the Year, that is the message I would want to share. I will be an advocate for our students by being a voice for them and communicating their stories of empowerment, resiliency, and success. I would let my profession and the public know that if we believe in our students and empower them, they will be more successful. My message would be to eliminate the term “at-risk” and change it to “at-promise.” I will let the public know that when we can guarantee our students the chances to be successful, they will meet or exceed our expectations. As the National Teacher of the Year, I will share my ideas and promote innovative programs that will help keep our students in school and motivate them to want to be successful.