



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DPI-NR 2019-30

Thursday, May 9, 2019

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## Four educators named Wisconsin Teachers of the Year

*Herb Kohl Educational Foundation gives \$3,000 to each honoree*

MADISON – “It’s such an honor to recognize four educators who help students connect with successful paths in the world,” said State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor in congratulating Wisconsin’s 2020 Teachers of the Year.

This year, four educators have been chosen to represent Wisconsin’s teaching corps as Teachers of the Year during the 2019-20 school year. Each will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation. The four educators are: **Chelsea Miller** of Jefferson, an art teacher at Sullivan and West elementary schools in the Jefferson School District, Elementary School Teacher of the Year; **Erin McCarthy** of Milwaukee, an eighth-grade social studies teacher at Greendale Middle School, Middle School Teacher of the Year; **Chad Sperzel-Wuchterl** of Milwaukee, an art teacher at Reagan High School in Milwaukee Public Schools, the High School Teacher of the Year; and **Bawaajigekwe Andrea DeBungie** of Washburn, a special education teacher at Ashland Middle and Lake Superior Elementary schools in the Ashland School District, Special Services Teacher of the Year. Stanford Taylor notified each of the teachers of the honor during surprise announcements in their school districts.

Selection of the four Teachers of the Year is through a statewide committee made up of educators, parents, and community leaders. The panel reviews applications from the 86 public school recipients of the Kohl Teacher Fellowship who were named earlier this spring. Teacher Fellowship recipients are nominated and selected based on their ability to inspire a love of learning in their students, ability to motivate others, and their leadership and service within and outside the classroom.

“Our Teachers of the Year represent the thousands of dedicated educators in Wisconsin who take on multiple roles to help our students succeed,” Stanford Taylor said. “Teachers lay the foundation for our next generation so they can contribute and lead in the future.”

“Our teachers work so hard to inspire young people and help them become the leaders of tomorrow. I am honored to support the Teacher of the Year program to recognize our teachers’ efforts and support their unrealized goals for their classroom, their school, or their professional development,” said

(more)

Herb Kohl, philanthropist and businessman who co-sponsors the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his foundation.

Each of the Teachers of the Year will be honored during Stanford Taylor's State of Education address and awards program at the State Capitol in Madison Sept. 19. The Teachers of the Year will interview with a committee that will select one of the four to represent Wisconsin in the National Teacher of the Year program. That individual will receive an additional \$6,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

Nominations for the Kohl Teacher Fellowship program can be made online on the [Herb Kohl Educational Foundation website](http://www.kohleducation.org/teacherfellowship/) <http://www.kohleducation.org/teacherfellowship/>.

Information about each Teacher of the Year follows.

## Elementary School Teacher of the Year

In her teaching and extracurricular leadership, [Chelsea Miller](#) combines compassion with art. She understands each student as unique and able to change the world, and she aspires to influence those around her in a positive way.

"I believe that children who are taught to add beauty to the world are less likely to destroy it and that teaching kindness matters," she said. Art class is so much more than art in Miller's world. From becoming trauma-informed to teaching specific art techniques, Miller works with students and the community to make meaningful, lasting connections. Art history, fine motor skills, and technique get attention, but so do cross-content instruction, problem-solving, questioning, and teamwork.

In Miller's schools, poverty and homelessness are major concerns for many students. "Foundationally, increasing my knowledge on the subject is important, so I'm facilitating a book study about disrupting the cycle of poverty. Since beginning the study, I've learned that challenging our own stereotypes may be one of the biggest hurdles facing educators." Miller works hard to hold the same high, rigorous standards for all students, even when modifying lessons to meet individual needs.

Miller leads and participates in many extracurricular activities and programming, focused on arts, community engagement, or both. She created the Crochet Club to simultaneously teach a skill and connect students with community volunteers and organizations. Everything the students create is donated to places like the Humane Society of Jefferson County, Jefferson Fire and EMT, Fort Hospital, and Rainbow Hospice.

At the Construction Club that Miller hosts weekly, students from multiple grades build, play, and complete challenges. Miller noticed the struggle to keep books in students' hands during the summer months and worked with a local builder who donated several little libraries for students to decorate and help install in places where kids would have easy access.

She also hosts the Stained Glass Club and organizes the Veteran's Day assembly each year, with music, thank you cards, and educational visits to classrooms from the 484th Army band. In addition to leading these activities, she aspires to establish a Mosaic Club, along with a community-wide art project. Continuing her own professional learning factors into these aspirations.

Students in Miller's classes are sometimes provided access and opportunities to work with art media that are not commonly offered at the elementary level. She wants to learn more about using tools they already have to expand offerings, including learning to fuse glass. "I know this is possible in my kiln, but I would need to learn how through a class. We could use the fused pieces to add detail to our finished mosaic work."

Dreaming big and sharing her passion for art and life in general are major threads in her teaching, and Miller feels fortunate to work in a school district that encourages these traits.

She is also grateful for support, from administrators and beyond, for arts education, social and emotional learning, and working to reach every child. Building relationships with families, staff, local media, and other community members is the key to creating a positive impact, she finds — even, or especially, now, when Miller feels it's both "a challenging time to be a teacher" and "a tough time to be a parent."

"We need parents and community members to feel like they're part of the team. We need to bring back the village." Miller holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh and is currently working toward a Masters in Educational Leadership from the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater.

## Middle School Teacher of the Year

**Erin McCarthy** strives to spark every child's curiosity about history, along with their sense of agency in the present, so that they leave her class enthusiastic not only to explore the world, but to improve it.

McCarthy sparks curiosity and motivates reluctant learners by connecting them to diverse figures, especially those whose voices have been left out of history. McCarthy has developed a curriculum for writing these voices back into the narrative. At the end of the year, students perform an exercise of rewriting a chapter from their own textbook with a goal of making the story more complete. This project has successfully engaged students who were otherwise reluctant to learn.

McCarthy labors to truly include every student in her classroom's community. "I've shifted the focus in my classroom to valuing the experience of each student and not teaching to the 'average,'" she explained. "The work is exhausting but yields the greatest rewards." She will, for example, take extra time to find the right story from history to engage a struggling reader. She includes visual, musical, and tactile experiences in her classroom so a diverse range of students can learn effectively. In addition, McCarthy embarked on a multi-year project to ensure students in special education can fully participate in her class's National History Day project.

It was McCarthy who originally brought National History Day to the school. Students pick a historical topic of choice and learn to manage complex a project comprising research, collaboration, developing an argument, and sharing outside the classroom. Over four years of collaboration between McCarthy and special educators, Greendale's National History Day project has gradually become truly inclusive of students with disabilities.

McCarthy is a leader in engaging students in self-directed research, known as "inquiry-based learning." Educators nationwide asked to learn about her "Four I's of Inquiry" model for fueling students' curiosity. The approach shows versatility; her class even used it to respond to a "crisis of unkindness" at school. Inspired by historical examples yet working with current data, students developed plans for improving their school culture, presented them to administration, and formed a "Fix It to Fight It Club."

Another way McCarthy connects students to history — inviting family histories into the curriculum — also helps families connect to the school. One mother thanked McCarthy after students interviewed family members about the 2001 terrorist attacks. "Being from a military family, September 11 was a life changing day for us ... Thank you for providing this teachable and talkable moment."

Musing on the world of education, McCarthy would like to see more focus on making the community an extension of the classroom, for career development and civic participation. She's excited about the "whole child" movement, which emphasizes education for social, emotional, and other goals, in addition to academic assessment scores. In McCarthy's classroom, skills like working hard and pushing one's self get equal weight as growth in one's knowledge and academic abilities.

In addition to classroom responsibilities, McCarthy serves on teams for diversity and equity in her school district; she has helped trained teachers to provide students with disabilities with opportunities to grow and

succeed. McCarthy is a member of the board of directors of the League of Women Voters of Milwaukee County, and has participated in numerous professional development opportunities in her field throughout the country. She holds a bachelor's degree in history from Roosevelt University, Chicago, and a master's in public history from Loyola University, Chicago.

## High School Teacher of the Year

**Chad Sperzel-Wuchterl** calls education “a vibrant, ongoing, lifelong process that interweaves the individual within a greater community.” His students’ artwork has been displayed throughout that greater community, not only in the school but also in university campus art galleries, the Wisconsin Capitol, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and revolving displays in Milwaukee’s Historic Third Ward.

Sperzel-Wuchterl infuses college experiences throughout the curriculum by collaborating with professors from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and the Minneapolis College of Art Design to provide lessons, workshops, and even professional critiques of student work. For students, an added benefit of working with professors on critiques and revision is learning about financial support for college. “Last year alone, \$3.5 million was offered to 41 of my seniors as scholarships were put forth to draw in talented artists to multiple universities,” Sperzel-Wuchterl says. Students also make an annual visit to the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, where they participate in art workshops and learn about college options and scholarships from admissions staff.

Working against what he calls the “‘starving artist’ misconception,” Sperzel-Wuchterl invites parents to attend the campus visits to learn about college affordability, scholarships, and the wide array of careers available for students with art degrees.

Another hallmark of Sperzel-Wuchterl's philosophy is his belief in the intrinsic motivation to learn. “My experience has been that the more I empower students, the more excited they become in the learning process. I think this approach is essential as it lays the groundwork for independent learning which is expected at the college level and also paves the way for life-long learning.”

A major tenet of his teaching practice includes a focus on closing the achievement gap. Sperzel-Wuchterl embeds literacy within his visual arts classes and uses ACT data to better understand his students’ literacy-related strengths and areas in need of improvement. He is then able to tailor literacy-infused art lessons to support students reading about and analyzing art and art theory, describing their artistic processes, explaining their work to professors and other professional artists, listening to critiques, and writing their reflections. Students also develop valuable collaboration skills in many creative projects and work with diverse media to develop existing talents and build new skills.

Students embrace a global mindset. “Our student population includes 31 different cultures, some of whom are immigrants, refugees, or first-generation Americans,” Sperzel-Wuchterl notes. “Every culture has a unique perspective to share with the world at large.” A partnership with artists in residence and the international project, Inside Out, resulted in portraits of the school's culturally diverse students and staff appearing on the exterior of Reagan High School. Sperzel-Wuchterl also features, in his classroom and around the school, artworks by marginalized people.

Even while working tirelessly to widen students’ experiences and opportunities, Sperzel-Wuchterl's belief in education as a lifelong process remains at the center of his own development. In his professional learning, he says he has witnessed an increasing “openness, adaptability, and flexibility” in education; he dreams of facilitating even more collaboration, to “knock down the rigid silos ... separating truly gifted educators from each other and limiting their professional development.”

Sperzel-Wuchterl began teaching at Reagan High School, which offers an International Baccalaureate program, in 2004. He holds a bachelor's and a master's degree in visual arts from Cardinal Stritch University.

## Special Services Teacher of the Year

As an educator, **Bawaajigekwe Andrea DeBungie** facilitates learning as a community, honoring the history and wisdom that every student brings into the classroom while building the confidence they need to learn, grow, and even heal. "When connections are made with a student and a relationship is built within the classroom, there must be a deep understanding that the heart and mind cannot be separated," she says. Everything she strives to do within the classroom stems from this perspective.

Working with groups, where students learn holistically to stay engaged, has been a major component of DeBungie's teaching practice, particularly in schools serving high populations of Native American students and students from low-income households. Both groups have historically not achieved at levels equal to their peers. "If we want to close the achievement gap, we must shift our perspective. Let us look at every student who comes into our school buildings as someone who can and will achieve and succeed as long as they are given the opportunity."

DeBungie is a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians. She has supported the creation of Native American clubs for native and non-native students and educators, and currently advises the club at Ashland Middle School. DeBungie says these clubs create spaces where students can check in, support each other, feel a sense of belonging, take care of their community, and learn about educational opportunities.

For DeBungie, supporting and engaging students is ongoing work that requires a three-part team: students, their families, and DeBungie. She builds trust and opens communication with students and their families, acknowledges who they are as people, and shows up as a community member within and outside of the school setting.

Each year, DeBungie helps students write grants and complete applications to attend the Wisconsin Indian Education Association conference. Last year, she collaborated with professors from Northwestern University to bring several middle school girls to Chicago to participate in STEM-related experiences.

In her current studies of Indigenous education, through a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, DeBungie is exploring her questions about how the education system can support the success of American Indian children. "Our Indigenous students are some of the brightest and most brilliant, and they must be looked at through this positive lens on a systemic level, otherwise, they will continually be oppressed and stunted within the educational system," DeBungie says.

At the same time, she sees positive elements and developments in the education system. She appreciates the Educator Effectiveness system of continuous improvement, for example — citing its positive impact on collegial collaboration, self-directed growth, and rapport among teachers and administrators.

In addition to her teaching duties in Ashland, DeBungie is a volunteer basketball coach and school board member in the Washburn School District, serves on the academic board of Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College, and is part of a group of jingle dress dancers providing what she describes as a healing function in her community. DeBungie holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Wisconsin–Superior and a master's in education from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in First Nations education at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay.

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