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Wausau educator named Wisconsin High School Teacher of the Year

Brent Zinkel to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON — In a surprise ceremony at his school, Brent Zinkel, a history teacher at Wausau East High School, was named Wisconsin’s 2018 High School Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, Zinkel will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

“Teaching is a career for optimists. People who see the potential in each student and meet challenges with innovative solutions that improve the lives and education of our kids,” Evers said. “A Teacher of the Year recipient inspires the young people in their classroom and their colleagues in the school and community. It is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin’s public schools.”

“The Teacher of the Year program highlights the many contributions educators make to our children, schools, and communities,” said Herb Kohl, philanthropist and businessman, who co-sponsors the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation. “Our teachers make extraordinary efforts to help all children achieve.”

Told he has “unapologetic enthusiasm” for history, Zinkel demonstrates and inspires a love of learning for his students through his lessons and sharing what excites him, from a book he’s reading, to a class he’s taking, to places he’s traveled. He says that the most effective learning strategies are those that allow students to discover the answers to open-ended questions. Zinkel finds his students respond to “cognitive dissonance” that require them to reconcile opposing viewpoints or examine ethical dilemmas. To “do the work of historians” his students must consider complex questions and understand history, not as a march of dates and facts, but as a set of decisions made by historical characters that shape the world in which we live.

Zinkel, who teaches U.S. History I and II and International Baccalaureate (IB) History I, has worked on various school committees that strive to improve educational outcomes for students. He recently led a team of educators that developed vocabulary building activities and content-reading strategies to support struggling students.

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A tiered reading activity he developed allowed high-need students to be active in an all-class discussion of landmark Supreme Court cases. His work with the Wausau East Narrowing the Gap Committee resulted in the first Hmong Parent Night, an effort to increase parental participation in their children’s education. He also developed a U.S. History curriculum for Hmong students learning English. His work with the Wausau East Research and Design Committee led to schedule changes that opened collaborative time for staff to set curricular goals, develop common assessments, analyze student performance, and develop remedial lessons. For example, cross-curricular cooperation between the English and history departments led to common vocabulary for teaching analytical writing skills. The cross-curricular problem-solving strategy provides a flexible framework that works for students in regular and special education classes and across academic disciplines. One former student, who supported Zinkel’s nomination for the Kohl award, noted that her teacher challenged her in IB history and never wasted her time. She added that his teaching methods contributed to her decision to study history in college.

Zinkel coaches multiple sports teams, including cross country and swimming. He is active in his community, volunteering for numerous special events in Wausau and serving as a liaison to provide IB students civic engagement and leadership opportunities to fulfill their community activity and service requirement. “My volunteering and community engagement is an extension of my passion for making Wausau a vibrant and appealing destination to live, work and play,” he said.

Zinkel began his teaching career at Wausau East in 2005. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in history. He earned a Master’s of Science in Education degree from the University of New England-Maine in Biddeford, Maine.

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