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Contact: DPI Media Inquiries, (608) 266-3559, media.inquiries@dpi.wi.gov

Kim Marggraf, Herb Kohl Educational Foundation Inc., (920) 457-1727 (office), (920) 946-3640 (mobile)

Bawaajigekwe Andrea DeBungie named 2020 Special Services Teacher of the Year

Herb Kohl Educational Foundation gives \$3,000 award

MADISON – In a surprise ceremony today, Bawaajigekwe Andrea DeBungie of Washburn, a special education teacher at Ashland Middle and Lake Superior Elementary schools in the Ashland School District, was named Wisconsin's 2020 Special Services Teacher of the Year.

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

"Every day, teachers work to help students gain confidence, skills, and knowledge so they can contribute successfully to our world," said State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor. "It's such a pleasure to meet with educators who represent the best of this tremendous calling."

Herb Kohl, philanthropist, businessman, and co-sponsor of the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation, said he supports the program because "I want to help teachers pursue their unrealized goals for their classroom, their school, or their professional development."

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, grown, 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."

(more)

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.

“When working with students who are Native American, I am conscious to never separate a child from their culture or identity but instead utilize their gifts to emphasize achievement. I understand that Indigenous students carry their identity with them at all times, and I have worked to set up learning environments that do not make anyone lose who they are, feel they need to check their identity at the door, or code switch to accommodate everybody else.”

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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