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Erin McCarthy named 2020 Middle School Teacher of the Year

Herb Kohl Educational Foundation gives \$3,000 award

MADISON – In a surprise ceremony at her school today, Erin McCarthy of Milwaukee, an eighth-grade social studies teacher at Greendale Middle School, was named the 2020 Middle School 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, McCarthy 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."

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.

"Since my daughters started your class," one parent wrote, "they are eager to discuss all that they are learning and aspire to learn.... They are working harder than ever to prove themselves to be respectful and responsible young people."

McCarthy considers it her mission "to connect students to their place in history so they take action to impact their local and global community." She finds she is able to spark curiosity and motivate 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 ensure every student is included 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

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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 their choice and learn to manage complex projects comprising research, collaboration, developing an argument, and sharing outside the classroom. Gradually, over four years of collaboration between McCarthy and special educators, Greendale's National History Day project became fully inclusive of students with disabilities. "Our students with significant cognitive and learning challenges found their path to success," McCarthy said. She told of a moment when "Elizabeth" (not the student's real name) presented about the historical figure named Ruby Bridges. "As Elizabeth shared the story of a little African-American girl who spent an entire year alone in a classroom with just one teacher because of the fear of integration it was a poignant moment. Elizabeth's education experience was similar to Ruby Bridges because at her previous school the special education model used was to isolate Elizabeth in a classroom by herself. Preparing her documentary provided Elizabeth opportunities to read, research, and connect to history."

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 train 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.

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