



News Release

Herb Kohl Educational Foundation
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Five educators named Wisconsin Teachers of the Year

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

MADISON — “Educators have the power to make a positive impact on the lives of students, parents, and community members,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers in announcing the 2009-10 Wisconsin Teachers of the Year.

This year, five educators have been chosen to represent Wisconsin’s teaching corps. Each will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation. The five teachers are: JoAnn Lens and Maureen McGilligan-Bentin who share the Elementary Teacher of the Year title; Rachel Rydzewski, the Middle/Junior High School Teacher of the Year; Leah Lechleiter-Luke, High School Teacher of the Year; and Kay Zastrow, Special Services Teacher of the Year. Evers notified each of the teachers of the honor during surprise announcements in their school districts.

A panel of educators, parents, and community leaders selected the five Teachers of the Year from a pool of 86 Kohl Teacher Fellows who were named in spring 2009. Kohl Teacher Fellows, nominated by colleagues, parents, students, or members of their community, are chosen for their ability to inspire students’ love of learning, instructional innovation and leadership, and commitment to community involvement.

“Strong teachers are absolutely vital,” Evers said. “They are critical to the well-being of our students and inseparable from the success of our communities.”

“Our students are our future — that’s why teachers are so important,” said U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl. “I support our Teacher of the Year awards in order to recognize outstanding educators and to help ensure we have caring and competent teachers in the classroom to grow the leaders of tomorrow.”

Elementary Teachers of the Year

JoAnn Lens teaches fourth grade at Hawley Environmental School. Her colleagues in the Milwaukee Public Schools credit Lens with having an inspirational love of learning, a facility for community connections, and a passion for pursuing and sharing educational advances. Lens describes her educational philosophy as centered on “high expectations” and “respect.” Lens is also known as an upbeat and fearless innovator. She especially leads the

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way in technological advancements, which impress her for their ability to “bridge the gap between school and home.” Lens, who lives in Milwaukee, holds a degree from Marquette University in Milwaukee and is working on a master’s degree.

Maureen McGilligan-Bentin, who teaches fourth grade at Marquette Elementary School in the Madison Metropolitan School District, is described by colleagues and parents as a “force of nature” with “incredible enthusiasm” for conquering educational barriers for each child and advocating for students and education. With 37 years of experience as an educator, McGilligan-Bentin makes a point to learn the individual strengths, passions, challenges, and needs of each child, and calls herself “relentless” in working to help each and every student. McGilligan-Bentin, who lives in Madison, holds a degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Middle/Junior High School Teacher of the Year

Rachel Rydzewski teaches communication arts to seventh-graders at Waunakee Community Middle School. Parents and colleagues praise her ability to engage and motivate a wide variety of students as well as her leadership and innovation. Rydzewski infuses her instruction with the belief that every student has the ability and responsibility to contribute to the world. Her own extensive community service experiences have motivated her homeroom to lead the school in charitable drive collections for each of her three years in the building. Rydzewski, who lives in Madison, holds a degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

High School Teacher of the Year

Leah Lechleiter-Luke teaches Spanish to ninth- through 12th-graders at Mauston High School. Lechleiter-Luke likens her educational approach, both in classes and in extracurricular activities, to leading students to the cliff-like edges of their comfort zones, then pushing them off and watching them discover the ability to fly. She is described as a passionate and determined mentor for students at all levels of achievement. As adviser to the Key Club, she has inspired a quadrupling in membership. The organization has won numerous awards for its community service projects. Lechleiter-Luke holds degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and Viterbo University in La Crosse.

Special Services Teacher of the Year

Kay Zastrow, a special education teacher in the Green Bay Area School District, receives praise from parents and colleagues for developing positive relationships with her students and bringing out their best behavior and ability to learn. Zastrow draws on a wide range of techniques for instructing her very diverse group of students.

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She has conducted her own research to learn the best ways to help children with special needs. Zastrow, who lives in Green Bay, has achieved certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. She holds degrees and certification from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

Each of the Teachers of the Year will be honored during the Sept. 24 State of Education address and awards program at the State Capitol. Later this fall, a committee will select one of the five Teachers of the Year 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 are open until Oct. 2. Visit the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation website, <http://www.kohleducation.org/>, to nominate a teacher.

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NOTES: More information about each Teacher of the Year can be found in individualized news releases available from the Department of Public Instruction newsroom website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/newsroom.html>. This news release is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2009_22.pdf.