

VOICES From the Classroom

Wisconsin teachers of the year offer their perspectives for the new school year

Each year, the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation and the Department of Public Instruction recognize four individuals as the Wisconsin teachers of the year. A panel of educators, parents, and community leaders select the teachers from the pool of Kohl Teacher Fellows. 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.

"The Teacher of the Year program highlights the many contributions educators make to our children, schools, and communities," said Sen. Herb Kohl. "They are leaders who put forth extraordinary effort to help all children achieve."

"At some point in all of our lives, a teacher influences us in a life-changing way," said State Superintendent Tony Evers. "The impact of such a teacher stretches far beyond the walls of the classroom."

We reached out to the 2017 Wisconsin teachers of the year and invited them to share their perspectives on public education and teaching. We hope their perspectives are informing and inspiring to all school leaders as we begin the 2017-18 school year.

To nominate a teacher for a 2018 Kohl Teacher Fellowship, visit kohleducation.org. The nomination period closes Sept. 22.

2016-17 WISCONSIN TEACHERS OF THE YEAR

HIGH SCHOOL Sarah Breckley – Reedsburg Area High School, Reedsburg School District

MIDDLE SCHOOL Chris Gleason* – Patrick Marsh Middle School, Sun Prairie Community School District

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL Pamela Gresser – Rothschild Elementary School, D.C. Everest Area School District

SPECIAL SERVICES Barbara VanDoorn – Lake Holcombe School, Lake Holcombe School District

** 2017 National Teacher of the Year Finalist*



SARAH BRECKLEY

2016-17 High School
Teacher of the Year,
Reedsburg



Entertaining Education

I'm Sarah, and I'm in the entertainment business. Not that kind of entertainment, but the kind of entertainment that is desperately needed to increase learning in my classroom. Every hour a crowd of emotional teenagers enters my classroom, and they expect to be wowed. They've heard the rumors, and so I must continue to be "the craziest teacher" while teaching a class that "has a surprise every day." This edutainment is exhausting, but I mustn't allow old school pedagogy or teacher lounge grumbling to convince me that making things fun isn't an essential element of the job.

I've read many teacher resumes touting degrees from prestigious universities and high ACT scores, but these same applicants have failed to keep my attention while conducting their interviews. Imagine these monologuing masterminds in front of 32 teenagers at 3 pm on a beautiful summer day, and we immediately see the need to change our perspective of what a qualified teacher looks like. After all, we're not teaching the same kids that we used to, and their needs have also changed.

Do any of your teachers have classroom management issues? Then, it's likely their students need to be entertained. Do some kids seem unaware instead of engaged? Seriously, entertain them. Do teachers in your district complain about having to teach while competing with SnapChat, video games, sports, YouTube, and fidget spinners? The battle is real, and your teachers need to be even more entertaining.

The issue with teachers as entertainers is that most of us don't consider ourselves as naturally funny,

and we never expected to be hosting a daily variety show when we selected this profession. As the newbie grin fades and our shortcomings are realized, many simply conclude that including entertainment

"Do some kids seem unaware instead of engaged? Seriously, entertain them."

isn't actually valuable, because participation issues can be cured with strict rules and harsh consequences. However, we must acquiesce to the fact that eye contact from students

doesn't mean anything of value is entering their brains. In order to meet student learning needs, based on student engagement and achievement research, teachers should feel some relief to know that entertainment in education can be implemented in a variety of ways, besides just becoming a comedian.

For example, have you heard of differentiation? Many agree that it provides a pathway to excellence for every type of learner, but for some kids it's the only way to stay awake as they spend seven hours glued to tiny polypropylene chairs. Some teachers live by a set, hourly routine for planning ease and classroom management, but a lack of variety, spontaneity, and wonder can lead students directly to LaLa Land. We

should cook, play games, take our lessons outside, perform skits, wear costumes, integrate PBL to change the

world, debate, Skype with unique people, dance, and work hard to convince our students that our nine-month curriculum is fun! This differentiation as entertainment is exactly



how students begin to fall in love with learning.

We have some excellent storytellers in our school and they can fabricate their way through every unit as they connect the content to crazy or heart-wrenching life experiences. It's okay to embellish the truth if it's for a good cause, especially since our history teacher used to be a secret agent!

And do you know who students think is the most entertaining? Themselves. Show-and-tell is appropriate for all ages and curricula, and shouldn't be limited to speech class and the hand-raisers.

While some of us only became teachers because our 'America's Got Talent' auditions failed, centerstage should regularly be occupied by our students. In addition, as peers are learning the material from each other, teachers are facilitating cultural awareness as a by-product. It's impossible for teachers to have a complete understanding of every cultural norm in order to teach it without furthering stereotypes and oversimplifying. Alternatively, allowing students to share their own practices and perspectives establishes an awareness of uniqueness without blanket generalizations for entire groups of people.

Similarly, family communication and support increases student achievement, and sometimes these connections can happen during class time. I periodically call parents on speakerphone during class to allow the pre-informed students to tell their parents what we're learning. The audience is entertained by the family-peer interaction, and it's a great way to complete formative checks.

A teacher should rarely be sitting at a desk, except for attendance and for running necessary technology, because physical separation precedes disengagement. If it makes sense to sit, we should sit amongst the children. If not, teachers can use a FitBit or a Swivl camera to periodically measure class-

room movement. Uncommon teaching locations, frequent movement, and friendly proximity will surprise and help minimize those pesky classroom management issues.

Hay políglotas en la mayoría de las clases, y hablar en otro idioma es una forma de entretenimiento. The act of including our student linguists and world language teachers to share things in different languages is easy to do in all content areas. New sounds, lexical teasers, and phonemic personal connections are

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enriching and fun. ¿Comprende?

Is there an odd teacher in your district? Embrace the oddness for the sake of entertaining education. Recently, I bribed kids to prepare for an assessment in exchange for a demonstration of my unicycling talents. Students united for the unconventional reward and helped each other to learn the material. I've also taught grammar with puppets, worn

shirts with the lesson objectives ironed-on, sung a song to end an argument, henna tattooed student names on my arms to become a walking certificate of academic achievement, told many jokes without punchlines, taught vocabulary with magic tricks, and made it mandatory for my live-streaming puppy cam to be the inspiration for Spanish class journal entries. Every single talent, quirk, and creative idea can be used for educational entertainment, so administrators should be looking for teachers who do things differently.

Perhaps your teachers don't embrace becoming teachertainers or don't have the extra time it takes to tackle entertaining education. When I'm in a rut, I grab the calendar and call my favorite guest speakers. We all have many community experts, such as business owners, veterans, farmers, and school board members, who can provide real-world connections to my curriculum. Some of them are even a little entertaining. □

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BARBARA VANDOORN

2016-17 Wisconsin Special Services
Teacher of the Year,
Lake Holcombe

Addressing Mental Health: Starting with the Basics

The statistics are frightening — 13 percent of our students report seriously considering suicide, 20 percent of teens will experience a mental health issue, and 40 percent of our population are affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Hundreds of programs promise to help. As a task, it feels overwhelming.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” program for addressing mental health in a school setting. Having access to effective mental health care is vital, but how you get there will look different for rural and urban districts. Not everyone will have a satellite clinic in their building. Program selection must involve assessing your needs and choosing a practical fit for your population, resources, and setting.

But we can’t wait for resources to come to us. Rural districts with the highest suicide rates and fewest resources know this reality too well. It’s important we drill down to the basics. There are common components outlined in nearly all research-based plans:

- Promote emotional well-being and connectedness,
- Identify students at risk and assist in getting help, and
- Promote resilience.

You already have the resources in your building to address this basic list. Staff, curriculum and existing programs are already promoting well-being and resilience. Most effective mental health programs have “caring adults” and “connectedness,” again, vital resources each school has.

For teens, the strongest protective factor against suicide is having one caring adult in their life. Teachers, coaches, administrative staff have daily contact with all students. Empower staff with the knowledge that they can make a difference, and then give staff the support needed to identify students at risk.



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We know belonging and connectedness are key factors in improving academics and healthy behaviors, yet the Youth Behavior Survey tells us one in four high school students don’t feel they belong in their school. Encourage staff to promote connectedness and administration to respond ‘yes’ in creating belonging in their school community.



We can go farther. Our schools perform best when we respond with a proactive, “upstream” approach. Building resiliency does just that. For students it gives the power or ability to rise above difficult experiences and meet mental health challenges.

Educators are uniquely positioned and able to help build resiliency in our students, most do it daily through interaction, expectations, and creative programming. DPI consultants and national programs agree on the following components for building resiliency in our students.

- Caring relationships. Convey compassion, understanding, respect, and interest to students.
- Have high expectations, with support. Provide firm guidance, structure, and challenge while giving the message you have faith in their ability.
- Provide opportunity to contribute. Give students responsibility and a voice in making decisions and making a difference.
- Real talk. Talk with students about real issues. Guide but don’t over direct, not every conversation has to be a “teachable moment.”
- Mastery experiences. Help students find what they do well and encourage them to do more of it.
- Creative expression. Foster art, music, writing, and other forms of creative expression, which are powerful protective factors.
- Personal identity. Give students permission to be authentic, to be seen, understood, and accepted.
- Build trust through consistency.

The more challenges a student faces, the more important these factors become.

In facing challenges, we need to think “people” not just “programs.” We can help students meet challenges by empowering the people in our buildings to unleash the care, compassion, and professionalism they bring to their classrooms each day. In every building, our greatest resource in tackling any challenge, including mental health, is our people. □



CHRIS GLEASON

2016-17 Middle School
Teacher of the Year,
Sun Prairie



“Educators have the responsibility to model passion, persistence, and the love of learning.”

Yes ... Be a Teacher!

“You don’t want to teach.” These are the words that I have heard adults say to students on more than one occasion. I believe this is a massive mistake that potentially prevents some of our best students from entering the profession.

Do we have challenges to overcome in education? Certainly, but who better to meet those challenges than our students?

If you think about it, we are replacing us. We need to encourage the next generation to enter this noble profession. We need to instill in them what it means to be called “a teacher.”

“A teacher affects eternity; one can never tell where their influence stops.” – Henry Adams

This became clear at my father’s funeral this past February. I grew up in my father’s band room. I remember watching him teach and inspire

students year after year. Like many teachers, he put in long hours at school and then came home to do more planning for the next day. He had an incredible gift of making you feel like you were the most important person in the room. His high expectations and persistence made it evident that he was committed to your success.

At his funeral, my mother, brother, and I were greeted by a long line of former students who came to pay respects to a man who made a profound difference in their lives. As the brass ensemble consisting of former students concluded their performance of *Salvation Is Created* by Pavel Chesnokov, I was reminded of the lifelong impact we all have as educators.

As teachers, we must seize every opportunity we have to influence, shape, and uplift young people’s lives. Education is so much more than just a test score or even the content of our curriculum.

Who we are is just as important as what we teach or learn. Educators have the responsibility to model passion, persistence, and the love of learning. We must make connections with each and every child, proving to them that they are unconditionally important to us.

To accomplish this, we must continue to better ourselves and our students.

As Ken Robinson so aptly stated, “Farmers know you cannot make a plant grow...the plant grows itself. Like farmers, great teachers know what the conditions for growth are and bad ones don’t.”

I believe this begins with knowing each child and asking ourselves, “What does this child need?” As educators it is our job to know our children and ourselves, to create the conditions for growth. The seeds of potential lie within each person. Cultivating an environment of possibility will ensure that students and teachers not only succeed but also find their passion.

It is imperative that we recognize the difficult and complex work of the educator. During the past decade, we’ve learned more about how diverse and distinct intelligence is. Excellent teachers navigate not only different learning styles but also emotional, social, physical, economic, and ethnic differences among students.

As educators, our work is never complete. We constantly contemplate and wrestle with ways to better reach and inspire all students. Great educators hear the truth ring out in Ken Robinson’s words when he says: “What you do for yourself dies with you when you leave this world. What you do for others lives on forever.”

Should we encourage our youth to teach? YES! □



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PAMELA GRESSER

2016-17 Elementary School
Teacher of the Year,
D.C. Everest



What is the Key to Academic Success?

Education is the foundation from which our knowledge stems, and is necessary to function in our complex and ever-changing 21st century society. Every student has the ability to learn, but how do we unlock that?

The key to students' learning begins with a teacher who has the ability to inspire hope, ignite the imagination and instill a love of learning while motivating all students into believing they can become successful, lifelong learners. When students have positive connections at school and believe they can achieve, their confidence blossoms and they take more learning risks while putting forth their best effort.

Many children cannot be coerced or bribed into learning or behaving. Research indicates there is a connection between student achievement and positive relationships. Education researcher Robert Marzano notes that, "Positive relationships between teachers and students are among the most commonly cited variables associated with effective instruction."

The best educators increase student engagement by using creative strategies such as cooperative groups, genuine feedback, and hands-on and interactive learning. A strong relationship develops as teachers interact with students through a sense of respect and cooperation. Students are willing to take risks, and best of all, learning takes off and reaches a higher level.

Relationships between students and teachers can determine student success or failure. Although some teachers may not find the time or be given permission to spend time on

building relationships, research suggests that you need to have both positive relationships and effective instruction in today's classrooms. This starts by simply getting to know each child at different levels, not only academically, but personally and socially as well.

"Relationships between students and teachers can determine student success or failure."

Teachers should start by self-disclosing information so students get to know their teacher as a real person too. This is immediately followed by getting to know each student's interests, personality and background to

show that they are valued unconditionally. This body of knowledge opens up the possibilities of growth and dramatic learning opportunities.

As the year goes on, simply asking children about their weekends can be another step to connecting with them. When teachers take advantage of opportunities to speak with their students about life outside of school, it's an indication to students that their teacher truly cares about them as a person not just a student.

As students begin to feel a bond with their teacher, their self-concept improves which leads to not only improved behavior, but also academic achievement. Educators should look for opportunities to recognize the uniqueness of each student and know his or her needs. Understanding each child's learning styles and multiple intelli-

gences along with their strengths and weaknesses allows the teacher to effectively differentiate instruction and further individualize their curriculum. This valuable information enables teachers to find creative ways to help the student successfully grasp the material and make academic gains no matter what level they are at. The more we know about the child, the more we can build learning environments and curriculums that are going to work for them.

Students will move mountains for those who have taken the time to develop meaningful relationships and show they care. Relationships are sometimes treated as luxuries even though they are a necessity for learning and make a difference in the way students perform in school.

Teachers need to be given permission and should be expected to take time away from mandated curriculum to build positive relationships with their students and class all year long because we can't afford not to do it. To inspire meaningful change, we must open the heart, before we open the mind. ■

2018 Teachers of the Year

In May, the Department of Public Instruction and Kohl Educational Foundation announced the 2018 Teachers of the Year.

ELEMENTARY — Mary Ellen Kanthack, a fifth-grade teacher in the Genoa City J2 School District

SPECIAL SERVICES — Matthew W. Miller Sr., an English learner teacher at North High School in Sheboygan

MIDDLE SCHOOL — Jill Runde, a school counselor at Indian Mound Middle School in McFarland

HIGH SCHOOL — Brent Zinkel, a history teacher at Wausau East High School