FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 12, 2010
News Media Contact: Communication and Media Relations, 678-301-6020

Six educators named finalists for 2011 Teacher of the Year

A 5th grade teacher, an 8th grade language arts teacher, a middle school Spanish teacher, a media specialist, an ESOL teacher, and a high school science teacher... they come from a broad range of backgrounds and specialties, but they have one thing in common. They all are finalists for the 2011 Gwinnett County Teacher of the Year (TOTY) title. This year’s finalists are Julie Bailey-Wegner of Mulberry Elementary; Debbie Trevino of Bay Creek Middle; Sergio Parra of Osborne Middle; Jennifer Helfrich of Radloff Middle; Katie Saldarriaga of North Gwinnett High; and Steve Kuninsky of Parkview High.

The 2011 TOTY process began with an impressive list of 123 local school educators who were nominated by their colleagues. This list was whittled down to 25 semifinalists. A selection committee, comprised of Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) teachers, administrators, and central office staff, then narrowed the field of semifinalists down to the six finalists, one of whom will become the district’s 2011 Teacher of the Year. That announcement will be made at a banquet on November 4, 2011, at the Gwinnett Center. The program begins at 6:30 p.m. All 123 local school Teachers of the Year will be recognized that evening.

As the final element of the judging process, the selection committee will complete an observation of the six teachers in their classrooms. During the visit, committee members will look for original teaching methods, how the teacher demonstrates his/her philosophy of teaching, and special class projects. The finalists also will share more about themselves through an interview process with the selection committee.

MEET THE FINALISTS

Julie Bailey-Wegner, a 5th Grade Teacher at Mulberry Elementary
(11 years in education, four with GCPS)

This school year, Julie Bailey-Wegner began her eleventh year of service in education. A product of Gwinnett County Public Schools, Mrs. Bailey-Wegner made the decision in 2007 to return to the community that provided her with her education. She joined the inaugural staff of Mulberry Elementary in 2007, bringing with her years of experience she gained in neighboring metro-Atlanta schools. Mrs. Bailey-Wegner holds a bachelor’s degree in Middle Grades Education from Wesleyan College.
Debbie Trevino, an 8th Grade Language Arts Teacher at Bay Creek Middle
(14 years in education, eight with GCPS)

For 14 years, Ms. Trevino has taught language arts and social studies to middle school students. She brought that experience to Gwinnett County Public Schools in 2003 when she joined the school system at Summerour Middle (2003-2009) as an 8th grade language arts teacher. In 2009, she moved across the county to help open Bay Creek Middle, where she now shares her love of language arts with 8th graders. Ms. Trevino is a graduate of South Gwinnett High who dedicated the first years of her career to children in North Carolina. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Fayetteville State University, and a master’s degree in English for Grades 7-12 from Piedmont College. In 2007, she earned a specialist’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction also from Piedmont College.

Sergio Parra, a Spanish teacher at Osborne Middle
(18 years in education, six with GCPS)

Sergio Parra became part of the Osborne Middle faculty in 2008 as a Spanish language teacher. But his career as an educator began nearly two decades ago in his native Colombia where he taught computer applications (1989-1992). His career in the United States began in Massachusetts where he taught Spanish and middle school social studies (1996-2005). He joined Gwinnett County Public Schools in 2005 as a teacher at Central Gwinnett High (2005-2008), and later accepted his current position at Osborne Middle. Mr. Parra earned a bachelor’s degree in Education from Adventist University of Colombia. In 2001, he earned his master’s degree in Education from Atlantic Union College (MA).

Jennifer Helfrich, a media specialist at Radloff Middle
(Eight years in education, all with GCPS)

Earning an undergraduate degree in Chemistry, Jennifer Helfrich’s journey toward becoming a media specialist would first take her through a career as an analytical chemist. She discovered her passion as an educator while volunteering at her children’s school. Mrs. Helfrich joined Gwinnett County Public Schools in 2003. During her career with the district, she has worked as a media specialist at both the elementary and middle school levels. She served at Berkeley Lake Elementary (2003-2008) prior to joining Radloff Middle in 2008. In addition to her bachelor’s degree in Chemistry from the University of Illinois, Mrs. Helfrich also earned a master’s degree in Library Media Technology from Georgia State University.

--more--
Katie Saldarriaga, an ESOL (English to Speakers of other Languages) teacher at North Gwinnett High
(14 years in education, 13 with GCPS)
Another Gwinnett graduate from Duluth High, Katie Saldarriaga began her career in education in Rockdale County as a special needs paraprofessional (1997-1998). She moved from this position to a substitute teacher position at Duluth High the next year and became a full-time employee of Gwinnett County Public Schools in 1999 as an ESOL teacher at Norcross High. In 2003, Mrs. Saldarriaga joined the staff of North Gwinnett High, where she helps English language learners in language arts, geography, world history, U.S. history, chemistry, biology, as well as in economics and government. Mrs. Saldarriaga earned her bachelor’s degree in History, Technology, and Society from the Georgia Institute of Technology. She also earned a master’s degree in Education from Walden University.

Steve Kuninsky, a science teacher at Parkview High
(Nine years in education, all with GCPS)
Steve Kuninsky has made Gwinnett County Public Schools his teaching home ever since he entered the profession. In fact, since joining the staff of Parkview High in 2002, he has only taught at the Lilburn school. A science educator, Mr. Kuninsky has taught College-Prep Physics, Technical Biology, Technical Physical Science, Advanced Placement (AP) Biology, College-Prep Biology, and Honors/Gifted Biology. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Biology from Vanderbilt University, and later earned his master’s and specialist’s degrees in science education from Georgia State University and the University of Georgia, respectively.

As part of the TOTY process, three of these six finalists will be designated as the elementary, middle, and high school teachers of the year. As the only elementary level finalist, Mrs. Bailey-Wegner automatically becomes the winner at that level. The middle and high school level winners will be named from the remaining finalists at each level. The county winner will be selected from among the three level winners and will go on to represent the school district in the Georgia TOTY competition.
Gwinnett’s Teacher of the Year will receive an annual award of $1,000 and the other level winners will each receive $750 each year, for as long as they are employed with GCPS. The other three finalists will receive a one-time award of $500, and each local school winner will receive a one-time award of $200.

--more--
GCPS expresses its appreciation to area companies whose contributions continue to make this recognition of outstanding teaching possible. Those sponsors include Balfour, Coca-Cola, Emtec, Georgia Power, Gwinnett Federal Credit Union, Hayes Dodge, Herff Jones, IBM, J. Smith Lanier, Lifetouch, MedCom, Mellon Global Securities, and VALIC.

---30---