

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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AUSD Announces Teacher of the Year

Alameda — May 9, 2018 — At the Board of Education meeting last night, Alameda Unified School District (AUSD) staff announced the district's 2018 Teacher of the Year: Mary Otieku, an 18-year veteran of AUSD.

Otieku, who received both her BA in psychology and her teacher credential from Saint Mary's College in Moraga, currently teaches a 4/5 combo at Bay Farm School. Prior to that, she worked as a 3rd grade teacher at Lum Elementary School for three years and at Paden Elementary for ten years. She has also served as a math coach in the district and a coach for new teachers.

"Teaching is in my blood," Otieku says. "My grandmother was a teacher, my grandfather was a geology professor at Stanford and UCLA, and my mother was an elementary school teacher. It is what I am meant to be doing."

Passion as a driving force

Recommendation letters submitted in support of Otieku's nomination cited her use of differentiated instruction, books from different cultures and mixed-race authors, classroom meetings, gratitude cards, respect for students, and clear and consistent communication with parents.

"From the flexible seating options that allow students to choose furniture that works best for them at a given time to the classroom meetings in which she keeps a notebook of student suggestions, she constantly communicates that she values the students' opinions and that they can make a difference," Bay Farm School parent Lina Hannigan wrote in a recommendation letter.

A teacher who was mentored by Otieku when she worked as a coach for beginner teachers praised her mentoring skills. "Mary's approach to dig deep and really get to know her students, even in a large class of 32 fifth graders, exemplified what I wanted to be and how I had interpreted the role of a teacher," said Lily Bianchi, who now teaches third grade at Paden Elementary School. "Children connected with her openness and felt safe to take risks in the classroom environment. She is the very embodiment of what happens when a teacher spontaneously makes passion the driving force of how to engage children."

When asked what advice she would give a new teacher today, Otieku said, “Learn and collaborate with others.’ Teaching can be very isolating and overwhelming, but if you work with your team, it can be immensely collaborative and much more manageable.”

The power of empathy and compassion

Parents also emphasized Ms. Otieku’s lessons on the importance of respect and kindness. “When my daughter corrected me in my usage of the word ‘easy,’ saying ‘What might be easy for one person, Mommy, isn’t necessarily easy for everyone,’ I knew that she was learning some unique and powerful lessons about differences, respect, inclusivity, and kindness,” Hannigan wrote. “It fills me with pride and hope to know these kinds of conversations are happening among peers with Mrs. Otieku’s leadership in her dynamic classroom.”

Wrote Jennifer Williams, a parent at the school and also an AUSD Board Member, “My daughter is learning the power of empathy and compassion this year, lessons that will shape who she is and the adult she will become. As the world we live in becomes more complex, teaching children to be kind and to be an ally to other members of their community will help them be successful citizens in the long run.”

Nominees for AUSD Teacher of the Year come from parents, students, staff, and the community. After being invited to submit materials (including a resume and letters of support), a selection committee observes nominees in the classroom and then interviews them. Next fall, Otieku will compete to become Alameda County Teacher of the Year.

“I am honored and humbled to be chosen as Teacher of the Year,” Otieku said. “All teachers deserve recognition for their hard work and dedication to our kids. It is the hardest job there is.”

Said Superintendent Sean McPhetridge, “AUSD has been lucky to have Mary Otieku teaching Alameda students all these year, and we are thankful for her exemplary model to children and adults alike.”

The other finalists this year were Tyra Cable (Lincoln Middle School), Rebecca Baumgartner (Lincoln Middle School), and Pauline Stahl (Encinal Jr. & Sr. High School).

“I am proud of all of Alameda’s teachers for their dedication to the students in our community,” said Board President Gray Harris. “It is a pleasure to honor these four educators for their outstanding work. We are lucky to have inspiring teachers like Mrs. Otieku whose passion energizes students every day.”