

Meet the 5 Teachers Being Considered for National Teacher of the Year

By Madeline Will — January 25, 2023 | Corrected: January 26, 2023



Clockwise from top left: Carolyn Kielma from Connecticut, Jermar Rountree from D.C., Rebecka Peterson from Oklahoma, Harlee Harvey from Alaska, Kimberly Radostits from Illinois

Corrected: A previous version of this story misspelled Carolyn Kielma's surname.

Every year for at least the past three decades, four teachers have been named finalists for the National Teacher of the Year. But this year, five teachers have been deemed worthy of the honor.

The Council of Chief State Schools Officers announced on Wednesday the finalists for the national award, which honors teachers for their work inside and outside the classroom. A spokesperson said that the selection committee conducted a rigorous process to identify the finalists out of a pool of 55 state teachers of the year and came up with their list of five. They hail from the nation's capital all the way to the top corner of Alaska and represent the passion, creativity, and heart of the profession.

The teacher who receives the national honor will be granted a yearlong sabbatical to represent the profession and advocate for an issue of choice.

The finalists are:

- **Harlee Harvey**, a 1st grade teacher in Point Hope, Alaska;
- **Carolyn Kielma**, a high school science teacher in Bristol, Conn.;
- **Jermar Rountree**; a preschool-8th grade physical education and health teacher in the District of Columbia;
- **Kimberly Radostits**; an 8th-12th grade Spanish teacher in Oregon, Ill.; and
- **Rebecka Peterson**, a high school math teacher in Tulsa, Okla.

The finalists have varied experiences, interests

For the past nine years, Harvey has been teaching at Tikigaq School, which is located at the farthest northwest point of the state. The community, which is predominately Iñupiaq, a group of Alaska Natives, is accessible only by boat or plane.

Most teachers who are not from the area leave the school after two years, but Harvey, who was born and raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, has built strong relationships with her students and the community.

“As a teacher coming from outside of the community, I had to humble myself in order to be effective,” she wrote in her application . “As teachers, it is easy to believe that we need to be the expert in everything we teach. That is not possible when trying to integrate a culture different from your own. ... There are so many times where I am a learner in my classroom alongside my students who willingly and proudly share their knowledge and traditions with me.”

In her application, Harvey highlighted her incorporation of culturally responsive practices in the classroom, as well as her work implementing a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

program in the school, which is rooted in the Iñupiaq values of respect, responsibility, and cooperation.

If named the National Teacher of the Year, Harvey said she would focus on how collaboration and strong communication can create conditions in schools where teachers want to stay and students want to learn.

Kielma has been teaching science at Bristol Eastern High School in Connecticut for the past 15 years. She recently developed an ecology unit about the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and then won a fellowship in 2020 so she could visit the area to study the wolves, bears, and other species and enrich her lessons.

“As my students witness my excitement as I share my images, research, and experiences with them, they feel empowered. I then encourage them to take part in actively making a difference in their community,” Kielma wrote in her application . “Though I use wolves to convey it, this is just another way I teach students that people of all ethnicities, identities, orientations, physical abilities, languages, and/or immigration statuses have value, and should be accepted and treated with respect, humanity, and understanding.”

Kielma also teaches an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class and is the college-readiness program’s coordinator at her school. In 2019, more than 80 percent of the school’s AVID students were students of color, received free or reduced price lunch, and had parents who did not graduate from college or university. Yet every student graduated high school on time, and 92 percent enrolled in college. (The others enlisted with the military or attended tech school.)

Kielma wrote that AVID has rekindled her love of education, and she also serves as an AVID staff developer to train teachers in the program nationwide.

As National Teacher of the Year, she wrote, she would work to inspire students of all backgrounds to become educators, in hopes of diversifying the profession.

Rountree has been teaching in the nation’s capital since 2012. He teaches at the Center City Public Charter School, Brightwood Campus, and also is the teacher leader for the six-school charter network’s P.E. and health department.

In his application, Rountree highlighted his wellness initiatives, including a unit on healthy eating habits, securing a grant to purchase bicycles for his students, and partnering with an organization to have college athletes teach lessons on nutrition, mental health, and sexual wellness to students.

“Sadly, over the course of my career, I have seen the instructional length of my physical education classes shrink from year to year,” Rountree wrote in his application. “Knowing how tightly linked movement and physical education is to academic success and mental wellness, I quickly became an advocate for not just maintaining but increasing the amount of time students spend being physically active during their school day.”

Rountree is already working on this issue in the District of Columbia, and he wrote that as National Teacher of the Year, he would push for schools across the country to make sure all students have opportunities to move their bodies throughout the school day.

Radostits is a National Board-certified teacher at Oregon Junior/Senior High School in Illinois. In addition to teaching Spanish, she leads a freshman mentoring program to make sure students who are struggling remain on track to graduate high school. She also co-directs a New Teacher Academy that provides professional development and support for new hires in her district.

“Although I love teaching Spanish and sharing my *‘orgullo’* (pride) for the Spanish-speaking world, my content is simply a vehicle for connecting with my students,” she wrote in her application. “My true passion is making sure that every student I have feels known and valued and is developed into a productive, responsible member of society who demonstrates compassion and resilience.”

To that end, improving freshmen failure rates has been the bulk of her life’s work, Radostits wrote. In 2007-08, her high school was averaging 273 Fs a year for a class of 130 freshmen. By 2019-20, there were only 16 failing grades in the freshman class—a result Radostits attributed to an early warning system that she helped pilot. The system, which flags missing work, absences, and lack of school connectedness in junior high, allowed the school to identify incoming freshmen who are in need of additional support.

As National Teacher of the Year, she said she would emphasize the importance of teacher-student relationships, partnerships with families, and support and collaboration among educators.

Peterson, who teaches calculus at Union High School in Oklahoma, is also a frequent contributor to the blog, “,” which is dedicating to sharing the good from the classroom. As the state teacher of the year, she is visiting all 77 counties and sharing teachers’ stories of hope, tenacity, and creativity on social media—a project inspired by “Humans of New York,” the social media phenomenon featuring interviews with thousands of people on the streets of New York City.

In her application , Peterson wrote that blogging about a good thing that happened every day “saved her career” as a new teacher in a large urban high school. She now encourages her students to also journal about the good during “Free Write Fridays,” which has inspired some to continue the practice on their own time—including as adults and as teachers themselves. Peterson also sends the parents and guardians of each of her 120 students a celebration letter about their child.

“This is how we impact the world: In a culture that desires everything immediately, we must teach our children to develop practices that foster awareness, compassion, and gratitude,” she wrote in her application. “To impact their community and cultivate belonging, they must recognize that change requires dedication, reflection, and listening. Change happens when we choose to do the next right thing. This is the practice of joy.”

As National Teacher of the Year, Peterson said she would emphasize gratitude for and celebration of teachers. As an immigrant of Swedish-Iranian descent and the daughter of medical missionaries, Peterson credited her own teachers for making her feel welcome and empowered as a child.

A national winner will be selected in the spring

The finalists were selected from a pool of state teachers of the year from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and U.S. territories.

A selection committee, made up of 16 representatives from education groups, chose the finalists based on their written applications, and will pick a national winner this spring based on interviews with each of the finalists.

Kurt Russell, a history teacher from Ohio, won the national award in 2022.

Typically, the national winner and the other state teachers of the year are honored in a White House ceremony in the spring. President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden honored the 2022 teachers of the year in April.



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