

Annie Brockopp, Early Childhood Special Education

Early Childhood Teacher of the Year

Annie is an advocate for her students, families and colleagues; she demonstrates this through her leadership with early childhood special education program development and has assisted the preschool program to find ways to diversify instructional strategies which enable student growth. Annie is always willing to coach and collaborate with others to encourage out-of-the-box thinking in the pursuit of efficient inclusive strategies for the district promoting social-emotional learning. Annie continually evaluates the effects of her support for students and colleagues and adapts her approaches to diverse situations. Through all of Annie's dedication, hard work, organization and enthusiasm, there is evidence that the families, students and staff she works with are being enhanced and experiencing growth and success. Additionally, her kind, helpful demeanor is a benefit to the overall school climate and culture.

Emily Rustman, Special Services Assistant Director



I nominated Annie Brockopp because of her strong leadership and willingness to help serve not only her students, but to provide support to the teachers to help other students who may need extra support. There have been a number of occasions where I have had students who struggle with various behaviors and Annie is open and willing to meet to talk about concerns and help develop social stories or tools to provide support for students in my class. She shows compassion and care for all students and staff.

Annie has a special way of interacting with early childhood students and their families. She has a calm and patient demeanor, which students respond well to. She creates a safe place for students to learn, always approachable and treating each student as unique and special. She not only serves the students on her caseload but provides teachers with guidance to help general education students that may need extra support. All students have a great big smile when they see "Mrs. B".



In addition to her relationship building skills, she continually goes above and beyond to match students learning styles with their interests. For example, a five year old student had a high interest in fishing so she created a way to incorporate fishing into teaching the student colors, numbers, and feelings.

Lyndsay Geyen, Nominator

Scott Lhotka, Media and PBIS

Shirley Hills Teacher of the Year

Student learning and their wellbeing are at the core of Scott Lhotka's soul. EVERYTHING he does he looks at through the lens of how he can support students through their educational experience. Scott has lead efforts in our school to create social-emotional learning groups. Students who struggle to regulate their emotions or behavior work with him on mindfulness and other techniques to provide them with tools to help regulate. Scott is a leader on our crisis team and is on the front lines with our students in trauma to support them as they work through their emotions. His compassion for students drives him to learn as many tools as possible in order to help and support in all situations. Every week in his newsletter to staff he offers techniques and practice to support the emotional needs of our staff so they can be fresh and able to show the empathy and support needed for our struggling students to succeed.



As a person, Scott is one of the most compassionate people I know. Every day he asks all that he meets, "how are you?" and if he senses hesitation or they say anything other than "spectacular" the first words out of his mouth are, "how can I help?" And he truly means it! I've seen him drop everything he is doing to help a student, staff or parent at a moment's notice. His compassion for people is undeniable and he is driven to help everyone he comes into contact with.

Scott Eidsness, Shirley Hills Principal

I have had the incredible privilege of working with Scott Lhotka the last few years and have seen his exceptional teaching and mentoring skills first-hand. Scott is a caring, enthusiastic teacher who brings passion, dedication and excellence to all of our students and staff at Shirley Hills.

Scott has transformed our school into a PBIS (Positive Behavior Initiative and Supports) exemplary school. He has implemented Mindfulness and behavior supports groups for our students that have various trauma and difficulty in their lives. He connects, encourages, and motivates all students to achieve their potential. In addition, he has initiative, energy, and a strong sense of empathy towards all students at Shirley Hills Primary School.



Scott goes above and beyond on a daily basis to help all students and staff succeed. He is kind, caring and community-centered. As a teacher, I know he will be there for me and my students when they need it most. His ability to stay calm and connect with all of our students has been an absolute gift to Shirley Hills. He is also one of the biggest reasons our elementary schools have incorporated the Second Step curriculum and MindUP curriculum. I am a better educator because of Scott Lhotka! Our school is blessed to have such a leader, leading by example!

Bobbie Jo Tronsgard, Nominator

Theresa Schmidt, Primary Music

Hilltop Teacher of the Year

Theresa Schmidt has been an outstanding educator, mentor and advocate for children and staff during her tenure at Hilltop Primary School.

Theresa touches the lives of the students she works with. Her joy and passion for music is passed on to the students each and every day. She has a gift of making music fun and educational for all. It is amazing to watch her interact with students. They adore her and want to do their best for her. Theresa brings out the inner voice and love of music in each student. It is especially fun to see how the most unlikely of students become passionate about music, and it is because of Theresa.

Recently, when talking with a student that was returning from Mrs. Schmidt's music class the student stopped me and said, "Mr. Moch, you have to come to music next time. We have to teach you our new song." It's moments like these that I am reminded of the impact Theresa makes on her students. She makes such an impact that students invite others to visit.



Mike Moch, Hilltop Principal

Mrs. Schmidt was the first person who showed me that music was important and that there were fun elements to learn about. My love of music began in her class and I was lucky to have five school years with her. I have continued my passion for music into high school. When I look back, I know that loving music in elementary school made me excited to continue when I had the choice of electives in middle and high school. Some of the extra special things that I remember about her class were rhythm games, keyboards, kazoos, and her collection of nutcrackers that she had ac-

quired from her students over the years. She would actually put tape over her mouth sometimes so we wouldn't be able to see her sing the words when it was time for us to know them by heart. I am proud to recommend the person who started my love of music.

Emma Jordahl, MWHS Senior

Mrs. Schmidt is such a great music teacher that she can make the most non-musical students love her class. I am not musical at all and she is one of my favorite teachers. Having Mrs. Schmidt as a music teacher at Hilltop is one of my best memories of primary school.

Avery Finck, MWHS Sophomore



Dr. Deb Castner, Special Education EBD

Grandview Teacher of the Year

I have many incredible special education teachers in my school, but Deb is in a class of her own because her impact extends far beyond the walls of the school and the hours in the school day. A perfect example of this happened this year. One of her students was beginning to show signs of struggle at school. When she reached out to mom, she learned that there was no food in the home as well as other financial and logistical obstacles getting in the way of this family having what it needed. Deb arranged with mom to take her grocery shopping and to run errands with her on Saturday to help stabilize things in the home for mom and for Deb's student. None of this is a part of her job requirement and yet, she sees it that way because her student was struggling and she was going to do whatever it took to help support him. Over the years this has meant driving kids to appointments, doing home visits, helping students get presents for their parents or helping parents find resources to pay for basic needs (to name a few.) Long before ACES research was made available, she inherently knew that kids needed to feel safe, connected and cared for before they would be ready to learn and so meeting those needs has always been her first priority.



Christy Zachow, GMS Principal

Dr. Deb Castner's commitment to her students, mentorship to her colleagues, and dedication to perfecting her craft are what Minnesota teachers are all about.

Deb works with some of the most challenging students at Grandview. She helps them learn to identify and manage their emotions, advocate for themselves, and form healthy relationships. She does this through her engaging activities and discussions, running the school garden, and her genuine love for every student that walks through her door.

I have worked with many excellent educators over the last 20 years, but Deb is the person I look up to the most. The way that she engages with students is truly magical. She has a way of holding them accountable and calling them out on their behavior while helping them to retain their dignity and feel supported.



Despite having been in the classroom for many years, Deb is always seeking out new activities and experiences to bring to her students. When a new senior living facility was built next door to our school, Deb immediately looked into how she could build a relationship with them. Thanks to that initiative, some of her students will be joining the seniors for exercise classes.

Ali LaLonde, Nominator

Laura Hensley, Secondary Art

Mound Westonka High School Teacher of the Year

Laura has a clear sense of purpose, and it is revealed in the way she approaches curriculum and lesson design, assessment, and the cultivation of classroom culture to support all students' learning.

Laura places a great importance on the social-emotional health of all students, and she sees arts education as a critical vehicle for students' exploration of self. Laura truly sees students for who they are individually and works tirelessly to get to know them through arts education, identifying and providing any necessary supports where needed.

It is a warm and friendly atmosphere, and at the same time, she is able to create an environment that has a professional studio feel where students know she expects the best they can bring on any day. She treats a level one painting student with the same enthusiasm and has the same high expectations as she does a student in AP Studio Art. Students take note and know they matter in Laura's classroom.

Mark McIlmoyle, MWHS Principal



Walk into Laura Hensley's class and you will see empowered students expressing their ideas and passions through various mediums. Speak to these students and you will hear them confidently articulate their learning and goals. Watch Ms. Hensley discuss, lead critique and model artistic choices and you will know exactly why she is the MWHS teacher of the year. I have had the honor of knowing and observing Laura as a colleague, parent and friend. She is the type of teacher, and person, who inspires those around her to be the best version of themselves and who encourages us to unleash our own artist into the world.

Kristin Wallace, Nominator



I nominated Mrs. Hensley because she works very hard and genuinely cares for all of her classes, and gives her students enough freedom to express themselves while still being able to help students by giving them guidance. Even though higher level art classes can be hard, she is able to make classes fun despite the stress that could be caused by a lot of work; she makes class enjoyable and is an invaluable resource for any student who wants to be able to express themselves artistically.

Ivy Anderson, Student