For Immediate Release:
August 22, 2024

For media inquiries only, contact:
Haley Lacuesta
(706) 951-2674

Richmond County School System announces five finalists for Teacher of the Year

(AUGUSTA, GEORGIA) - Five Richmond County School System (RCSS) teachers received surprising news during the middle of their school day when Dr. Kenneth Bradshaw, Superintendent of Schools, announced the top finalists for the annual Teacher of the Year award on Friday, August 9.

The RCSS Teacher of the Year finalists are Selema Clay, Deer Chase Elementary School; Beverly Franqui, Blythe Elementary School; Laquandra Staley, C.T. Walker Traditional Magnet School; Valarie Thomas, eSchool; and Juanita Walden, Richmond County Technical Career Magnet School (RCTCM).

Selema Clay is a Gifted program teacher and a member of the Deer Chase Elementary School leadership team who has been an RCSS educator for twelve years. Clay is the vice president of the Deer Chase Elementary Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and leads one of the school's Professional Learning Clubs. During her career Clay has mentored several student teachers and received an i-Ready Growth Award in mathematics. Clay holds a Bachelor of Arts in communications from Paine College, a Master of Arts in education from Augusta University, and an Educational Specialist in advanced educational studies from Augusta University. She is pursuing a doctoral degree at Augusta University.

Beverly Franqui is a fifth-grade teacher at Blythe Elementary School who has worked in RCSS for her entire 20-year teaching career. Franqui is a four-time school-level Teacher of the Year who serves in several leadership and advisory roles in her school and community. She received an Outstanding Educator Award from the Richmond County Council of PTAs, an i-Ready Growth Award in reading, and multiple literacy awards throughout her career. Franqui received a Bachelor of Science in elementary education, a Master of Education in instruction, and Gifted and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) endorsements from Augusta University.

LaQuandra Staley is a second-grade Gifted teacher at C.T. Walker Traditional Magnet School. Staley has been an educator for 20 years and has worked for RCSS for 12 years. She is a member of C.T. Walker's instructional leadership team and coaches the school's cheerleading team. During her time with RCSS, she was named a Model Classroom Teacher by the Fundations Phonics program and received an i-Ready Growth Award for reading growth and proficiency. Staley holds an associate's degree in early childhood education from Augusta Technical College, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Argosy University, and a Master of Arts in Teaching in Early Childhood Education from Augusta University.

Valarie Thomas taught social sciences at the former eSchool virtual program during the 2023-2024 school year, where she was nominated for Teacher of the Year. Thomas is now a 10th and 11th grade U.S. History teacher at the Academy of Richmond County (ARC). She has been an educator for 12 years and has worked with RCSS for five years. Thomas was one of 60 teachers selected nationwide to attend the 2024 National Endowment for the Humanities Forever Wild Program. She also serves on the teacher advisory board for the National Museum for Civil and Human Rights and received several teaching fellowships throughout her career. She received her Bachelor of Arts in History and Secondary Education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and a Master of Arts in Acquisition and Contract Administration from The University of West Florida.

Juanita Walden is a Gifted- endorsed 8th-grade physical science and 9th-grade biology teacher at Richmond County Technical Career Magnet School (RCTCM). This is Walden's eighth year as an educator and seventh year teaching for RCSS. She is a co-sponsor of the Middle School Makers Club (STEM), an advisor to the freshman class, and received a Savannah River Nuclear Solutions Innovative Teaching Mini-Grant at RCTCM. Walden serves as the professional development chairperson for both the Georgia Association of Educators (GAE) and the Richmond County branch organization. Walden holds a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology, a Master of Arts in Teaching, and a specialist degree in Advanced Educational Studies from Augusta University.

The RCSS Teacher of the Year will be named during a banquet on Thursday, September 19, at the Augusta Marriott at the Convention Center beginning at 7 p.m.

# # #