



For Immediate Release

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Paterson Public Schools Educator Named 2026 McGraw Hill Pathfinder Award Winner

Ms. Sonja Capers is honored for her innovative teaching practices at School 16

Paterson, NJ (May 7, 2026) – Ms. Sonja Capers of Paterson’s School 16 has been named a recipient of the 2026 McGraw Hill Pathfinder Award. Presented by McGraw Hill, a leading global provider of education solutions for preK-12, higher education and professional learning, this prestigious national recognition honors educators who challenge traditional teaching methods to deliver measurable improvements in student success.

Selected as one of only three recipients nationwide, Ms. Capers was recognized for her innovative, student-centered approach to instruction. By transforming her English Language Arts (ELA) classroom into a production-style learning environment, she has transformed her students from passive consumers of text to creators of digital books and multimedia content.

“We are incredibly proud to see Ms. Capers recognized on a national stage with the McGraw Hill Pathfinder Award,” said Superintendent of Schools Dr. Laurie W. Newell. “Ms. Capers unlocked a level of engagement and academic excellence in her students that is truly inspiring. This honor is a testament to the innovative spirit our educators bring to the classroom every day and the high expectations we set for all our students. Congratulations to Ms. Capers on this well-deserved honor.”

In Ms. Capers’ classroom at School 16, the students’ interest in interdisciplinary units, such as forensic anthropology cases and modern food issues, drives their scientific inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and critical thinking within literacy. She integrates gamified learning strategies and supportive tools to reduce testing anxiety and improve long-term retention. These efforts contributed to an 85% improvement in her students’ New Jersey State Learning Assessment scores.

“I am honored to be named a recipient of the 2026 McGraw Hill Pathfinder Award,” said Ms. Capers. “By empowering my students to see themselves as creators, we unlock their potential and build the confidence and critical thinking skills they need to succeed. Watching their growth continues to inspire me to be a better educator every day.”

As a McGraw Hill Pathfinder Award winner, Ms. Capers will receive a \$5,000 cash prize and a Professional Learning Consultation from CAST, a learning design, research, and professional services organization that seeks to make learning more inclusive to all. Her teaching and

professionalism are now recognized on a national stage as a model of forward-thinking classroom practices grounded in measurable results and providing children with high-quality education.

“While the academic results speak for themselves, it’s her approach that distinguishes Ms. Capers and exemplifies what it means to be a Pathfinder,” said Sean Ryan, President of McGraw Hill’s School Group. “Her classroom blends the attributes of multiple academic disciplines to create a student experience that’s more reflective of the real world and thus uniquely engaging. We are honored to celebrate her as one of this year’s Pathfinder Award recipients.”

In alignment with National Teacher Appreciation Week, Ms. Capers was presented with the award at the Paterson Board of Education workshop meeting on May 6.

For more information about Paterson Public Schools, visit: www.paterson.k12.nj.us

About Paterson Public Schools

Paterson Public Schools serves over 22,000 students from pre-K to 12th grade in New Jersey’s third-largest city. About 71% of the student population is Hispanic, 16% are Black, 6% are Asian, and 5.0% are Caucasian. Recognizing its proud traditions, diverse community, and strong partnerships, the mission of Paterson Public Schools is to provide an academically rigorous, safe, and nurturing educational environment that meets the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students. The district is committed to preparing students for post-secondary education and careers. Despite the Paterson community being classified as low-income, many of its students achieve high academic success. A growing number of elementary school students are reading at or above grade level, and more high school students are earning college credits through Advanced Placement exams and enrolling in college-level courses before graduation. Paterson Public Schools is distinguished as one of only 17 school districts in New Jersey to offer the competitive International Baccalaureate program and is among just four districts with a P-TECH high school. In collaboration with IBM and Passaic County Community College, the P-TECH program allows students to graduate with an associate degree in applied science and valuable tech sector experience. For more information, visit www.paterson.k12.nj.us

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