

NEWS RELEASE

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Six Gwinnett teachers named finalists for educator top honor

From an impressive list of 112 teachers, the number of **Gwinnett County Public Schools** (GCPS) educators vying for the 2009 Gwinnett County Teacher of the Year (TOTY) honor has now been narrowed down to the final six. The group includes two elementary school teachers, one at the middle school level, and three high school educators – **Jodi Sanchez of Bethesda Elementary, Sue Tavernier of Mulberry Elementary, Aimée Burgamy of Trickum Middle, Ken Leach of Collins Hill High, Mike Reilly of North Gwinnett High, and Todd Shultz of Phoenix High.** One of these six teachers will become Gwinnett’s Teacher of the Year at a banquet on November 6, 2008, at 6:30 p.m. at the Gwinnett Center. All 112 local school teachers of the year will be recognized that evening.

A committee, made up of teachers, administrators, and central office staff, selected the final six from a group of 20 semifinalists. As the final element of the judging process, the selection committee will now observe the six teachers in their classrooms. During the visit, the committee will look for original teaching methods, how the teacher demonstrates his/her philosophy of teaching, and special class projects. Committee members also will conduct interviews with the finalists.

Jodi Sanchez, a K-5 Science Specials Teacher at Bethesda Elementary (10 years in education, two years with GCPS)

Jodi Sanchez has been with Gwinnett County Public Schools for two years. Her recognition as a Teacher of the Year finalist speaks volumes of the work she has done teaching Gwinnett children during that short period of time. She joined the system and Bethesda Elementary in 2006, bringing with her a wealth of experience after seven years of teaching fifth grade students in Illinois and New Orleans. Ms. Sanchez holds a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education from Eastern Illinois University.

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Not only does Ms. Sanchez say that she enjoys working with children, but her initiatives at her local school also demonstrate her cooperative spirit as she shares her knowledge and practices with her colleagues. She designs and develops staff development sessions each year. For example, she shares with fellow Bethesda Elementary teachers strategies on how to integrate science into reading and how to teach science process skills in each grade level. Additionally, when seeking learning opportunities for herself, Ms. Sanchez keeps her school team in mind, saying “The best professional development comes from sharing and collaborating with like minds. I enjoy attending new sessions so that I can be better equipped to return to my school and share what I have learned.”

**Sue Tavernier, a K-5 Reading Specialist at Mulberry Elementary
(19 years in education, 11 years with GCPS)**

Sue Tavernier is an original meerkat. She helped open the home of the meerkats, Mulberry Elementary, in August of 2007. This veteran educator joined Mulberry Elementary after 10 years of teaching kindergarten and second grade students at sister-cluster school Dacula Elementary (1997-2007). Before joining Gwinnett, she dedicated eight years teaching kindergartners, first graders, second graders, and fourth graders in DeKalb County. Mrs. Tavernier holds three degrees in Early Childhood Education. She earned her bachelor’s degree from Westfield State College, a master’s degree from Georgia State University, and a specialist from Brenau University.

Mrs. Tavernier strongly believes that all children can learn no matter the initial challenges. “In my classroom, I vary my instructional approach based on the subject and the needs of the children,” she says. She works with each student individually, conferencing with each one of them on their reading and writing skills. She also uses cooperative grouping, direct instruction, the “turn to your partner and share what you just learned” approach, hands on activities, and peer tutoring. This provides the evidence she needs to develop lessons that will engage students to be active participants in their own learning. She explains, “I hold high expectations for the students I teach. It is my responsibility to discover the best approach for educating each individual to guarantee their success in school and beyond.”

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**Aimée Burgamy, an Art Teacher at Trickum Middle
(11 years in education, three years with GCPS)**

Aimée Burgamy's career as an educator extends over a decade, and includes several years at the college level. She joined Gwinnett County Public Schools and Trickum Middle in August of 2005, after five years of art appreciation instruction to undergraduate students at the University of Georgia (2000-2005). As a college professor, she also taught graduate-level art courses at Oglethorpe University (2003-2006). A former museum of art curator, she began her career in education as a high school Advanced Placement (AP) art history teacher in Alabama (1997-2000). Ms. Burgamy holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, both in Art History, from the University of Mississippi and the University of Alabama, respectively. She is currently working on her doctoral degree from UGA.

Ms. Burgamy believes fine arts serves as a tool to challenge students intellectually and support them academically. "In my art class, students make things," she says. "But they also investigate, write about, and talk about the things they make... Additionally, I view art as a means for fostering interpersonal skills development and cultural understanding – essential skills in today's workplace."

**Ken Leach, a 9-12 Biology and Oceanography Teacher at Collins Hill High
(22 years in education, all with GCPS)**

Ken Leach has dedicated 22 years to teaching science to Gwinnett County Public Schools students. The native Oregonian who as a child explored the lakes and rivers of the Pacific Northwest and spent endless days in the tidal pools trying to find creatures, started his career in education at Trickum Middle in 1986 (1986-1992). He shared one year of learning with Meadowcreek High students (1993-1994), before helping to open Collins Hill High. Mr. Leach earned a bachelor's degree in Biology from Appalachian State University, and a master's and specialist both from UGA in Science Education.

Known on the Collins Hill High campus as the teacher that has the classroom "with all of these cool animals", Mr. Leach says that establishing a motivating and enriched indoor biological habitat for learning is the most dominant and original instructional strategy he uses. That habitat consists of 15 aquariums that house turtles, goldfish, plants, frogs, living coral reefs, and even an alligator. "I have created an environment for learning, an inviting place where everyone loves to visit and look at the various creatures. Because my classroom oozes an atmosphere of inquiry, students ask me questions about the animals, thus knocking down barriers to learning."

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**Mike Reilly, a 9-12 Computer Science teacher at North Gwinnett High
(12 years in education, three with GCPS)**

Mike Reilly joined Gwinnett County Public Schools in 2005, teaching computer science at North Gwinnett High. Mr. Reilly started his teaching career exactly two decades ago as a mathematics teaching assistant in New Jersey. He also taught math in Virginia, and math and computer science in Boston before making Gwinnett County his home. In addition, Mr. Reilly holds experience from corporate America. He earned a bachelor's degree in Business from St. Michael's College and a master's degree in Educational Administration from the University of Michigan.

Walk into Mr. Reilly's Advanced Placement (AP) computer science class, and you will find video games. But his students are not playing them, they're making them. "It captures their attention, their focus, it makes them think about every aspect of the programming project in depth," he explains. "It causes them to debate about design, usability, function, modification, and possibility." This innovative teaching strategy has turned the class into such a success that his class at North Gwinnett High now represents more than 25% of all 3 or higher AP computer science scores within GCPS.

**Todd Shultz, a 9-12 Social Studies teacher at Phoenix High
(17 years in education, eight years with GCPS)**

Todd Shultz has taught social studies at Phoenix High since August of 2000. But he started his teaching career in Oakland, California in 1991. This educator also has dedicated his knowledge with college-level students teaching language arts courses. Mr. Shultz holds a bachelor's degree in History from the University of California at Berkeley, a master's degree in Curriculum from California State University East Bay, and a specialist degree in Curriculum from Piedmont College.

Mr. Shultz has integrated technology into his teaching, using the TurningPoint Student Response System (RSS) software, a product that provides each student with a remote control that allows for interaction to gauge for student understanding. His use of the tool has helped him improve student engagement in his classroom and, therefore, student achievement. Mr. Shultz is now in high demand at other Gwinnett high schools who want him to train social studies teachers from around the county.

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Three of these six finalists will be designated as the elementary, middle, and high school teachers of the year. (As the only finalist at the middle school level, Ms. Burgamy automatically becomes the winner at that level.) The county winner will be selected from among the three level winners and will go on to represent the county in the Georgia TOTY competition. Two Gwinnett teachers have earned the state honor, Jeff White in 1991 and Kay Harvey in 1984.

Gwinnett's Teacher of the Year will receive a yearly award of \$1,000 and the other level winners will each receive \$750 yearly, as long as they are employed with GCPS.

The other three finalists will receive a one-time award of \$500, and each local school winner will receive a one-time award of \$200.