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Alvin "Corky" Schroeder teaches industrial technology to student Anthony Griffith at Valley Community School in Merced, Calif. Schroeder draws on his experiences as a dyslexic kid with attention problems and a leftie forced to write right-handed to connect with troubled kids, many of whom have layers of legal, family or learning problems. His devotion earned a place among the 20 educators in USA TODAY's All-USA Teacher Team.

By David Hunter for USA TODAY

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## All-USA teachers strive to give students confidence, chances

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By **Tracey Wong Briggs, USA TODAY**

It's 6 a.m. and All-USA Teacher Team members Benita Hackett Albert and Amber Larkin already are arriving at work.

In Oak Ridge, Tenn., a town built on physics research, Albert usually pulls into the Oak Ridge High parking lot to find students waiting, Starbucks in hand. Albert, 62, opens her classroom for tutoring by 6 a.m., through both lunch periods and after school until 4 p.m. or later. Her willingness to explain college-level calculus as many times as it takes has made Albert a legend in this science town where she is in her 40th year of teaching.

**PHOTOS:** [Meet these exemplary educators](#)

Meanwhile, in an impoverished neighborhood 200 miles away in Charlotte, Larkin, 26, sometimes sits in her car for a minute in the morning stillness, gearing up for another day at Billingsville Elementary. Once she gets out of the car, Larkin doesn't let up. Now in her fifth year teaching, she has seen her students make remarkable gains — socially, emotionally, academically — at Billingsville, where nine out of 10 students live in poverty and a third have limited English, including some refugees who haven't been educated in any language.

"Working in a place like this takes so much energy, people burn out," says principal Byron Campbell, who marvels at the upbeat way Larkin engages students, day in and day out. "The energy level you see is there every minute. I've never met anyone so 'on.'"

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Albert and Larkin start early and never stop in their relentless efforts to help students learn. They are two of 20 educators honored today in the newspaper's teacher recognition program. All 20 teachers named to the 10th annual All-USA Teacher Team receive trophies and share \$2,500 cash awards with their schools as representatives of all outstanding teachers.

"Few professions can rival teaching for its long-term impact on young people," says editor Ken Paulson. "USA TODAY

Enlarge By CJ Gunther for USA TODAY

Revere (Mass.) High School teacher Nancy Barile and her senior college level English class review *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Barile hounds students to succeed, visiting them at home and helping them apply for scholarships. Last year 100% of her students in this impoverished area passed the AP test.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

- 11 women; nine men
- Averaging their 18th year full-time teaching, ranging from 5th to 40th.
- Eight National Board Certified
- Eight elementary (including one public charter school), eight high school, two middle school, one middle/high school, one alternative/vocational
- Four from Florida, three from California, two from both North Carolina and Michigan (including two from Troy High, Rebecca Johns and Alan Mac Nair)

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- Four math, two physics, two social studies

## ■ ALL-USA TEACHER TEAMS

■ **About:** USA TODAY honors 20 teachers, both individuals and instructional teams, as representatives of all outstanding teachers. Each teacher receives a trophy and a \$2,500 reward -- \$500 for the teachers and the rest for their schools.



■ **Winners:** 2007 | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 | 2003



is honored to recognize the members of the All-USA Teacher Team for their professionalism and passion in educating a new generation."

Team members were chosen from K-12 teachers nominated nationwide. In a two-step process, judges considered how well teachers identify and address their students' needs and, most important, the impact they have on students and learning.

The 20 teachers demonstrate that great teaching thrives in all sorts of places. Team members teach a variety of grade levels, subjects and student populations, from Jeffrey Thompson of Evergreen Elementary in Fort Lewis, Wash., a military community where almost all his kindergartners have a parent in Iraq or Afghanistan, to Rebecca Johns and Alan Mac Nair, winners from Troy (Mich.) High who have guided the biology and orchestra programs in the affluent Detroit suburb to national acclaim. Johns had a minor planet named for her after two Intel Science Talent Search finalists named her their most influential teacher, and Mac Nair's 65-piece symphonic string orchestra is playing Carnegie Hall in the spring.

## ■ 2007 HONORABLE MENTIONS

- Sol Aboulafia, honors organic and biochemistry; Northview High, Duluth, Ga.
- Janet Slates Bowland, kindergarten; Scarbro (W.Va.) Elementary.
- David Brock, biology, AP biology; Roland Park Country School, Baltimore.
- Polly Burkhart, sixth-grade science; Jewett Academy Middle School, Winter Haven, Fla.
- Charlene Littlefield, English as a Second Language; John Fiske Elementary, Kansas City, Kan. (now ESL school facilitator, Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools).
- Tony Nichols, kindergarten; Cherry River Elementary, Richwood, W.Va.
- Jennifer Wells Phipps, eighth-grade pre-algebra, language arts; Corbin (Ky.) Middle School.
- Merrie Rumpy, life science, environmental science, AP environmental science, physics, chemistry, physical science; Fernley (Nev.) High.
- Chris Skinner, physical education; Maysville High, Zanesville, Ohio.
- Fran Squires, third grade; Pine View School for the Gifted, Osprey, Fla.
- Rebecca Stallings, eighth-grade English, honors English; Homewood (Ala.) Middle School.
- Paula Elina Stenberg, English, biology, anatomy/physiology, Shakespeare through performance and film; St. Mary's School, Medford, Ore.
- Chester Tylinski, Latin, journalism; Northside College Prep, Chicago.
- Sugarland SIOP Team (Alexandra Schiavo Wong, Courtney E. Petralia), English as a Second Language inclusion for language arts; Sugarland Elementary, Sterling, Va.

### Math made fun

Despite the rich geographic, grade-level and demographic diversity of the All-USA Teacher Team members, this year's team has a distinctly mathematical bent. In addition to Michael Lampert, who teaches physics, astronomy and electronics at West Salem (Ore.) High, and William Yucuis, who developed an aerospace engineering program at Lyman High in Longwood, Fla., there are four math teachers. All four make math concepts relevant, but they also meet more specific student needs:

• In Oak Ridge, Albert makes college-level math more accessible by giving calculus functions nicknames such as Gertrude and Lynn, personalizing the math and making it less intimidating, says former student Scott Molony, 19.

"She has a conviction that's heroic: There's no such thing as a dumb person, a stupid person or a person who is not a math person — just people who have gotten it and people



[+ Enlarge](#)

By Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press

Alan Mac Nair played violin with the Boston Pops and Detroit Symphony, and under Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa and Leopold Stokowski. However, he found his passion is teaching. "Mostly it's a matter of having these students come to the realization that everything they feel and everything that's human about them is in the music they play," he said.

who have not gotten it yet," he says. A self-described "crazy philosophy kid," Molony was on a three-person team Albert advised that won the \$100,000 top prize in the 2006 Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology.

•Margaret (Peg) Cagle, who teaches in the gifted/highly gifted magnet program at Lawrence Middle School in Chatsworth, Calif., challenges the perfectionist, risk-averse tendencies of some students by requiring them to work in ink and learn by correcting their mistakes. Though all of her students are gifted, they are identified in different ways, and the leap from concrete elementary school math to geometric and algebraic abstraction can be difficult. Cagle often takes students outdoors to make geometric or parabolic formations.

"The most satisfying experience is when you see that look on a child's face, the 'Wow, that's cool!' look; all of a sudden they see a pattern. I call it the 'geek moment.' They're really genuinely excited, in the way a 13-year-old can be excited," she says.

•A former factory manager, Basil Lee photographs water fountain streams and has algebra classes at Benjamin Banneker High in College Park, Ga., graph the parabola and develop the equation. But before Lee can get down to algebra and trigonometry, he often has to help students deal with issues such as violence and teen parenthood.

Lee, who saw 97% of his juniors pass the state math test last year, tries to treat each child as he would his own. He is a father figure and a grandfather figure. "If you go back years ago, the professionals lived in the place where they worked," he says. "That's how a village raised a child."

•Linda Jarzyniecki of Greenville (Ala.) High, a rural high school where 70% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, does whatever it takes — phone calls, e-mails, visits, tutoring and multiple quiz retakes — to get students over their fears of math. They dread going to the board to do problems in August, she says, but by May, they can't wait to get up there to show what they know.

"I want to challenge my students, but I want them to experience some success so they don't become discouraged, and they remain in mathematics." She had 14 students in the only advanced placement Calculus AB class in Butler County and had a pass rate of 100%.

### Laying the groundwork

Whatever their teaching situation, team members aim high and provide the support to break down even monumental challenges into a pyramid of small successes.

With his families facing the stresses and unpredictability of military life, Thompson pushes to get kindergartners reading as quickly as possible. Before school starts, he meets with parents to help them get their kids off to a good start academically and deal with specific challenges military families face.

"He just has a way of bringing people on board. When he has a parent night, it is standing room only," says Evergreen Elementary principal Holly Shaffer.

Thompson holds Kinderparent University sessions, provides Parent Teacher Partnership toolboxes stocked with learning materials and assigns parents weekly homework. He provides a rich learning environment and makes the effort to know each student in his half-day classes.

"You have to get to know them if you want to see where they are weak and where they are strong and build

up those strengths and self-confidence," he says. "Regardless of whether they are here a month or two months or nine months, you really have to take that time."

Even with a schoolwide student mobility rate of 60%, Thompson typically sees a quarter of his class reading at second-grade level.

Turning out successful learners is a many-layered task, and Teacher Team members often start to lay the groundwork for success by building a positive frame of mind.

At Liza Jackson Preparatory School, a charter school in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., Nancy Berry uses gentle encouragement, individualized attention and a plastic, heat-reactive fish to make learning a self-fulfilling prophecy for her first-graders. Berry brings out the fish on the first day of class. The fish curls up in the hand of a child who is smart, worthy and good, she tells her young charges.

"Children have to have concrete ways of seeing that they are smart or are able to be successful," she says.

Each child sees that not only he is smart, but also all his classmates are smart, even if the fish doesn't curl at the same time for everyone.

She has them pledge to work hard, never give up and believe in themselves.

"I've had parents ask how smart do you have to be to get into my classroom. I have to laugh, because I have all different levels," Berry says. "But it's true. Smart is a relative term, and as long as they believe it, they shall perceive it and achieve it."

*Reported by: Larry Copeland in College Park, Ga.; Joe Culpepper in Fort Walton Beach, Fla.; Marilyn Elias in Chatsworth, Calif.; Heather Frye in Fort Lewis, Wash.; Marty Roney in Greenville, Ala.; Ben Schmitt in Troy, Mich.; and Tracey Wong Briggs in Charlotte and Oak Ridge, Tenn.*

#### The 2007 ALL-USA TEACHER TEAM

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<b>Benita Hackett Albert</b>	Oak Ridge (Tenn.) High  Advanced Placement Calculus BC, calculus II; math, science and computer science thesis, grades 9-12  40th year full-time teaching  Nominated by: Chuck Carringer, principal  She: Fell in love with math, figuring out older kids' blackboard problems in a one-room schoolhouse in Missouri; turns kids on to calculus in this town, built in the 1940s to support the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge National Lab. * Infuses college-level math with personality, nicknaming functions and giving students vector names: "She makes math creative and attractive," says Nabeela Ahmad, 17. * Advises research students, including the third-place finisher in the 1987 Westinghouse Science Talent Search and the first-place team in the 2006 Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology. * Opens room for tutoring by 6 a.m., through both lunch periods and after school until 4 or later. * Encourages collaborative learning and sees almost all her students pass the AP calculus BC test year after year, about 70% scoring 5 out of 5. * Writes calculus teaching guides and is a frequent teacher trainer. * "I love seeing students become scientists at this age and continuing with it. I think of what I do in teaching as a gift I give to kids."
<b>Nancy Barile</b>	Revere (Mass.) High  Advanced Placement English, Mysteries, Intro to Education, grades 10 and 12  14th year full-time teaching  Nominated by: Merzudin Ibric, former student  She: Teaches AP Literature and Composition at a school defined by poverty (63% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch) and diversity; last year 100% passed the AP test with students accepted to Stanford, Yale and Duke. * Walks through gang-ridden streets to be a presence in the community: "She connects with the toughest kids; she's always been friends with the kids other teachers complained about," says colleague Antonio Cinelli, a former student. * Started Mysteries class to get kids reading for pleasure; uses her Intro to Education class as a "think tank," funneling student ideas up to administrators. * Founded Culture Club for student body speaking 46 languages, advises literary magazine, site manager for boys and girls soccer teams, works at basketball and football games. * Hounds children to succeed, visiting them at home, signing them up for enrichment courses, helping them apply for scholarships. * Writes articles for professional-development journals and was selected for the National Commission on Writing. * "Students flock to her, and she gets top-notch results, 100% of the time," says principal David DeRuosi.
<b>Nancy Berry</b>	Liza Jackson Preparatory School,  Fort Walton Beach, Fla.  First grade  29th year full-time teaching (plus five as a principal)  Nominated by: Dawn Fisher, parent of former students  She: Welcomes charter school kids from diverse backgrounds and learning styles to "Berryland USA: A Place Where Children Love to Learn," a classroom that's alive with hermit crabs and oysters, uncaged caterpillars, chrysalises and butterflies. * Accepts students unconditionally and treats them as if they are smart to make learning a self-fulfilling prophecy. * Calls on imaginary characters Georgie the Manners Elf to correct behavior and Mikey the Eagle to encourage eye contact without nagging or embarrassment. * Reassures kids that she made mistakes as a child to coax them to read, write, organize thoughts and make decisions at a higher level. * Uses singing, moving, reading, experiencing, applying and writing to reach all types of learners. * Individualizes spelling lists from words kids misspell. * "I don't teach to a test," she says. "I teach to life. Children's lives depend on what I'm doing. It must be done positively." * "It's not just the one or two who she needs to go the extra mile with," says assistant principal Julie Jensen. "It's every one. There is nothing she won't do to make sure her children get everything they can from their first-grade experience."
<b>Margaret (Peg)</b>	Lawrence Middle School, Chatsworth, Calif.

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**Cagle**      **Gifted/Highly Gifted Magnet Program**

Math, grades 7 and 8

**14th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Darryl Yong, teacher-training colleague

**She:** Heeds the No Parking sign at her desk, moving non-stop and keeping kids on their feet with activities making abstract math concrete: Students run and graph races to learn slope, form human parabolas to diagram equations, create modular origami. "They'll say, 'Oh, yeah, remember when we were outside with the ropes or traffic cones, and we found that out?' They won't say, 'Remember, it was on page 81.'" \* Challenges gifted students, often invested in being "the smart kid," to take risks, requiring them to work in ink. \* Sometimes gives answer at the outset so children slow down and focus on process, concept. \* Seats classes of 36 at tables of four so kids work together. "My classes are really, really loud." \* Tutors through lunch, drawing from other math classes. "If I don't get it one way, she'll explain it another and talk to you about it and show you until you do get it," says Madeline Lewis, 13. \* Came to teaching from architecture and is a teacher trainer: "You can fall in love with literature without having a great teacher because all you need is books. But just doing math rarely lights a fire for kids. You need someone who has a passion for it and opens up that world, showing you how beautiful math can be."

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**Gregory Fisher**      **California Academy of Math and Science, Carson, Calif.**

U.S. government, economics, grade 12

**20th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Diana Maruna, colleague

**He:**Engages students with projects such as working at polls, writing economic plays and producing campaign ads at a public magnet high school aimed at drawing more minorities and women to math and science, housed at California State University-Dominguez Hills. \* Students build and track imaginary \$100,000 portfolios to see if they can beat his, chosen by dart throw; students team up and research community needs to design a product and start-up business plan, judged by venture capitalists and businessmen. \* "Creativity can be messy, but the rewards and benefits transcend any cost." \* Pushed students, 40% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, to audition for ABC's *American Inventor* and saw four of 12 teams go beyond the first round. \* Has student groups compete to mimic real-world teamwork and competition. \* "At some point in his class, you realize you're thinking like an economist," says Dora Duru, 17. \* Directs a typical class of 36 students like a fast-moving variety show. "Like all kids, they have natural creative energy. My job is to channel that, and then get out of the way."

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**Vincent Floriani Jr.**      **Claxton Elementary School, Asheville, N.C.**

Fourth grade

**13th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Carol Ray, former principal

**He:**Brings experience as an improv actor (*Tony n' Tina's Wedding* off-Broadway), musician, journalist and Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco to an arts-and-humanities magnet school with students at both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. \* Teaches with thematic units such as having students build North Carolina lighthouses incorporating circuitry schematics or create talk shows discussing the Trail of Tears: "I like taking kids to that edge and see them taking that leap to learn something they didn't know." \* Performs as a singer/songwriter ([www.vincejunior.com](http://www.vincejunior.com)) and teaches through songwriting; last year's class wrote letters to a recording studio, raised money to pay the reduced fee and recorded a song they wrote about migrant workers. \* Responds to kids' interests and doesn't teach the same way twice: "I know I can have one of those teachable moments that's better than I had planned." \* "He has this innate ability to be where he needs to be before they need it. Part of it is his sensitivity as an artist," says assistant principal Charlotte Moore. "Children respond because he goes where they are. He knows the curriculum and implements it in about as holistic a way as I've seen in a long time."

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**Linda Jarzyniecki**      **Greenville (Ala.) High**

Algebra II, trigonometry, pre-calculus, AP Calculus AB, grades 10-12

**20th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Mike Looney, superintendent

**She:**Creates a familial atmosphere with challenge and support to help students get over their fear of math at a rural school where 69% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. \* Asks students to write a short biography on an index card to help her understand their needs. \* Has student teams build "Splash or Splat" Ferris wheels to figure out when a man should be released from the wheel to safely drop into a nearby bucket of water; helps maintain a mini tilapia farm where math students' water-testing data are used by science classes. \* Relentless in finding avenues of success, using phone calls, e-mails, cards, before- and after-school tutoring, one-on-one talks, quizzes on quizzes. \* "If you are having a problem with an equation, she'll say 'Honey, I know you're better than this. Do I need to call your mama?'" says Chelsea Wilkerson, 16. "Everybody loves Mrs. J. But nobody wants her to call their parents." \* Teaches the only AP calculus course in the county; all 14 students passed last year. "I get satisfaction in seeing that 'a-ha' moment on their faces when they realize they can be successful."

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**Rebecca Johns**      **Troy (Mich.) High**

Biology, Advanced Placement Biology, grades 9 and 11-12

**Ninth year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Mark Dziatczak, principal

**She:**Patterns pretests after *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?* and designs multimedia, multisensory lessons such as a walk-through digestive system named Hungry Jack, testing tortilla chips and cereal for genetically modified grain, and having AP students diagnose and perform heart surgery on defective animal hearts. \* Raises the ceiling at an affluent, high-performing school; former students are at Harvard, Stanford, MIT and med school; her pass rate on the AP Biology test is over 95%. \* Established Biology Competitions Club in 2004 and has helped produce winners of the NASA Hyper-Gravity Competition, International Brain Bee and Toshiba Exploravision, plus two finalists in the 2007 Intel Science Talent Search. After both finalists named her their most influential teacher, MIT named a minor planet after her. \* Has won spots in selective teacher summer programs, including a week-long seminar at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Course at Princeton. \* Won 18 grants totaling \$10,000 for materials and equipment. \* "The motivation is the joy I get from working with my students. I get excited about the topics, and I want to share them with my students."

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**Michael Lampert** West Salem (Ore.) High

Physics, astronomy, electronics, grades 9-12

**20th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Maureen Foelkl, colleague

**He:**Travels the world to bring physics home to middle-class high school, devising lessons and student projects after spending three months in Antarctica using weather balloons to study ozone depletion and traveling to Cape Verde, Africa, to help install an infrasound detector that can pick up nuclear explosions. \* Coaches the FIRST Robotics, Ocean Bowl, Science Bowl and High Five teams, and mentored students winning national awards for inventions such as a prosthetic arm that can sense touch, a toothpaste dispenser and a watermelon-ripeness evaluator. \* Plasters classroom with news clippings, awards, photos of science projects and student work, including a drawing by former student Jon Heder (*Napoleon Dynamite*) \* Has won more than \$250,000 in grants and fellowships. \* Developed curriculum for a microelectronics course that earns kids college credit; many have gone on to high-paying jobs after only a year or two of community college. \* "Sees trends come and go: "The only thing that's successful with these kids is to be one-on-one with them," he says. "That's the secret to bringing out learning."

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**Amber Larkin** Billingsville Elementary, Charlotte

Fifth grade

**Fifth year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Jacqueline Hahn, colleague

**She:**Got dropped, fresh out of college in 2003, into a classroom trailer with some of the toughest challenges imaginable: almost all kids living in poverty, including homeless kids, non-English speakers, kids with special needs, refugees who'd never worn shoes or had any formal education. \* Emerged as a teacher leader at Billingsville, which met state and federal progress benchmarks last year. \* Keeps everything positive, teaching teamwork, responsibility, manners and gratitude. "I bet if you asked her kids, every one would say they're her favorite," says principal Byron Campbell. \* Sees almost all her students pass state tests but is as pleased about emotional and social growth: "Learning is not all about the test." \* Takes pride in her cheerful, stimulating classroom with homemade materials organized floor to ceiling. \* Seats pupils of varying academic levels into U-shaped groups of six desks so she can assign tasks by seat position to challenge each one, while encouraging kids to help one another. \* Creates activities, such as graphing with M&Ms, and backs up explanations with PowerPoint to reach all types of learners. \* "Some people have the attitude that everyone's going to be successful, that failure is not an option. Those people get great things," Campbell says. "There's an unspoken aura that great things are going to happen, and that's how she goes about her day."

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**Basil Lee** Benjamin Banneker High, College Park, Ga.

Algebra II, advanced algebra/trigonometry, AP statistics, grades 9-12

**16th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Amia Burnette, assistant principal

**He:**Gave up a job as a factory manager at three times the salary to teach and has become National Honor Society adviser, father figure and even grandfather figure at a school with a free or reduced-price lunch rate of 63%, 70% mobility and a 47.6% graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students. \* Often has to help students resolve personal issues before focusing on math; last year, six students wore electronic monitoring ankle bracelets and a seventh was shot dead as she left a shopping mall. \* Succeeds by building trust; new students fill out a "You Are Special" form with confidential information that he uses to get to know them. \* Brings in items, such as a Pringles canister and a Clorox bottle, to explain how math was used in container design, labeling and barcode, even the bottle cap. \* Gives clothes his own kids have outgrown to students, six of whom are parents, and has given 15 \$500 scholarships over the past three years out of his own pocket. \* Volunteered to work through his prep period last year after four teachers quit during first semester. \* Helped raise his school's graduation test pass rate from 85% to 95%; saw 97% of his juniors pass the math test last year. \* "If you think of yourself as the parent of that child, and ask yourself the question, 'What would I want to happen to my own child?' the answer would be, 'I want that person to be successful,' " he says. "That's what I do with my students."

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**Valorie Lewis** Stigler (Okla.) Grade School

Third grade

**13th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Rita Echelle, former school psychologist

**She:**Shares her story of overcoming childhood poverty, teasing and low expectations with her rural Oklahoma students to inspire them to believe in themselves: "There is no such thing as a child without the potential for success." \* Holds weekly "Community Circle" for students to share thoughts and feelings and learn empathy. \* Fosters environment where students respect and value others by having kids draw names each week and fill out "Positive Comment Cards" about that person each day to share with the class. \* Uses multisensory lessons such as cooking to reach all students. \* Developed daily review program to practice basic skills and Third Grade Brain Olympics, used in other classes and schools. \* Holds themed days such as "Chocolate Day," using M&Ms to teach geometry of a circle, chocolate bars to teach fractions and weighing Kisses and other chocolates to calculate mass. \* "Her students are afraid to be absent because they don't want to take the chance that they'll miss anything," says nominator Echelle. "Mrs. Lewis doesn't always tell them when she is planning something special, so they have to be there every day, just in case!"

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**Alan Mac Nair** Troy (Mich.) High and Smith Middle School

Orchestra, grades 7-12

**31st year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Mark Dziatczak, Troy High principal

**He:**Arrives early and stays late to direct one middle and three high school orchestras; the high school program comprises 200 students with a symphony, a freshman orchestra and combined full student orchestra, named National Grand Champion four times. \* Played violin with the Boston Pops and Detroit Symphony, and under Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa and Leopold Stokowski but found his passion is teaching: "Mostly it's a matter of having these students come to the realization that everything they feel and everything that's human about them is in the music they play." \* Started Troy String Camp in 1988, bringing 200 students to a retreat to work with Detroit

Symphony members for three days each fall. \* Founded Troy Country Fiddlers, in which strings take country tunes to community events. \* Started annual orchestra trip; spring 2008 the symphonic strings play Carnegie Hall. \* Worked with parents to found Orchestra Association of Troy High (troyorchestra.org) in 1987 to help manage activities and raise funds. \* Started orchestra gala concert in 1991 to raise travel money; last spring the symphony played Beethoven's Ninth with professional and collegiate guests and raised approximately \$25,000. \* Says principal Mark Dziatczak: "Our students perform at such a high level, it causes all of our audience members to have this overwhelming sense of pride and appreciation for what he does in the classroom to make the performance a reality on stage."

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**Jerry Parks** Georgetown (Ky.) Middle School

Social studies, grade 7

**25th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Sharan Gwynn, colleague

**He:**Channels youthful excitement into an engaging learning atmosphere: "In middle school, excitement is contagious." \* Starts year with personality surveys to gauge interests and strengths; draws on individuals' strengths to hold a mock Hammurabi's Court, Greek plays, Passover *Chad Gaday*a dances, producing an Egyptian Museum for the whole school. "You learn everything you need to learn, but you learn it in a different way," says Colbey Valdez, 12. \* Cultivates parental communication all year long by phone, letter, newsletters, website. \* Takes his mandate as a role model and motivator seriously, providing structure and support for pre-adolescents at high poverty, diverse rural school that met goals on federal benchmarks last year: "When they know there are limits, they spread out." \* Holds doctorate in theology and has written four teacher guides published by Weekly Reader Press, using profits for student scholarships. \* Refines lessons with an impressive attention to detail: "He does so many things that you're supposed to do, but he does them naturally," says nominator Gwynn. "I've seen kids come to school on their death bed just to hit his class. He's fully engaged, and they know that."

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**Jill Putney** Tradewinds Elementary, Coconut Creek, Fla.

Fourth and fifth grade, looping

**13th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Erin Gaylor, colleague

**She:**Stresses environmental action with "Tradewinds Turtle Troopers" and "Butterfly Brigade." Students clean roads and beaches, conserve water, champion recycling. They persuaded a coastal community to go dark for sea turtles so hatchlings won't head for street-lit roads instead of moonlit ocean and got retailers to add plastic-bag warnings of dangers to animals. \* "If you let them take the wheel, you'll be surprised where they'll go." \* Creates a Living Museum where costumed students play presidents or famous African-Americans in a school where just 9% of students are black. \* Has her 22 students inventory their likes, dislikes, hobbies and interests and uses it to tweak her teaching for the two years she has each class: "When you find out what motivates them, that's half the battle," she says. \* Blogged for students during her Japan Fulbright trip, motivating students to stage an Asian festival upon her return. \* Brought in \$6,500 in grants over five years at Tradewinds. \* Favors hands-on learning: making pottery, studying Native Americans, shaking water-filled cylinders with rocks, clay, soil or sand to research how sediment deposits for science. "Hands-on learning is the way," she says. "If it's not hands-on, it's not happening here."

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**Corky Schroeder** Valley Community School, Merced, Calif.

Workplace learning, industrial technology, grades 9-12

**22nd year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Annette Palmer, assistant principal

**He:**Turns kids who've been unsuccessful at other schools into teams that rebuild and race cars at Merced Speedway; his classroom garage full of racing trophies shows kids they can succeed. \* Subtly weaves academic concepts, people skills and life lessons into shop and race-car classes at an alternative school and vocational center serving three unified school districts. \* Draws on his experiences as a dyslexic kid with attention problems and a leftie forced to write right-handed to connect with troubled kids, many of whom have layers of legal, family or learning problems. \* Doesn't pry, but lets kids know he's interested: "If somebody doesn't ask how their day is going, somebody doesn't care." \* Scrounges abandoned auto parts or buys them at discount; this year's project is the rusted hull of a 1983 Chevy Monte Carlo. \* Turned to teaching after 15 years as a mechanic. \* Provides structure and consistency and feels the weight of being a role model; most kids don't have family at the car races, but Schroeder's wife makes every one. \* Teaches with humility and heart, says vocational center vice principal Rick Parsley: "He opens a lot of lives and makes them think, even do a little soul-searching. He instills in them that life is choices. They realize the importance of education."

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**Jeffrey Thompson** Evergreen Elementary, Fort Lewis, Wash.

Kindergarten

**13th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Casey LaRosa, colleague

**He:**Brings love, logic and high academic expectations to two half-day kindergarten classes in a military community where most students have at least one parent in Afghanistan or Iraq. \* Created Kinderparent University, teaching everything from educational methods to parenting skills for military families. "The first thing I convey to parents is that this is not your typical kindergarten, that it is highly academic, and I need them to partner with me," he says. \* Gets students reading and writing from the first day; despite a 60% turnover rate, typically a quarter of his students end up reading at a second-grade level. \* Turns his classroom into an eye-popping wonderland, morphing from an underwater world with fish and a submarine to a garden shop to an archaeological dig. \* Assigns parents weekly homework, lets them check out plastic toolboxes full of learning materials. \* Tailors lessons individually. \* Uses innovative toys and tools, from phonelike tubes that help kids hear their own voices when they read aloud to dolls and rubber insects used to create patterns. \* "His classroom is literally transformed," says principal Holly Shaffer. "Jeff really expands the children's learning in ways they would not have without him."

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**Linda White** Haycock Elementary, Falls Church, Va.

Music, grades K-6

**25th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Suzanne Ransleben, colleague

**She:**Writes original musicals tailored to both curriculum and students' musical skill levels and interests; last year first-graders presented versions of the Gingerbread Boy while studying folk tales, second-graders put on a Veterans Day program, third-graders produced *Let's Go to Egypt*, fourth-graders did an American history musical and fifth-graders did a Chesapeake Bay musical. \* Won grants to co-write *Musical Letters From the Civil War*, tied to sixth-grade standards, produced at two schools. \* Attended college on piano scholarship but preferred accompanying to soloing; she still likes being a "quiet catalyst," bringing out the best in others. \* Journeyed to Ukraine, New Zealand, Japan and China on fellowships, bringing back multicultural experiences for kids. \* Started Korean drumming group and won grant to buy 30 ukuleles to teach chord structure and folk songs. \* Trained at the Metropolitan in New York to teach kids to create operas and has helped students mount *George Mason's Legacy* and *A Monumental Opera*. \* Wrote lessons distributed nationally and co-teaches a course for veteran music educators. \* Has all the hallmarks of a great classroom teacher and is unusually perceptive at figuring out what each child needs, principal Maureen Boland says. "I've never seen her stressed or angry or frustrated with children, despite all she does."

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**William Yucuis** Lyman High, Longwood, Fla.

Aerospace engineering, grades 9-12

**13th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Joan Shalls, guidance counselor

**He:**Served as an Air Force pilot and Air Force Academy instructor and was hired away from a middle-school math department in 2002 to develop Lyman's four-year magnet aerospace engineering program. \* Builds academic, teamwork and communication skills by having student groups work on aerospace problems such as building and testing paper, straw-powered, balsa wood and foam rockets, and presenting written and oral reports. \* Calmly leads a class calculating and charting the rocket-flight results, first by hand, then with a graphing calculator. "If results match perfectly, you probably ... what?" he asks. "Copied off our calculator," the class says in unison. \* Had students collaborate with computer and electrical engineering classes on a post-traumatic-stress syndrome project, which they presented internationally last year. \* "He takes the time, he gives time," says Nicole Morales, 17. "I have calculus, and I come to him when I have problems." \* Develops homegrown talent for Kennedy Space Center and aerospace firms but never pushes kids into careers, advising: "Do something you enjoy that you can be good at." That's why he's a teacher.

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**Gayle Sols Zavala** Gove Elementary, Belle Glade, Fla.

Special education, grades 1-6

**12th year full-time teaching**

**Nominated by:**Ellen Smith, colleague

**She:**Transforms special-ed students into entrepreneurs to boost academic and social skills; students have sold pickles, cared for school plants and created vases from recycled glass jars for Mother's Day. \* Takes students from rural, agricultural Belle Glade, where about one-third of 15,233 residents live in poverty, to live theater and posh locales, such as an equestrian center and a Palm Beach-area shopping mall. \* Tailors lessons to varying ages and skills, aided by learning centers labeled with words and pictures throughout her classroom. \* Won \$10,000 in grants to create a school garden, compile a multicultural community cookbook and purchase books and a comfy classroom reading rug, among many other things. \* Includes even the most severely disabled students in activities, giving non-verbal children in plays "speaking" parts via electronic communication devices and using battery- and switch-powered props for performers with limited mobility. \* Started at Gove in 1985 as a speech pathologist. \* Finds novel ways to get disabled students into the community, often with regular-ed peers: adaptive plays, puppet shows, bowling sessions. Says principal Anne Turner: "The connection our regular-ed students have with the students with disabilities is so strong here. The message it sends is that we all should be appreciated for what we have and who we are."

*Reported by Daniel Baer in Revere, Mass.; Larry Copeland in College Park, Ga.; Joe Culpepper in Fort Walton Beach, Fla.; Marilyn Elias in Carson and Chatsworth, Calif.; Heather Frye in Fort Lewis, Wash.; Jessie Halladay in Georgetown, Ky.; Sharon Johnson in Stigler, Okla.; Janet Kornblum in Merced, Calif.; Tracy Loew in Salem, Ore.; Matt Reed in Longwood, Fla.; Marty Roney in Greenville, Ala.; Ben Schmitt in Troy, Mich.; Deborah Sharp in Belle Glade and Coconut Creek, Fla.; and Tracey Wong Briggs in Asheville and Charlotte, N.C.; Oak Ridge, Tenn.; and Falls Church, Va.*

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shehott76 wrote: 52d ago

It would be wonderful to see a DCPS teacher get that honor. The teachers from my childhood were dedicated to the job and the futures of the children's lives they touched. Hope it will get back to that one day.  
Children are indeed the future and their education or lack is going be the determining factor to our futures.  
Good luck and Congrats to the teachers on the front line who already understand that.

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timeforchange wrote: 53d ago

I think this is partly a good thing. The problem is two fold. There are thousands of teachers in this country that could easily qualify for this kind of recognition. Secondly, this type of focus misses the one weakness in public education that never gets talked about or addressed. We are simply doing nothing to motivate parents to themselves care more about education and make education a visible priority in the lives of their kids. These small victories look good in the media but simply will not get the job done. We have a societal failure on a monumental scale that needs to be addressed if education in this country is to be put on the right track again. I simply do not fathom why this never gets discussed.

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The Mick wrote: 54d ago

Kevin - It's a shame they didn't get rid of the teacher. Unfortunately, they exist but you'd be amazed at the lengths parents will go to in order to "frame" good teachers, so a bad teachers stay on the books. Fortunately, at least in my experience, they are few and far between in a school system that pays a reasonable salary and can attract good teachers. And most teachers would not be silent if they observed such activity in others.

But such things do happen. My sister was in a pre-algebra class and always finished her work early and then helped the teacher grade papers! It took another teacher to get my sister moved up to algebra I - the pre-algebra teacher didn't want to lose her paper grader!

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barblee wrote: 54d ago

Thanks USA TODAY for spotlighting Excellence in Teaching. I am an elementary school teacher...I LOVE BEING A TEACHER! I have been a teacher for 12 years. It is certainly refreshing when organizations and companies make an effort to highlight the work of dedicated teachers throughout the nation. I am participating in Make A Difference Day on October 27, 2007.

I would love to hear from other educators across the nation....

Barb

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TalentedTenth wrote: 54d ago

Sorry to hear about your son's experience, but can we please just take a moment to celebrate the positive in teaching versus the negative?

Recommend 3 | Report Abuse



McViking wrote: 54d ago

My son's middle school Algebra teacher in Irvine, CA , was marking his right answers wrong. He began to spiral within a few month period. Fortunately, I was closely monitoring his performance and class work when it came to our attention.

We were able to meet with the School Principal and document several tests denoting her (his teacher's) malfeasance. He was switched to another class and was able to rebuild his self esteem.

As it turned out this teacher didn't want her male students do well...

We just received an email from our son with his mid-term junior year college transcripts from a top tier University. A 3.6 overall, with an "A" in Electrical Engineering.

Good thing we caught the bulldog teacher early.

Recommend 2 | Report Abuse

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