



National
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System



The Sanford Teacher Award: Identifying and Recognizing Inspirational Teachers

Inspirational teaching can ignite a spark of wonder and love of learning that last a lifetime, develop skills that transform innate talent into careers, and reshape the experience of schooling to be more engaging and equitable. Identifying and investigating inspirational teaching offers the opportunity to provide insights to educators, parents, and the public about what teachers do that makes them inspiring.

The desire to define core qualities and elevate awareness of inspirational teaching is what led the San Diego-based private, nonprofit National University System (NUS) to establish the Sanford Inspire program—a comprehensive series of research-based online modules designed to help PreK-12 teachers create inspiring classroom experiences. The Sanford Harmony program being introduced in PreK-6 classrooms also supports inspirational teaching focused on social and emotional learning. It creates classrooms where students are empowered to communicate, cooperate, connect, embrace diversity, and resolve conflict. Both programs are now being offered through NUS at no cost to schools and nonprofits and collectively reach more than three million students and teachers.

The Sanford Teacher Awards, launched in Fall 2018 by the National University System, identify PreK-12 educators around the country who demonstrate characteristics associated with inspirational teaching. These characteristics include:

- Enthusiasm for teaching
- Showing empathy and warmth toward all students
- Fostering positive relationships with all students
- Creating positive learning environments
- Recognizing student strengths

While the profession demands that teachers value their students and work hard to help them learn, Sanford Teacher Award winners do this and more. They exemplify the best models, in and out of the classroom, for helping students gain lifetime lessons that linger long after the student has forgotten how to factor a quadratic equation or who signed the Treaty of Ghent.

About the Sanford Teacher Award and Sanford Programs at National University System

“As a child, I was fortunate to have a few teachers who truly inspired me to learn and succeed. Educators have many similar opportunities to touch children’s lives and make meaningful impacts that can last a lifetime,” says T. Denny Sanford, one of the nation’s leading philanthropists, who has given more than \$130 million over the past few years to the San Diego-based National University System to support powerful education programs he himself envisioned and inspired.

Mr. Sanford’s most recent \$100 million gift this summer will help expand Sanford Harmony and Sanford Inspire across the nation and the globe. Sanford Harmony creates the opportunity to give every child in

the nation access to high-quality PreK-6 social and emotional learning approaches. Sanford Inspire offers research-based online modules to help create inspiring PreK-12 teaching experiences. The Sanford Teacher Awards acknowledge the key qualities the two programs emphasize collectively: social-emotional learning and inspiring teaching. "I can think of no better return on investment than inspiring students to embrace learning and find their path in life," Mr. Sanford says.

The Sanford Teacher Awards includes a prize of \$50,000 for the top national awardee and \$10,000 for one awardee in every state and the District of Columbia. Educators from around the country were part of a team that reviewed nominations and applications and selected the awardees.

What Inspirational Teachers Have in Common

Teaching is a profession and all teachers bring to the classroom both personal attributes and specialized training to foster and promote learning. The inspiring teacher's practices and habits of mind mark the classroom and permeate the learning atmosphere. The Sanford Teacher Award winners are being recognized for embodying these attributes and skills and taking them to a level that their students and educational communities find inspirational. These inspirational teachers:

- **Have a strong enthusiasm for teaching.** The spark that teachers ignite in students starts from within, and inspirational teachers exhibit a passion and dedication to teaching that provides the foundation for creating inspirational classroom experiences. In some cases, teachers attribute this to the role models who inspired them to become teachers, and in other cases they cite the support of schools that allow them to grow and do what they do best.
- **Promote empathy through a desire for equity.** As our population and schools become more diverse, effective teachers acknowledge the difficult life circumstances many of their students face, but do not use this as an excuse for low achievement. Instead, they demand that all students make progress from their individual starting points, and support them in making their very best efforts. Inspirational teachers are committed to high expectations and strive to provide an equitable and accessible education. At the same time, inspirational teachers not only recognize that students have different personal qualities, issues, and emotions, but also build on individual strengths to successfully overcome challenges. Sanford Teacher Award winner Jerriel Hall, for example, says that he does not want any students to be told, as he was, that they are not college material. He seeks to create innovative, cross-curricular, and collaborative experiences. "Once I learned to lead with my heart and listen to the feedback of my scholars, I saw an amazing transformation in my instruction and my scholars' achievement."
- **Build strong, positive relationships with students.** Teachers understand the need to make a personal connection with every student at the outset to gain their trust, learn their interests and concerns, and be able to offer individualized attention that ties instruction to what matters to the student. Ideally, teachers work with families as part of a team, so that home and school reinforce each other. As adult leaders, good teachers also model positive behaviors, such as always showing respect to everyone in the classroom and out. Through relationship building, inspirational teachers can gain an understanding of their students and motivate them to embrace learning. Principals who work with inspirational teachers commonly observe that these teachers "engage families and students," "go above and beyond," "have relationships with families that extend beyond their child's grades," and "stay in touch and mentor the students through the years."
- **Create a safe and positive environment.** Many students face hostile environments at home and in the streets and have no place where they are free to be themselves. Inspiring teachers

carefully construct a safe, nurturing environment where students are accepted, respected, and supported, and where they can take risks. According to one Sanford Teacher Award recipient, Sarah Frayer, one of the key challenges of creating engaging lessons is to create an environment where students' needs are met and fostered and they are at ease about making mistakes, which are proof that students are trying and learning. "I want my students to believe in themselves, even when they fail, for our failures are the key to our success and patience unlocks the door." These teachers establish an expectation that what is shared in the classroom is not used against anyone later so that students may feel comfortable dropping their personas and revealing their inner lives. In this safe space, students find the learning experience inspirational.

- **Recognize student strengths by engaging them.** Many students, especially in the upper grades, claim to be bored with school, because it does not engage them. Inspiring teachers address that through innovative practices that get students excited about learning and becoming active participants in their education. These practices include tailoring classroom themes to students' real-world interests, incorporating hands-on activities into lessons, offering opportunities for experiential learning, and incorporating project-based learning. They build students' social-emotional skills and encourage students to participate, spark their curiosity, and stimulate them to explore. This spirit is exemplified in a statement by Sanford Teacher Award winner Spencer Cody, who describes his own excitement in discovery as he watches his students do research and learn from hands-on projects and field trips to the Black Hills and the Gulf of Mexico: "If I could live an eternity in that moment of student discovery, I would happily oblige."

The desire for continuous learning is another quality that came through in the Sanford Teacher Award applications, though it was not among the criteria evaluated. To inspire students, teachers have to stay inspired by learning, too, and not just through professional development. The best teachers continually improve their practice, master new knowledge, and upgrade their skills, an approach to lifelong learning that reflects the National University System's own emphasis on serving adult learners through degree programs and professional development such as through the Sanford College of Education and the Sanford Programs. In the words of one Sanford Teacher Award winner Norma Burke: "I push myself to constantly evolve my lessons to better match the needs of my kids. I read articles, look for innovations or experiments that I can use in the classroom as real-world examples. I push myself to learn and work on things outside of my comfort zone so that I can grow as an individual and bring that experience back to my classes." The 2018 Sanford Teacher Award winners also described their commitment to self-reflection as part of their practice. They learn from other teachers, attend conferences, read books and journals, scour the Internet for new ideas, and modify lessons based on student reactions. Innovative teachers are the first to take advantage of new technologies, new standards, and new methods. They inspire their students by modeling the importance of learning and showing that even adults, even their own teachers, still are willing to work to learn new things.

Conclusion

Every teacher deserves more recognition for the work she or he does to support and inspire students across all developmental dimensions—not just the academic. Those who nominated teachers for this award testified to the inspirational teaching they witnessed or from which they benefitted. For example:

- "He [Tom Wissinand] is the kind of teacher you would want every student to have. He's calm. He's attentive. He listens to each of his students. He... makes you feel like you can trust him and that failures aren't failures—as in the end-of-the-world type—but rather they are opportunities to learn a lesson, a new way of doing something, a way to be resilient."

- “She [Felicia Ferber] fearlessly walks into her room and embraces her students every day, because each moment is a new chance. Her students come to see that their past decisions don’t have to define their future. She knows that what works for some kids doesn’t work for others, and she always individualizes her approach to what the student needs in that moment. She maintains a rigorous schedule and her high expectations. Students know that they are responsible for their work, and that she will expect nothing short of their best. She runs small group interventions and reviews data to see what she needs to change in order to be more effective. She inspires her students to achieve their own greatness.”

Inspirational teachers see their crucial tasks as lighting the spark in every child so all can reach their full potential, demonstrating acts of caring and connection, and meeting the needs of every child. This requires understanding students, respecting their circumstances, and nurturing the mindset that turns students into self-motivated learners.