

# 2026 Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Award Categories



## Illinois Teacher of the Year Cohort

The 14 Regional and Specialized Teachers of the Year are all part of the Illinois Teacher of the Year Cohort. Among this cohort, those with five or more years of teaching experience qualify as finalists for the Illinois Teacher of the Year, announced later in the spring.

## Regional Teachers of the Year

- Cook County Regional Teachers of the Year (Minimum of 3)
- East Central Regional Teacher of the Year
- Far North Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year
- Northwest Regional Teacher of the Year
- Far South Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year
- Southern Regional Teacher of the Year
- West Central Regional Teacher of the Year
- Far West Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year

## Specialized Teachers of the Year

- Bilingual Teacher of the Year
- Special Education Teacher of the Year
- Early Childhood Teacher of the Year
- Outstanding Early Career Educator

## Those Who Excel Awards

Awards are presented in six categories: classroom teachers, early career educators (1-4 years of teaching experience), school administrators, student support personnel, educational service personnel, and community volunteers.

## Award of Excellence

To receive the **Award of Excellence**, the most prestigious of the Those Who Excel honors, educators must have demonstrated a commitment to equity and to the success of all students. They regularly collaborate with colleagues, students,

and families to create positive school cultures. They are lifelong learners who connect their schools to the community at large and who inspire other education professionals within and beyond their schools.

## Award of Meritorious Service

Educators presented with the **Award of Meritorious Service** have gone above and beyond in service to their school communities. They are experienced educators who take on leadership opportunities and whose accomplishments uplift the culture of learning in their school. They stand as exemplars of their profession and have become integral members of their schools and districts.

## Award of Special Recognition

Educators who receive the **Award of Special Recognition** are valued members of their school community who have been recognized by their colleagues, students, families, and administrators for the skills, passions, and talents they bring to their school community.

For more information on award types and the application process, visit the [Those Who Excel and Teacher of the Year overview webpage](#).