



For Immediate Release

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ISBE Announces 13 Teacher of the Year Finalists and Honors Over 500 Illinoisans for Excellence in Education

State recognizes outstanding educators, administrators, and staff for their dedication, innovation, and impact in Illinois schools

SPRINGFIELD — The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) today announced 13 Teacher of the Year finalists and honored more than 500 educators, administrators, and other school staff through its annual Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awards. The awards celebrate the dedication, innovation, and impact of talented professionals in schools across Illinois. See the [full list of awardees](#).

"Illinois educators are changing lives every single day, and today we celebrate the very best among them," said **State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tony Sanders**. "Our 2025 Those Who Excel awardees and Teacher of the Year Cohort exemplify excellence in teaching and leadership, ensuring their students feel supported, included, and inspired. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to all the 2025 Those Who Excel Awardees and Teacher of the Year finalists."

The Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awards recognize individuals and teams making a meaningful impact in Illinois schools. ISBE presents awards in seven categories: classroom teachers, early career educators (teachers with one to four years of experience), school administrators, student support personnel, educational service personnel, community volunteers, and teams.

Dr. Rachael Mahmood, the 2024 Illinois Teacher of the Year, began her state-

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tunded, yearlong ambassadorship in July, dedicating the 2024-25 school year to fostering meaningful conversations about belonging in schools. She has facilitated World Café events across Illinois, engaging educators, school leaders, students and their families, and school equity teams in small group discussions that build on shared insights, ultimately generating actionable steps and innovative solutions for building inclusive school communities.

“Serving as a representative for Illinois educators has been an extraordinary honor,” said **Mahmood**. “I have loved every minute visiting their schools and classrooms, hearing their educators' stories, learning from their collective wisdom, and seeing the meaningful actions they take to support students and one another. I have learned that schools thrive when students, families, and especially educators are heard, valued, and included in shaping the future of education. To the 2025 Those Who Excel awardees and the Teacher of the Year Cohort — congratulations! Your dedication to education reflects the passion and excellence I have witnessed in classrooms all across Illinois.”

The Teacher of the Year Cohort includes Regional Teachers of the Year; Bilingual, Special Education, and Early Childhood Teachers of the Year; and an Outstanding Early Career Educator. Those with five or more years of teaching experience qualify as finalists for Illinois Teacher of the Year – the state’s highest honor for classroom teachers.

Dr. Sanders and Board Chair Dr. Steven Isoye notified members of this year’s cohort of their selection via surprise video calls earlier this month.

The 2025 Illinois Teacher of the Year Cohort and finalists for 2025 Illinois Teacher of the Year include:

- **Cook County Co-Regional Teacher of the Year – Comfort Agboola**, English Language Arts, Poe Elementary Classical School, City of Chicago School District 299
- **Cook County Co-Regional Teacher of the Year – Víctor Gómez**, Science, East Leyden High School, Leyden Community High School District 212
- **Cook County Co-Regional Teacher of the Year – Joshua Lerner**, English as a Second Language, Peirce Elementary International Studies School, City of Chicago School District 299
- **East Central Regional Teacher of the Year – Tracy Selock**, Mathematics, Lincoln Cultural Center-Montessori Elementary, Kankakee School District 111
- **Far North Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year – Heidie Dunn**, English/Theatre/AVID, McHenry Community High School, McHenry Community High School District 156
- **Far West Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year – Michele Oberlin**, Prekindergarten/Early Childhood, Madison Early Childhood Education Center, Elmhurst School District 205

- **Far South Suburbs Regional Teacher of the Year – Jennifer Gruca,**
English Language Arts, John F. Kennedy Middle School, Plainfield School District 202
- **Northwest Regional Teacher of the Year – Leslie Rennick,**
Elementary, Stark County Elementary School, Stark County Consolidated Unit School District 100
- **Southern Regional Teacher of the Year – Nina McLean,** Elementary,
James Avant Elementary School, East St. Louis School District 189
- **West Central Regional Teacher of the Year – Katie Welch,**
Mathematics, Rolling Acres Middle School, Peoria School District 150
- **Bilingual Teacher of the Year – Jessica Suarez Nieto,**
Elementary/Bilingual, Telpochcalli Elementary School, City of Chicago School District 299
- **Early Childhood Teacher of the Year – Amber Sims,**
Prekindergarten/Early Childhood, Alton School District Early Childhood Center, Alton Consolidated Unit School District 11
- **Special Education Teacher of the Year – Jennifer Gross,** Special Education, Thornton Fractional South High School, Thornton Fractional Township High School District 215

ISBE also awards one Outstanding Early Career Educator who has less than five years of experience and has demonstrated excellence and leadership beyond their years:

- **Outstanding Early Career Educator – Jena Kleindl,**
English/Journalism, Freeport High School, Freeport School District 145

ISBE received a record number of nominations and applications for the 2025 Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year Awards. A committee of administrators, teachers, educational service personnel, student support personnel, and past Illinois Teachers of the Year reviewed applications and selected this year's awardees.

Dr. Sanders will select the 2025 Illinois Teacher of the Year from the finalists later this spring. All awardees will be honored at an annual banquet on May 17.

Visit [ISBE's Those Who Excel & Teacher of the Year webpage](#) for photos and bios of the 2025 Illinois Teachers of the Year Cohort along with more information about the awards.

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For more information: