

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District

Teachers honored by the Milken Family Foundation

The Milken Family Foundation National Educator Awards program provides public recognition and financial rewards to elementary and secondary schoolteachers, principals and other education professionals who are furthering excellence in education. By honoring outstanding educators, the program strives to attract, develop, motivate and retain talented people to the challenge and adventure of teaching. The following Fairbanks teachers have been honored by this prestigious national foundation. (*The information about each teacher was provided at the time the award was presented. Since that time, teachers may have retired, relocated or passed away.*)

2005: Morgan Gray, Tanana Middle School

For extended learning teacher Morgan Gray and his students, the world is their classroom--literally. Each year during spring break, Mr. Gray takes students and parents to a foreign country, a culminating experience that draws upon everything the students have learned about that country throughout the year. When they return from the trip, students create a presentation to share what they learned in their travels. Only students who demonstrate their academic readiness for the trip get to go, and former students often come back and ask to go along. During the rest of the year, Mr. Gray brings the world into his classroom through a variety of learning activities that include programming robots, creating aboriginal artwork, producing video advertisements and even solving complex engineering dilemmas. Colleagues and students alike consider Mr. Gray a motivating and inspiring coach as well as a teacher, so it was no surprise to them when a national robotics competition named him Coach of the Year. With his passionate commitment to education as a richly rewarding experience, Morgan Gray shows there's no limit to what students can learn.

2000: Amy Kenaston, Nordale Elementary School

At Nordale Elementary School in Fairbanks, third-grade teacher Amy Kenaston has created a dynamic project-based curriculum aligned with state standards that is rich in content and cultural learning. In Mrs. Kenaston's classroom, making a class quilt becomes a lesson in math, a six-week "moon journal" helps students learn about astronomy, and an oral history project about the community surrounding Nordale provides the children with a personal connection to history. Mrs. Kenaston, who received National Board Certification, mentors pre-service teachers, interns and other educators, and serves on the district's Math Curriculum Committee. She is an adjunct instructor at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, where she played a leadership role in developing a fifth-year elementary standards-based certification program.

1999: Martin Foster, Career Education Center

For Martin Foster's students at the Career Education Center in Fairbanks, the goal is to make math learning "an event, a celebration, and a daily habit." To help his students visualize math concepts, Mr. Foster incorporates art into his lessons, using kaleidoscopes to explore the power of symmetry in trigonometry, flip books to study how algebra is

used in creating animation, and graphic art concepts to illustrate geometry. He has also written songs such as "How Do You Solve a Logarithm?" to reinforce math learning. Mr. Foster co-created and team-taught a successful remedial class coupling algebra with concept-based science, enabling at-risk students to do more, not less, than their mainstream counterparts.

1996: Frederica Buffmire, Pearl Creek Elementary School

An educator for over 25 years, Frederica Buffmire, principal of Pearl Creek Elementary School in Fairbanks, has overseen the introduction of several innovative programs at her school. These include mixed-age classrooms at the primary and intermediate levels, an elementary Spanish program and an intervention program that links the school and its families with services and resources in the community.

1995: Georjean Seeliger, Hutchison Career Center

"The most important thing I have taught my students is to accept the fact that change starts with one's self, that there are many solutions to a problem, and that each of us has value as a human being," says Georjean Seeliger, who teaches home economics at the Hutchison Career Center in Fairbanks. After extensive research on existing programs for pregnant and parenting teens, Ms. Seeliger developed an education component for the OPTION Teen Parenting Program. Responsive to the needs of the population it serves, the program allows young parents the opportunity to complete their education and offers a "reality-based" curriculum geared toward the healthy development of young parents and their children. The program also offers transportation, on-site childcare and access to a supportive network of community agencies.

1994: Leslie Gordon, Badger Road Elementary School

Leslie Gordon teaches third grade and is the Extended Studies Program Coordinator for kindergarten through fifth grade at Badger Road Elementary School in Fairbanks. "The growth of my students, both affective and academic is my highest priority," says Mrs. Gordon. In addition to being a dedicated teacher, Mrs. Gordon is seriously committed to reform in all facets of the educational profession. The science and math assessment kit project she developed has received a national award and is in use throughout the country. Mrs. Gordon is also interested in revising child assessment methods for all aspects of a child's education. For the past eight years, she has worked with the Alaskan Science Consortium, a project that trains Alaskan teachers in science content and process. In 1990, Mrs. Gordon received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science Teaching.

1993: Jerry Hartsock, Lathrop High School

Jerry Hartsock, principal of Austin E. Lathrop High School in Fairbanks, finds that "all in all this is the most exciting time ever to be an educator." He attributes this excitement to the novel ideas that are challenging the enclosed and hierarchical structure of the old educational system. Mr. Hartsock's model is a former teacher of his, Mr. Mason, whose dedication and enthusiasm rescued him from his own indifference and alienation as a high school sophomore. Like that teacher, Mr. Hartsock takes his cues first from his students; they are his priority, and their success and well-being are his legacy. His inclusive mode of leadership invites and thrives on the participation of teachers, parents

and community at all levels of the educational process. The excellence of his service has been widely acknowledged, and he has been selected several times as Alaska Principal of the Year.

1993: Ron Manook, West Valley High School

It was with the encouragement of teachers, family, and friends that Ron Manook decided to pursue a career in education. Today he teaches art at West Valley High School in Fairbanks. Mr. Manook says that he became a teacher, in part, to increase the presence of Native American role models in education. He understands the "feelings of isolation and bitterness that I see in a great many students, both Native and non-Native," and in his classroom he works to build hope. Mr. Manook is a firm believer in equal opportunity for all. "I believe that all people should be entitled to a quality education," he says. For Mr. Manook, a curriculum that neglects or disregards the arts is an inadequate one. He would like to implement an Alaska Studies Program at West Valley High School. Such a program, he points out, taught by the best of his peers and with a strong emphasis in Alaskan cultural studies and creative arts, would attract students from all backgrounds.

1991: Ruthanne Rust, Denali Elementary School

When Ruthanne Rust retired as a mentor teacher at Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks, she moved to Pennsylvania to teach at a private Jewish Academy. Currently she is a member of the adjunct faculty staff at Arcadia University in Glenside, Penn. During her tenure as an elementary school educator, Ms. Rust was chosen as Alaska's alternate for the Teacher in Space Program, was president of the Fairbanks Education Association, and took part in research sponsored by the Institute of Marine Science at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She served as Alaska's representative on a National Science Foundation research vessel studying marine ecosystems and was active in "Next Century Schools," a three-year science education project sponsored by the Nabisco Foundation.

1991: Susan Stitham, Lathrop High School

Susan Stitham, English teacher as well as chair of the English Department at Austin E. Lathrop High School in Fairbanks, promises her students each semester that they will leave her classes with more questions than when they started. Ms. Stitham was a founder of the Alaska State Writing Consortium and the Alaska Teacher Research Network, and she serves on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. One honor of which she is particularly proud is that she has been selected as commencement speaker by her school's graduating class on twelve separate occasions.

1990: Grace Heacock, Weller Elementary School

"I want my students to understand that- whatever the issue- they shouldn't be afraid of the truth." Imparting the courage of conviction to eight-year-olds is not an everyday ambition. For Grace Anne Heacock, it was a mission--a very successful one. Grace Heacock taught the third-graders of the Rosamond Weller Elementary School how to understand and tell the truth. She also gave them the self-confidence and optimism necessary for her annual "We Search" project through which they used their skills in reading, math, composition and critical thinking to research the civic issue of their

choice. Thus she showed children that the truth isn't the same for everyone. "Even very intelligent, caring people come out on different sides," Heacock would explain, "but by working together, we can find the best possible solution for all." A recipient of the Alaska Educator Award in 1990, Grace Anne Heacock embodied the qualities of dedication and creativity that are the marks of the truly great educator.