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Top Idaho science, math teachers advance to nationals

(BOISE) – Three Idaho elementary teachers, two in science and one in mathematics, will be honored as this year’s state nominees for the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching (PAEMST) during the Idaho Math and Science Conference, Oct. 5-6, at Eagle High School.

The awards dinner, slated for the night of Oct. 5, also will feature other Idaho science and mathematics teachers being honored for several regional and state awards in their fields.

PAEMST recognition is the nation's highest honor for teachers of math and science. Awardees serve as “models for their colleagues, inspiration to their communities and leaders in the improvement of mathematics and science education,” according to the PAEMST website. State nominees advance to the national competition, where typically one science and one math teacher from each state are named as national winners if the national review committee believes they meet the rigorous PAEMST standards. The awards honor elementary and secondary teachers on alternate years.

The 2017 Idaho PAEMST state finalist for math is Vonda Franklin from Washington Elementary in the Boise School District. A graduate of the University of Montana, she has taught at the Spalding STEM Academy in the West Ada School District and in 2014 moved to Washington Elementary in the Boise School District where, she said, “her passion and love for mathematics has soared.”

“It is an honor being selected as one of Idaho’s state finalists for the PAEMST Award,” she said, “and is a tribute to all of the instructors and colleagues who have... inspired me to excel in mathematics instruction. I also believe this recognition celebrates my students for their willingness to take risks, collaborate and participate in discourse as they explore the wonderful world of mathematics.”

Franklin participated in a five-year professional development program through Boise State University, and regularly mentors future math and science teachers through Boise State University’s “I Do Teach” Program. She has been featured in U.S. Department of Education “Doing What Works” videos highlighting effective educational programs across the nation. In 2017, she earned a master’s degree in mathematics education from Western Governors University

The two Idaho state finalists for the science component of the PAEMST national awards are Kellie Taylor and Deirdre Abrams.

Taylor has been the kindergarten through fifth-grade engineering teacher at Galileo STEM Academy in the West Ada School District since 2012.

She is no stranger to the PAEMST award, having previously been nominated as a state finalist in 2014. She has won a number of regional and national honors for her work in STEM education and is recognized for providing real world science experiences for her students. A three-time Teacher of the Year at her school, in 2018 she was named as an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow.

A lifelong learner, she began her teaching career in 2004 and earned her master's and doctoral degrees in Educational Technology from Boise State University. Taylor has shared her work in the classroom teaching robotics and 3D printing at state and national conferences. She conducts action research on best practices for STEM implementation in the elementary classroom.

Taylor said that she "maintains a curious attitude that promotes innovation in the classroom and school culture," adding that she "follows her curiosity and passion for education by striving to grow professionally." Among other things, she has participated in the Maven Elementary Educator Summit, NASA Microgravity University for Educators, and the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) 4th Annual National Summer Teacher Institute on Innovation, STEM and Intellectual Property. She is a new member of the Space Exploration Educator Crew through Space Center Houston.

She uses her extensive professional development efforts to advance student engagement in STEM with classroom instruction, additional opportunities in after-school groups and competitive teams, and organizing school-wide events, such as STEM Night and SumoBots. "Impacting students' futures and helping them find their passions is always amazing," she said.

The other state nominee in science is Deirdre Abrams, who has taught in the McCall-Donnelly School District for 24 years, the last 12 as a fifth-grade instructor at Donnelly Elementary School.

She described her teaching style as helping her students become "immersed in place-based learning" that focuses on science opportunities in "in this beautiful, friendly, resort town." They raise rainbow trout, have constructed and maintained a pollinator garden, have participated in a wolverine study for western states, and have replicated and carried out a cattle study with their wireless "trail cam." She and her students have officially adopted an impaired creek, Boulder Creek, next to their school. They collect annual water quality data from Boulder Creek to share with government agencies, and they release their trout in the creek each spring.

"I am grateful to be in the position to share my love of learning and passion for STEM with a class full of curious students each year," Abrams said. "I value solving authentic problems in my community and, thus, seek place- and problem-based learning opportunities for my students as a way for them to connect and engage with their surrounding neighbors and environment as they become thoughtful, convergent thinkers."

A graduate of the University of Montana, she earned a master's degree in education from Boise State University, where she has taught workshops on "Creating a Student Centered Classroom." She has been featured as a "best practices" speaker at educational conferences in Idaho, and has been the author of several papers in professional publications. In 2011, she was the Idaho recipient of the Presidential Innovation Award for Environmental Educators.

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Attached: Photos of Vonda Franklin, Kellie Taylor and Deirdre Abrams