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Teachers from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Washington

Receive American Civic Education Teacher Awards

LOS ANGELES — Teachers from Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Washington are recipients of the 2014 American Civic Education Teacher Awards, recognizing their exemplary work preparing young people to become informed and engaged citizens. The ACETA winners are John Dickson of Harwich (Mass.) High School; Natalie O’Brien of North Smithfield (R.I.) High School; and Jennifer Reidel of Lynden (Wash.) High School.

The awards are given annually to teachers of civics, government and related subjects who have demonstrated exceptional expertise, dynamism and creativity in motivating students to learn about the Constitution, Congress and public policy.

ACETA is sponsored by the Center for Civic Education, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and the National Education Association.

Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education, praised Dickson, O’Brien and Reidel for their dedication to helping young people learn the information and skills necessary to participate as effective and responsible citizens. “We are grateful for all these teachers do to ensure that each succeeding generation understands the principles and values of our representative democracy,” Quigley said.

Lee Hamilton, director of the Center on Congress, said that the awardees “inspire us with their passion for spurring students to contribute to community and country. To thrive, our political system needs conscientious citizens. These teachers give their all to see that students embrace their civic obligations and are motivated to participate constructively.”

“Civic education is a key component of ensuring our nation’s students and America as a whole advances in the 21st century,” said National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel. “The ACETA teachers are to be commended for arming students with the keys to preserving and improving self-government and setting a shining example of the professionalism and excellence demonstrated in classrooms across the country every day.”

The three awardees share a passion for explaining democracy and citizenship in an engaging way and helping young people see that what goes on in local, state and federal government is relevant to their lives.

In his self-portrait essay, John Dickson wrote that he builds his classes around “participatory and authentic learning. The goal is to get students involved in politics, not just to study. My approach has been to make our class as active as possible. We conduct exit polls and attitude surveys, organize legislative debates, host guest speakers, and create model congresses, cabinets, and court hearings. These activities allow students to experience government in order to teach them why it is so important in their lives.” Dickson graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor’s degree in government, and he earned a master’s in education from Lesley University. He has been teaching for 20 years. He is an active community leader on Cape Cod, currently serving as chair of the Brewster Board of Selectmen.

Natalie O’Brien wrote that she seeks to “enhance students’ knowledge of important historical, political and constitutional issues by engaging in mini-debates, simulations and circle discussions. I hear from parents that although my class is demanding, their child LOVES it. In room 218, students are knowledgeable enough about the U.S. Constitution and modern politics to know that their opinions are worth listening to and are respected. Every time I discuss politics with my students, I am encouraged about the future of my community, state and nation.” A graduate of Providence College with a bachelor’s degree in history and secondary education, O’Brien earned a master’s in East Asian studies from St. John’s University and a master’s in political science from the University of Rhode Island. She has been teaching for 13 years.

Jennifer Reidel wrote that she works to provide “relevant, rigorous, and engaging civics instruction” that challenges her pupils to “practice active democratic skills of deliberation and compromise.” Her class re-enacts the Constitutional Convention of 1787, so “students are given context for contemporary disputes relating to constitutional interpretation.” She does not shy away from “passionate disagreements” in class discussions and noted that one of her key goals is to help students understand “the intricacies and challenges of governing effectively in a democracy.” She added, “A democracy is only as vibrant as the opportunities afforded to its disenfranchised members. It is essential for traditionally marginalized groups to be equipped to advocate for their rights.” Reidel holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in history from Western Washington University. She has been teaching for 18 years.

Each year the ACETA program selects and showcases three teachers whose students represent the diversity of the American public- and private-school systems. Applicants must be full-time classroom teachers of grades K–12. There is no fee to apply. Applicants must submit a two-page self-portrait essay, their resume, and three letters of recommendation—two from teaching peers and one from their school principal.

With the recognition this year of Dickson, O’Brien and Reidel, the ACETA program has now honored 27 teachers since the awards were first given in 2006. The previous ACETA awardees:

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David Alcox (Milford High School and Applied Technology Center, Milford, N.H.)
Jim Bentley (Foulks Ranch Elementary School, Elk Grove, Calif.)
Nate Breen (Cheyenne Central High School, Cheyenne, Wyo.)
Sally Broughton (Monforton Elementary School, Bozeman, Mont.)
Christopher Cavanaugh (Plainfield High School, Plainfield, Ind.)
Kevin Cline (Frankton Jr. Sr. High School, Frankton, Ind.)
Cheryl Cook-Kallio (Irvington High School, Fremont, Calif.)
Mary Ellen Daneels (Community High School, West Chicago, Ill.)
Barbara Simpson Ector (Cleveland Middle School, Cleveland, Tenn.)
Jaime Festa-Daigle (Lake Havasu High School, Lake Havasu City, Ariz.)
Kevin Fox (Arcadia High School, Arcadia, Calif.)
Milton Hyams (Incline High School, Incline Village, Nev.)
Cindy Jarrett (Durant Road Elementary School, Raleigh, N.C.)
Tamara Johnson (Kettle Moraine High School, Wales, Wis.)
Julie Kuhnhein (Highlands High School, Fort Thomas, Ky.)
Galelyn McElroy (Central High School Magnet Career Academy, Louisville, Ky.)
Richard Ochoa (Alta High School, Sandy, Utah)
Mark Oglesby (Howell High School, Howell, Mich.)
Douglas Oswald (Marion Technical Institute, Ocala, Fla.)
Nancy Peterson (Gilbert High School, Gilbert, Iowa)
Donna Paoletti Phillips (Robert Frost Middle School, Rockville, Md.)
Sarah Ann Richardson Turpin (Clemson Elementary School, Clemson, S.C.)
Jackie Viana (Hialeah Gardens Middle School, Hialeah Gardens, Fla.)
Gregory Walsh (Falls Church High School, Falls Church, Va.)

About the Sponsoring Organizations

The Center for Civic Education (www.civiced.org) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy.

The Center on Congress (www.centeroncongress.org) is a nonpartisan educational institution established in 1999 to help improve the public's understanding of Congress and to encourage civic engagement

The National Education Association (www.nea.org) is the nation's largest professional employee organization, representing 3.2 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators and students preparing to become teachers.

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