

Difference Maker: Dr. Jeannine Butler's Innovative Approach Helps Her Capture Golden Apple Honor For Teaching Excellence

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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Difference Makers

of the Riverbend

ST. JACOB - With schools back in session, instructors are having to learn a completely different way of teaching their students with remote learning. There is one area teacher who stands above many of the others with her overall approach to instruction and that is Dr. Jeannine Butler, who has been a sixth-grade teacher at St. Jacob Triad Middle School.

Butler was the recipient of the 2020 Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching. This past summer, she learned of the news to her surprise with a car parade in her neighborhood with students, parents and colleagues. It was one of the most precious moments of her life.

The award, presented by Illinois nonprofit Golden Apple, honors outstanding teachers for their roles in having lasting, positive effects on students' lives and building stronger communities. More than 730 nominations from 64 Illinois counties were received this year, and Dr. Butler is one of just 10 award recipients in the state.

For the first time in Golden Apple's history, the awardees were notified differently than in the full-school environment, and Dr. Butler was surprised with a parade in her neighborhood by students, parents and colleagues.

Butler said she was honored and most appreciative of the Golden Apple award was extremely thankful for the surprise parade and community support.

"As far as Golden Apple, I still have to pinch myself to know that I was selected as one of their fellows this year," Dr. Butler said. "There are so many wonderful teachers, both in Triad, and among those who were nominated for the award. I am absolutely humbled that I was selected and want to do all that I can to help support and guide the next generation of teachers in Illinois. I've already had this opportunity a little bit over the pandemic remote learning time with the Teach Plus organization and their 'All Means All' initiative. This initiative helped support hundreds of teachers across the state in their remote efforts. 'All Means All' was actually mentioned by the state superintendent, Dr. Carmen Ayala, and ABC news in Chicago."

Dr. Butler, a sixth-grade instructional interventionist and coach for reading, English and math, became a teacher after she watched her mother work with her younger brother every night to overcome a significant language delay to become a Ph.D. chemist, which would not have been possible without the support of great teachers.

Dr. Butler carries this lesson today and her mission is to ensure a child's ability and potential is never missed.

"The most meaningful part of my job is helping students find the confidence and knowledge that they can be successful," Dr. Butler said.

Dr. Butler began her career in special education and earned her Doctorate in Education in 2016.

In addition to her role as a teacher, Dr. Butler has written numerous grants to help Triad Middle School add a variety of instructional resources; most recently receiving a Lowe's Grant for \$5,000 to enhance the school's interventionist program.

Following a highly competitive process, the 2020 award recipients were selected from more than 730 nominations of 4th-8th grade teachers. The demand for recognition throughout the state was profound, with nominations for outstanding teachers and leaders received from 64 Illinois counties.

"Exemplary teachers create an extraordinary ripple effect that benefits students, transforms schools and strengthens communities," said Golden Apple President Alan Mather. "We look forward to Dr. Jeannine Butler joining our mission to prepare the next generation of highly effective teachers for Illinois schools through our Scholars and Accelerators programs. Our award recipients play a major role in Golden Apple's efforts to make a material difference in resolving the teacher shortage crisis across Illinois."

The Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching honors outstanding teachers for their roles in having lasting, positive effects on students' lives and building stronger

communities. Teacher award recipients demonstrate - in their teaching and results - significant, positive impact on their students' growth and learning. Fellow educators, students, parents and community members nominate teachers for the awards. Teachers may not self-nominate.

"We recognize the recipients of the Golden Apple Awards for Excellence in Teaching to thank them for their countless contributions, to elevate the importance of the teaching profession for all to see and to inspire others to positively impact their communities by pursuing careers in education," said Alicia Winckler, CEO of Golden Apple.

Award recipients are selected by master educators who understand and recognize instructional best practices and who utilize professional standards to evaluate exemplary teachers and school leaders. Members of the selection committee viewed video evidence of instruction and observed recipients' teaching in-person in their classrooms during a comprehensive day which also included interviews with recipients' colleagues, school leaders, students, parents and community members prior to school building closures in Illinois.

In addition, each Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching recipient receives a \$5,000 cash award. Award recipients become Fellows of the Golden Apple Academy of Educators, a community of educators who support current and future teachers and deepen the learning of students. Fellows play an important role in preparing the next generation of teachers by providing instruction and mentorship to future teachers in the Golden Apple Scholars and Accelerators programs, each of which is dedicated to addressing the teacher shortage in Illinois.

As a highly valued component of this recognition, Northwestern University, Golden Apple's partner for more than 30 years, generously provides a Spring Sabbatical to award recipients at no cost.

"Both Northwestern and Golden Apple are dedicated to developing teachers who will transform the lives of their students and we are proud to host these master teachers on the next step in their professional journeys in education," said Timothy Dohrer, Ph.D., Director of the Master of Science in Education Program at Northwestern University's School of Education & Social Policy.

Dr. Butler said as far as the start to the year, "I think the word "challenging" covers it. Triad is one of the districts in the Metro East that is offering parents a choice in how they want their student to receive instruction this year. Some of our students are full remote, some students are attending on a hybrid schedule, and all in-person students are now coming to school on an A/B schedule where depending on the last name, they attend certain days during the week.

"My own schedule is a combination of in-person and remote instruction. The best part of this is that we still get to see our students and establish critical relationships. Additionally, the kids have been wonderful about following health guidelines and following reminders quickly. The most difficult part is the feeling that the virus is out there and we always have to be diligent in our efforts and support one another to keep everyone healthy."

SEE NOMINATION LETTER:

July 31, 2020

Dear Principal Noyes:

I am sure you know that Dr. Jeannine Butler is an outstanding educator and teacher leader. What you may not know is the extent to which she went above and beyond to serve fellow educators and students across the state in a time of crisis this spring.

When schools closed in response to the pandemic, Teach Plus, along with our partners at the National Board Resource Center and the Illinois State Teachers of the Year, put out a call for educators to help their colleagues adapt to remote learning. Dr. Butler stepped forward, attended initial trainings and weekly coaching sessions, and led twice-weekly planning and problem-solving PLCs over an eight-week period for teachers across Illinois.

Dr. Butler received no compensation for this work. She rose to meet the moment in order to help teachers better serve their students. The impact of her efforts is clear: more than 1000 teachers registered for support, and feedback from participants showed that Dr. Butler and her fellow teacher leaders made a real difference for those struggling to adapt:

- *"Just being able to speak to other teachers and hear and see what they are doing is so reassuring."*
- *"We were able to create something I can use next week with my students."*
- *"I got so much good information I can use to help with my life, my fellow staff, and my admins. LOVED IT!"*
- *"I am truly enjoying this PLC. I feel supported and I'm getting some wonderful ideas."*
- *"The ideas shared help me to feel more prepared for the fall, no matter how we go back to school."*
- *"It would be beneficial to continue these sessions in the fall. It has been a wonderful lifeline!"*

The “[All Means All](#)” effort that Dr. Butler was part of was also recognized by [State Superintendent Dr. Carmen Ayala](#) in her daily COVID-19 updates and by [ABC Chicago’s Eyewitness News](#) in a feature report.

Teach Plus is dedicated to teacher leadership, and so we celebrate the great teachers like Dr. Butler who have gone above and beyond to support their colleagues and students in this unprecedented time. As you prepare for a return to learning this fall, I hope you will take a moment to recognize Dr. Butler for her service as well.

Sincerely,

Bill Curtin

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Teach Plus Illinois