

Illinois Education Association Honors Edwardsville Educator, Others, From Around The State

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SPRINGFIELD – The state's largest educator organization, the Illinois Education Association (IEA), today honored those with an outstanding commitment to their schools, their students, their communities and to public education.



The awards were presented during the IEA Representative Assembly (RA). The RA is the legislative body of the IEA and helps the state's largest union set its agenda for the year. There are 1,200 IEA delegates, guests and state dignitaries who attend the RA.

"Each and every one of our members has gone above and beyond just by working in a school these past couple of years. We applaud all of our teachers, professors, nurses, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers and paraprofessionals. All of our hardworking education employees deserve recognition after making it through the second year of a global pandemic," IEA President Kathi Griffin said. "We celebrate this year's award recipients for taking what will likely be the most difficult time in their careers, pivoting to do something amazing while under the intense pressure of the pandemic. Our students are so lucky to be surrounded by so many outstanding educators. Congratulations to all our awardees!"

The IEA award recipients were nominated and chosen for their awards by their peers.

The 2022 IEA RA award winners are:

IEA HIGHER EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR – Michele Lorenzini (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville – Edwardsville, IL)

Michele Lorenzini has been a higher educator for the past 25 years and currently is part of the Anthropology Department at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville (SIU-E). Michele's involvement in the union and in the SIU-E community has enabled her to stand in the gap for the disenfranchised and be a voice for those who could not speak for themselves. Because she is such a fierce advocate for human rights, she is able to sit in tough negotiations and ensure that she gets the very best for her students and her fellow union members. Michele is undaunted and fearless and reaches across the aisle to achieve the greater good while still building alliances along the way. She is an excellent leader who understands the nuts and bolts of union work and a teacher-scholar in her field of anthropology, imparting her pearls of wisdom to her students and colleagues. She conducts excellent trainings in the fields of unionism and anthropology. Michele is a pioneer and legend in her own right. She has made a significant impact in the field of higher education. Michele spearheaded an effort within her local union to support adopting a child in need. Michele is also passionate about social justice issues and is involved in supporting the Illinois Education Association with its efforts to provide better representation of our Black Indigenous People of Color members in the local. She plans to advocate more for the inclusion of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer members in our ranks in public education.

Education Support Professional of the Year – Marandia Bledsoe (Harvey School District 152- Harvey, IL)

Marandia Bledsoe has worked in Harvey School District 152 for 18 years. She is currently the parent coordinator and the attendance liaison. In her professional practice, Bledsoe has demonstrated her ability to build relationships with staff and students. She manages to somehow help with a kindness that meets people at the deepest point of their need. As parent coordinator, she collaborates with local agencies and provides parents with resources and referrals for assistance in the community. As the attendance liaison, she is responsible for communicating with families on a daily basis concerning students who are late or absent. Because of her compassion and concern for the community and her combined role as parent coordinator, families trust Bledsoe with their children and their safety. Empathy is her professional practice and for what some may see as "above and beyond" she just sees it as "village work," bringing to life the proverb- "It takes a village to raise a child." Marandia is also a local school board and municipal election volunteer, as well as a 20-year volunteer sponsor of the Harvey Blue Angles, an award-winning flag and drill team. Marandia coaches her team to perform in major parades and competitions around Illinois and across the country. These children have been exposed to a world outside of their circumstances and given opportunities that many of us take for granted. Though she volunteers, Marandia has supported members who could not afford performance gear. Again, "village work." In this work she teaches the importance of community virtues while at the same time allowing her performers to shine. She has gained the respect of an entire community because of her devotion to community success. Marandia is a hidden jewel in the south suburbs who sees her personal achievement in the life of her children, and the children and parents she mentors.

Reg Weaver Human and Civil Rights Award – Heba Abbasi (Kirby School District – Tinley Park, IL)

Heba Abbasi has always gone above and beyond to help people, even as a teenager. At that age, she knew that once she was able, she would provide a safe and loving space to children in need, because there were always so many stories of neglected children. It is also one of the reasons she became a teacher. Abbasi has been an English as a second language (ESL) teacher in the Kirby School District for the past two years. In addition to being a mom to her two daughters, a wife and teacher, Abbasi also welcomes foster children into her home. Kaden was a two-week-old baby who required a lot of medical attention and hospital stays, especially during his first year of life. Abbasi went on to adopt Kaden, making him a permanent family member in her home. She truly goes above and beyond.

NEA Award for Teaching Excellence Nominee - Brandon Thornton (Bloomington High School – Bloomington, IL)

Brandon Thornton is more than a teacher. He's a mentor, a coach and a friend to his students. As the coach of the speech and debate team at Bloomington High School, Thornton is invested in the success of the team, but also in the success of each individual student, taking the time to get to know each of them, empower them and truly take an interest in their lives. Thornton's philosophy is, "When you strive to focus on the needs of all students, you should start with those most in need." It was this thought that helped inspire the Lights On initiative. Through Lights On, Thornton connects students to partners within the community. Those community partners then provide services for the students as well as mentoring and internship opportunities. Thornton, who is a math teacher, recently received his doctorate in Special Education from Illinois State University. He was honored by ISU College of Education as an Outstanding Young Alumni Ward.

Mary Lou and Keith Hauge Award – Wesley Heyduck (Retired – Fairview, IL)

Wes Heyduck's passion for education did not diminish with retirement. Heyduck continues to support all aspects of the public education community as a retiree and has for the past decade. Heyduck is an intricate part of the Illinois Education Association, serving in several roles throughout the organization. He has established himself as a 'get the job done' member and has worked tirelessly to make sure other retired educators, especially those from Southern and central Illinois, continue to stay involved in public education. He recognizes the importance of voting for public education-friendly candidates and has committed his time to helping those candidates win office. He is reliable and invaluable to the IEA-Retired Program, the IEA and the public education community.