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April 28, 2016

“FINAL FOUR” ANNOUNCED FOR ALABAMA TEACHER OF THE YEAR
2016-2017 Winner and Alternate to be Named May 11

Montgomery, Ala. — The educators who have emerged as the “final four” finalists vying to serve as the 2016-2017 Alabama Teacher of the Year are innovative and enthusiastic teachers who are committed to cultivating life-long learners who reach their full potential not only in the classroom, but throughout their lives.

The finalists are:

Elementary
- Dawn Davis, Montana Street Academic Magnet School, Dothan City School System, District II
- Sandy Georgette Deades Ritchey, Crestline Elementary School, Mountain Brook City School System, District VII

Secondary
- Vinny Chiaramonte, Robert F. Bumpus Middle School, Hoover City School System, District III
- Dana Jacobson, Clay-Chalkville High School, Jefferson County School System, District VII

Interim State Superintendent of Education Dr. Philip Cleveland said the final four candidates for the 2016-2017 Alabama Teacher of the Year have been chosen from many other outstanding examples of educational leadership in our state.

“Well-trained, dedicated, caring, enthusiastic, and innovative elementary and secondary teachers are among the ingredients essential to achieving excellence in preparing Alabama’s children and youth to become capable adults,” Cleveland said. “The final four are student-centered educators who personify the time, attention, and patience that great educators show every day in the classroom.”

The next step for the final four is an extensive interview with the state judging committee. The 2016-2017 Alabama Teacher of the Year will be revealed at a ceremony hosted by the Alabama State Board of Education and the Alabama State Department of Education at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, May 11, 2016, at the RSA Plaza Terrace in Montgomery.

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Alabama’s Teacher of the Year spends the majority of the school year serving as the spokesperson for education and the teaching profession as well as presenting workshops to various groups. Additionally, Alabama’s representative is a candidate for the National Teacher of the Year Award.

Following is more about this year’s final four candidates:

Biographies

Dawn Davis, Montana Street Academic Magnet School, Dothan City School System, District II

“My greatest rewards from teaching come in the form of a smile. When you see a smile cross the face of a child, you know they are gaining in knowledge. I am not interested in perfecting students, but I am greatly determined to perfect my abilities to encourage goal-based mindsets, so that all children can realize their worth and potential.”

Dawn Davis can clearly recall the spring day she raced into her house after school announcing she was going to be a teacher. She was only a first-grader at Rose Hill Elementary School in Dothan, but even at such a young age, she realized teachers make a difference in the lives of their students. The first among her siblings to go to a four-year college, Davis, who earned both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Elementary Education from Troy University, has spent most of her 20-plus years as an educator teaching in the Dothan City School System. She believes that while she cannot change the many circumstances from which her students come, she can change where they are going in life. Davis aims to do so by creating a classroom environment where all children realize their worth and potential, which she accomplishes through planning, building a support team, encouraging risk-taking, and utilizing her student’s natural curiosity. Parents and Montana Street Academic Magnet School volunteers J. Scott and Everlie Bolton said they feel blessed that she has taught two of their sons: “Throughout her years of teaching, Mrs. Davis has mentored hundreds of children from diverse backgrounds and abilities and makes them all feel special. She is dedicated to her profession, her school, and her students.”

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Sandy Georgette Deades Ritchey, Crestline Elementary School, Mountain Brook City School System, District VII

“My goal is to prepare students for the future, for jobs that do not yet exist, by helping them discover their purpose. I keep all that I do student-centered. A student-centered approach to teaching includes making learning relevant, providing inquiry-based learning, enhancing curriculum with the use of technology, giving students time to reflect, and, most importantly, ensuring success.”

Sandy Georgette Deades Ritchey is among the first generation in her family born in the United States. She knows what it is like to grow up in a home where two languages are spoken, and how it feels to be the “new kid” who isn’t quite sure how or where she will fit in. But Deades Ritchey also knows the importance of not allowing obstacles to become barriers to educational success. In her role as a literacy coach at Crestline Elementary School, Deades Ritchey offers unconditional support to her school family, recognizing that each student and teacher has a special gift and serves a purpose in this world. A frequent presenter and facilitator at education conferences across the state, the University of Alabama at Birmingham alumna does not think teachers should “box in” their students’ learning abilities. She believes children shape their own destiny, and teachers, along with parents and civic and business leaders, must work together to help young learners turn their curiosity into an engine of achievement. Crestline Principal Laurie King said Deades Ritchey is a compassionate and thoughtful teacher: “She demonstrates professionalism, common sense, and passion for children in every aspect of her job. She has a giving heart and cares deeply for children and staff members.”

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Vinny Chiaramonte, Robert F. Bumpus Middle School, Hoover City School System, District III

“Teachers have a tremendous responsibility in the development of the children put in our care. Yes, we have content to cover, and, yes, there are standards and benchmarks that must be met. But a teacher has to be more than data sets and standards. I believe teachers should have an authentic genuine interest in students as individuals.”

In 1996, Vinny Chiaramonte was a second year freshman with an IQ of 140 who decided to drop out of high school. A few years later, Chiaramonte, who credits key people who saw value in him and helped him get back on the right track, earned his GED, took the SAT, and prepared to enter college. It was through those experiences that he discovered his place in life is to expose, impact, equip, and empower young people to think beyond their current situation and know there is a world of options available to them. Chiaramonte decided the middle grades were where he could have the biggest impact as middle school is a critical time in a student’s development. He aims to instill in his students the confidence he lacked when he was their age by advocating for them and showing them he cares about them as individuals. The computer science instructor and Engaged Learning Initiative facilitator likens his class to a “differentiated wonderland of learning” where he engages students in discussions about the connections between learning and life. Former student Christian Pegouske said over time, his teacher also became his friend: “For Mr. Chiaramonte, it has always been about getting better and getting the best out of not just himself, but also his students. He constantly challenges his students and nurtures their skills to make them the best they can absolutely be.”

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Dana Jacobson, Clay-Chalkville High School, Jefferson County School System, District VII

“Teachers are visionaries who see that light at the end of the tunnel and find ways to help students get to that light. Some children require unanticipated methods or paths, but effective teachers persist. What differentiates the teacher from the student is the teacher’s obligation to engage the student.”

When Dana Jacobson was in fourth-grade, her teacher, Mrs. McNeil, asked her students to sign a conservation pledge. But before her pupils signed the piece of paper put before them, McNeil emphasized that signing it was a matter of consequence as it meant promising to make a difference. This lesson has stuck with Jacobson throughout her life and career. Like the teacher who inspired her to become an educator, Jacobson teaches high school students and values working with teachers in training because of the power to effect change. A veteran educator who has taught at Clay-Chalkville High School since 1999, Jacobson tries to uncover each student’s story, which she believes is the key to building rapport and meaningful learning. She designs activities so that students can make connections and strives to model those characteristics she believes the world requires: an interest in learning and people; a validation of others, not just tolerance; a desire to solve problems; and a strong work ethic. Clay-Chalkville High School Principal Michael Lee said Jacobson exemplifies those qualities and more: “On most days, Ms. Jacobson is the first teacher at school and the last to leave. She does not stop. She is a true giver to students, student teachers, and colleagues.”

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