



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, September 17, 2015

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## THREE IDAHO MATH TEACHERS VIE FOR NATIONAL HONOR

(BOISE) – Three Idaho mathematics teachers have been selected as Idaho’s state-level finalists for a national award recognizing their skills as secondary math instructors.

Jay Derting from the Genesee School District, Kathy Prummer, who teaches seventh-grade math at Sandpoint Middle School, and Mary Towler, who teaches at Compass Academy in Idaho Falls, are Idaho’s 2015 state-level finalists for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. One will be chosen by a special panel of the National Science Foundation to be Idaho’s recipient of the award, the nation’s highest award for teachers of math and science.

“The award recognizes those teachers who develop and implement a high-quality instructional program that is informed by content knowledge and enhances student learning,” the National Science Foundation said in a prepared statement. “Awardees serve as models for their colleagues, inspiration to their communities, and leaders in the improvement of mathematics and science (including computer science) education.”

Just filling out the application to be nominated is an arduous process that takes nearly a full year and includes records that monitor classroom activity and student progress. An independent committee formed by the State Department of Education then reviews all the applications and selects the state-level nominees to go on to the national level for final evaluation and award.

“It honors highly skilled and highly talented education professionals,” said Christine Avila, director of the State Department’s mathematics programs. “They’re spectacular.”

Avila noted that the best math teachers possess a combination of deep content knowledge and top teaching methods.

Derting agreed. “One of our biggest problems is we have people with good teaching skills, but not math skills, teaching math. And to be honest, most people who really understand math don’t have great people skills,” which is a key component in being a great teacher.

For Derting, the scores issue is relatively straightforward. The state ISAT test by Smarter Balance given to tenth-grade students “is heavily weighted toward geometry. But when we give the kids the test, they’re finishing up a year of algebra and they’ve forgotten by then a lot of the geometry that they’d learned the year before.”

Prummer believes that “In order for scores to improve, teachers need to have ongoing professional development in math education to continue to learn how to effectively implement our Idaho Core Standards.... Idaho Core calls for students to engage in problem solving, to understand math conceptually, to apply math to real-world situations, and to think at much higher levels. We are asking students now to have the habits of mind and dispositions real-world mathematicians possess. We are demanding greater focus, increased coherence and rigor. This is very different from what students (and teachers) were expected to do before we adopted Idaho



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Core standards.

“Prior to Idaho Core,” she said, “we cut apart math concepts and ‘spoon-fed’ students little pieces of math that really had no real-world applications of any value, nor did it prepare them to truly solve problems. In order to effectively implement this higher level of expectation, teachers need appropriate training. And that requires funding.

“Our Regional Math Specialists do an amazing job training our teachers,” Prummer said, “but they are spread very thin. Our Region I math specialist, for example, has a territory that ranges from about 20 miles south of Coeur d’ Alene all the way north to the Canadian border (and the borders of Washington and Montana). The specialists now work out of our Regional Math Centers, which have done a really good job of providing opportunities for conferences, book studies and teacher leadership groups engaged in research. Continuing to fund our Regional Math Centers will be a key element in the professional development of teachers and improving math scores statewide.”

All three of the presidential award nominees, Avila said, “are outstanding teachers who create environments where students feel safe to take risks mathematically and have fun.”

“I often get asked by my students, ‘are you a real math teacher?’” Derting laughed. “But I have a lot of freedom in my school. The administration trusts me.”

“I try to teach them to think, not just as individuals, but as a community,” he said. His room is covered in white boards and his students often work together to solve problems. “When I give the kids a problem, some like to work it out alone, others go to their group, and others form groups at the white boards trying to work it out. My room looks like total chaos, but it’s organized chaos.”

More importantly, by letting students help each other to learn, he empowers them to learn how to learn. “They learn how to think,” he said. Echoing Prummer’s belief that math instruction should involve real-world applications, Derting said that “math needs to be looked at holistically, instead of just a set of steps to learn skills.”

All three of the nominees bring something special to their classrooms.

Towler has taught math at Compass Academy since the school opened in 2012. Prior to that, she taught math for 21 years at Clair E. Gale Junior High in Idaho Falls. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Dickinson State University in North Dakota and a Master of Science degree from the University of Iowa. In her family, she’s a fourth-generation math teacher.

“Most kids say they don’t like math and dread having to take a math course,” she said. To make math enjoyable for her students, she tries to challenge them. “I think students will rise to the challenge if given the chance. Given the right level of challenge, along with the right amount of support, students can have success in math.”

Prummer was raised in a small town in Oregon, attended the University of Oregon in Eugene and longed for a smaller community to raise her children, so she and her family moved to Sandpoint where they had friends. She initially taught elementary school then started her own business where “real world problem solving (with math) is essential,” before returning later in her career to education. She has a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction and in the past five years, she has been a teacher participant in two National Science Foundation grants with universities in the Northwest. Currently she also is a participant in a math leadership group in Idaho’s Region I, conducting action research in her classroom.

“Kathy is devoted to providing opportunities for her students to build their math confidence, problem solving abilities, mathematical reasoning, and their ability to communicate their



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mathematical understanding,” Avila said, adding, she is “passionate about educating both students and teachers and has devoted her professional life to her personal development as a leader in mathematics education.”

Derting, Avila said, is an example of a teacher who meets the award’s criteria of being an “inspiration to their communities.”

He and his wife of 31 years, Angie, married in college. While she was still going to school, he looked for a nearby job that would let her do that, and was hired by the Genesee School District. After the birth of their second child, “she decided she wanted to be a stay-at-home mom,” Derting said, and eventually, they had three children – to start.

The couple, who live in Clarkston, attend the Nazarene Church in Lewiston. One day a missionary speaking at the church was discussing the plight of street children in Madagascar. “My (then) 6-year-old son said, ‘we’ve got to help them’.” Three years later, the Derting family was helping create a special center for 250 homeless street children, most of whom had no parents. The center taught math, reading and writing, provided the kids with two meals a day, and helped some go to school and even college, or get job training. After 13 months there, they were asked to stay, “but I missed teaching,” and the family came back to the Genesee district.

“But when we came home, we were kind of lost. Then we saw an ad on TV for foster parents and our oldest son and daughter said, ‘you should do that, you’d be great’.” Fourteen years later, their newest foster child, a four-month-old born with significant medical issues but who is “doing really well now,” Derting said, is the 37<sup>th</sup> foster child they’ve helped, including four children that they’ve adopted. “Our kids range in age from 28 to six and we have three granddaughters, ages 5, 3 and four months. So with grandkids we’re saying ‘sure, have some candy,’ and our younger kids we’re telling them to eat their vegetables.”

The couple remains active in their church and community. Angie started an organization called “Homes of Hope” that supports foster parents and foster children in the eight surrounding counties. The group just completed a drive to help provide backpacks and supplies for foster children in the area.

All three nominees are very deserving of this award, Avila said. “They have a commitment to mathematics education and children, both in and out of the classroom.”

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