



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Monday, November 16, 2015

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**IDAHO'S TEACHER OF THE YEAR: THOSE WHO CAN, DO, AND  
THOSE WHO CAN DO MAGIC, TEACH**

(BOISE) – Melyssa Ferro, the 2015 Teacher of the Year for Idaho, urges her fellow teachers to “bring your passion and your enthusiasm to the learning process.”

“Remember the power that you have to change the lives of the students who come through your classroom. Mentor them and encourage their innovativeness. Hold them to high standards and then provide the scaffolding they will need in order to reach those goals.”

Ferro has spent most of her 16 years as an educator teaching Life and Earth Science for grades 7 and 8 in Room 5 at Syringa Middle School in Caldwell. It's a school, a district and a community she knows well.

“Teaching in the same district that I graduated from has given me an opportunity to give back to the educational system that shaped my formative years. Much of what I know about being a good instructor comes from the men and women who have worked in the Caldwell School District,” she explained.

That history gives her a connection to her community that “allows me to know who my students are and how to meet them where they are.”

For example, when she volunteers at the YMCA teaching Zumba group exercise classes, “Many of the mothers of my students attend these classes and...I frequently end up doing mini parent-teacher conferences before and after class. Because these moms see me outside of the traditional school setting, I am able to build their trust and confidence,” which is important in a district where a large number of her students are Hispanic. “My actions in the larger community of Caldwell come back to me as effects,” she said.

“Students often enter my classroom with very few experiences with which to connect to their learning. Many of them come from a background of poverty, which limits their access to education. As an educator, the greatest contribution that I make to the future success of each of these students is to encourage their passion and interest in science....”

Holding a bachelor's of science education degree from Boise State University and a master's of science education from Walden University in Minnesota, she also serves as a leader in statewide STEM education conferences and programs and as mentor for younger teachers. A member of the National Science Teachers Association, she helped guide development of Idaho's recently adopted science standards.

Not unsurprisingly, this is not her first honor. She was recognized earlier this year with a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, one of the top awards a science teacher from each state can receive. She has been named the 2015 Teacher of the Year for



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the Caldwell School District, Teacher of the Year twice (2007 and 2015) for Syringa Middle School, and the educational Region III Outstanding Secondary Science Teacher of the Year in 2008.

Originally, she wanted to be a genetic scientist. She definitely didn't want to be a teacher. "Growing up in a family of educators," she said, "I had seen first-hand the long hours and dedication that went into lesson planning, paper grading, and professional development and I had made up my mind early on that my professional life would involve anything but teaching. By the age of 17, I had already figured out that teaching was not the 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. job with summers off that non-educators seem to think it is."

But as her college career progressed, "I realized that I really could not see myself doing anything other than working with students and helping to spark a love of discovery and learning in the minds of future scientists and engineers. Teaching a new generation of scientists seemed even more valuable than becoming one myself," she said. "Rather than simply following the old adage that 'those who can, do, and those who can't, teach,' I decided to rewrite that misguided piece of wisdom to read, 'those who can, do, and those who can do magic, teach'."

She has a genuine joy for her subject and the accomplishments of her students. "When the time comes for me to hang up my lab coat for the last time and pass my Smart Board markers and my computer gradebook off to the next lucky occupant of Room 5, I hope my lasting legacy will be the way I helped my students see themselves as scientists and engineers and not just as students who learned science by reading about it."

She stresses providing her students with hands-on science, taking them "outside of my classroom walls and allowing (them) the opportunity to smell, taste and roll around in science," which she notes "is incredibly important to engaging them in their own learning."

"One of the first scientists that I remember idolizing as a kid was Benjamin Franklin. Franklin is famously credited with the axiom, 'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.' Simply put, that is my philosophy of teaching. My job is to help kids connect their classroom learning with their own lives."

She's proud of the high percentage of girls who take part in her after-school science clubs and the students from all walks of life that she has inspired to think about and even pursue careers in science. "I help them make science into a verb so that they see themselves as problem solvers and critical thinkers instead of just watching other people do it."

Ferro said she tries to avoid the "traditional cookbook-type labs" where students follow precise steps to achieve a specific answer.

"My science lab usually resembles a busy urban 'maker space' because of the labs, projects, and experiments that are happening in my classroom. A 3-D model of a Mars-based dome city competes for space with a model of an underground New Zealand farm as my students tackle the topic of feeding the citizens of tomorrow for the Future City engineering challenge, while students on the other side of the lab are engineering design solutions using SimCity software."

"Recycled water bottles full of algae cultures take up my desk space, the lab tables near the window and the inside of my lab fridge as students partner with our local university to learn about the connections between photosynthesis and energy. During any given lunch hour, you will find students voluntarily coming in to count their algae populations and to check on their experimental setups," she says with pride in their interest and accomplishments.

But Ferro is more than just a teacher. She also is a student of her profession and is well aware of the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges to education.



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“Our digitally-inclined students are fantastic at navigating social media and video games, yet they struggle to use those same technologies in a classroom setting, and our teachers are not finding successful ways to help connect these technology-wired brains to traditional learning methods.

“A quick glance at colleges and universities shows teacher preparation programs that are begging for qualified candidates, and... teachers are leaving the profession within the first few years to look for greener pastures in other careers fields where there is more respect, more voice in decision-making, and maybe most importantly, better pay,” she said.

“To top all of this off, funding for public education is not keeping up with the demands that are being made at the local or state levels and there are growing inequities being created between school districts around the nation based on the tax bases of their surrounding communities.

“All of these problems seem to originate from a single, overreaching issue that threatens to undermine the entire basis of our public education system,” she said. “Our country has dropped the ball when it comes to ensuring that all children have access to equitable public education.”

She knows that solutions won’t come easily. “The vastness of this issue calls for a major shift in thinking about education at the national level but the action must come more locally. A solution to combating the issue of equity in education, especially in the areas of math and sciences, must come in the form of partnerships.”

Those partnerships, such as the effort of the state’s new STEM Action Center to bring together the resources needed for today’s students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, means “we are increasing the number of shoulders that we are able to stand on.” In her own district, community partnerships have led to donations of lab equipment and science fair prizes, guest speakers, field-trip opportunities and more for the teachers and students there, she noted.

She urged business, industry and other stakeholders to “Put your resources to work. Look for partnership opportunities with your local school system.”

And most importantly, she said, “Celebrate the successes that are happening all across our country in public school classrooms.”

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