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Idaho's 2020 Teacher of the Year teaches PE, champions mental health

(SPIRIT LAKE) – This morning, Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra and Governor Brad Little surprised Stacie Lawler in her classroom to announce that Timberlake Junior High School's health and physical education teacher is Idaho's Teacher of the Year for 2020.

Selected from among six finalists by a blue ribbon panel, Lawler will serve as a spokesperson and representative for Idaho educators and travel to Washington, D.C., as the state's nominee for National Teacher of the Year.

"A great teacher focuses on the whole child, and Stacie Lawler is a phenomenal teacher," Superintendent Ybarra said. "Her students don't just learn the subject matter, they learn about themselves, gaining the insight, confidence and resilience they'll need to overcome obstacles and succeed in school and beyond."

"Our students simply cannot succeed without dedicated teachers, and Stacie Lawler is an outstanding teacher who demonstrates the positive impact a teacher can have on the lives of a student and their family members," Governor Little said. "It is an honor to recognize Stacie for the difference she has made in thousands of lives."

"At a time when we plan to train educators across the state in social-emotional learning, I'm thrilled to present this award to someone who exemplifies that approach," Superintendent Ybarra said. "And it's a lovely coincidence that this announcement comes during Suicide Prevention Month, which heightens the focus on the mental and emotional well-being of our students."

Lawler said her key mission and message as Idaho Teacher of the Year will be to combat the stigma surrounding mental health.

"I believe a major issue in public education today is educators' lack of knowledge about mental health," she said in her application. "It's a frightening position to be in when you are ill-equipped to deal with a crisis."

“We must teach our children that it is OK to talk about not being OK,” she said. “What if we had a child tell us they were thinking of killing themselves and we knew what to do about it?”

Lawler has taught in the Lakeland Joint School District for 11 years, first as a physical education teacher at Twin Lakes Elementary, where she designed and delivered a new curriculum for K-6 physical education. She did the same for grades 7-8 curriculum at Timberlake Junior High, where she has taught health and PE since 2014. Earlier in her career, she taught in the Vallivue and Wilder School districts.

Last year she was named Teacher of the Year for the Lakeland Joint School District, and she previously earned that title at Twin Lakes Elementary and twice at Timberlake Junior High.

“She is the most thorough, professional, hard-working, diligent and amazing educator I know,” Timberlake Principal Chris McDougall said in a recommendation letter for Lawler. “Her passion for raising the bar in everything she does is truly seen in her classroom. Students grow in exponential ways across the board in Stacie’s classes.”

“Stacie’s extra-curricular work is also the best in the state,” McDougall said, noting that Lawler coaches cross-country and track, helped coach cheerleading and was the lead in setting up a successful districtwide Life Awareness Relay.

Lawler helped launch a community coalition to talk about suicide and helped establish an education program that brought in outside experts to teach employees how to deal with difficult situations. And she co-wrote the application that brought an SDE-administered Sources of Strength grant to Timberlake, training students to use, in her words, “the power of peer social networks to change the school culture and ultimately prevent suicide.”

Lawler made the difficult decision to talk to her students about her personal experience with family members’ mental health struggles, saying it opened a valuable dialogue that made textbook issues real and freed students to address their own challenges. Since then, she has been asked to share her experiences with coworkers, parents and others.

She takes over the Idaho Teacher of the Year title from 2019 winner Marc Beitia, an American Falls teacher and FFA advisor who attended the Sept. 26 announcement to congratulate his successor.

Lakeland Joint School District Superintendent Becky Meyer nominated Lawler for the honor, noting “her overarching belief in unconditional kindness toward all human beings.”

“Her ability to engage and harness the creative energy of students is beyond brilliant,” Meyer said. “Students love to be involved with Stacie’s programs – she motivates students to think beyond their adolescent self and give back.”

“Stacie is a gift to the profession and has been one of the rare staff members to never lose sight of our deep rooted mission in education.”

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Attached: A photo of Stacie Lawler, 2020 Idaho Teacher of the Year