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## NEWS RELEASE

### Sarasota County Teacher of the Year finalists surprised at 3 schools

SARASOTA COUNTY, Nov. 14, 2017 – Teachers at three schools in Sarasota County were surprised Tuesday, Nov. 13, when they were revealed as the district’s elementary, middle and high school Teachers of the Year and the 2018 Teacher of the Year finalists. The annual Teacher Tribute Tour team traveled to each school together on a bus.

This year’s team included Superintendent of Schools Todd Bowden, School Board members, Education Foundation President Jennifer Vigne and other representatives of the foundation and the school district, past winners and special guests. They congratulated the teachers as their students and school staff helped celebrate the event. One of the three finalists will be named the district’s overall Teacher of the Year at the Ignite Education event at the Westin Sarasota on Dec. 13.

The first stop for the Teacher Tribute Tour bus was Booker Middle School, where Superintendent Todd Bowden told students and staff, “You have a teacher who is very special to you and to all of us — she’s the Middle School Teacher of the Year for the whole school district...Ms. Allison Cohen!”

Cohen, who teaches sixth-grade math to students of varying abilities, told the cheering crowd, “I could not do this without the support of our great staff and our volunteers.” She integrates English language arts into the math curriculum and presents information in a variety of ways to meet the needs of each student.

“I don’t just teach math, I teach life skills, social skills and job skills. My goal is for all our students to be college- and career-ready,” Cohen said. “I love being here every day — I’m a Booker Tornado for life!”

Student Rachel Welch called Cohen “an amazing teacher” and said it is exciting to see her honored.

Cohen earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the University of South Florida. She has taught for 21 years — all of them with Sarasota County Schools. She has served on the Bill and Melinda Gates Teacher Advisory Council, as mathematics department chair and curriculum leader at Booker Middle.

“Education is a family tradition,” she says. “My two sisters, a cousin and a niece are all teachers in the district.” Cohen loves watching minor league baseball, gardening, and working with students at a local community center.

(MORE)

*Teacher Tribute Tour, contd.*

Next, the bus pulled into Riverview High School — the second time in a row the tour bus has stopped there. Reigning district Teacher of the Year B.J. Ivey, who teaches and coaches at Riverview, passed the High School Teacher of the Year baton to English Language Arts teacher Es Swihart.

Principal Paul Burns called it “a special day for us at Riverview.” He told the gathered students and staff that the next period was about to start, but that “it’s important to take this moment to celebrate. Having the High School Teacher of the Year two years in a row says a lot about what happens here in our classrooms.”

Swihart (whose first name Es is pronounced as the letter “S,” and whose last name is pronounced SWY-hart), said being named the district’s High School Teacher of the Year is “quite an honor. I am shocked and amazed...and overwhelmed!”

Swihart has taught for 11 years, five of them in Sarasota County. She teaches English Literature and “English 1” to Pre-International Baccalaureate students. She holds a bachelors’ degrees in English and theater performance from the University of Florida and a master’s of English education from the University of South Florida-St. Petersburg.

She said she is “passionate about teaching, learning and exploring the arts and writing to understand why these modes of expression are so powerful.

“I am drawn to story forms and their influence in any medium — including education, the arts, human relationships, psychology and technology,” Swihart explained. “I believe stories are powerful tools for connection and bettering our understanding of the world and ourselves. I want my students to be comfortable expressing who they are — their authentic selves.”

Student Alex Hilton said Swihart “is not just an amazing teacher; she’s an amazing person.”

Swihart loves spending time with her daughter, exploring the world, reading, attending and performing in theater productions.

The final stop on the tour was Venice Elementary, where Bethany Burnett was named the district’s Elementary Teacher of the Year. Burnett has been a teacher for 26 years, 20 of them in Sarasota County. She teaches fifth-grade inclusion, co-teaching with a colleague to help ensure that the individual needs of all students are met.

Burnett talked about students who are labeled “square pegs” because they don’t fit into the “round holes” as some people expect. “I look at students who might be labeled as having obsessive-compulsive disorder and help them and their classmates see them as organizers. It’s important to help kids understand who they are and to help them rise above the labels others assign to them.”

She said whenever she hears the phrase “those who can’t, teach” she corrects them. “Those who teach inspire and transform lives. A random act of kindness by a teacher can change the life of a student.”

Student Maddox Smith said Burnett is “really patient...she’ll let things slide sometimes. She will always be on your side. She’s the best!”

Burnett holds a bachelor’s degree in specific learning disabilities from Mercer University and a master’s of curriculum and instruction from American Intercontinental University. Her hobbies include cooking, gardening and home renovation.

(MORE)

*Teacher Tribute Tour, contd.*

## **About the Teacher of the Year program**

The Teacher of the Year program is co-produced by the Education Foundation of Sarasota County and the Sarasota County School District and is made possible through the funding and support of community partners. Each of the three finalists will receive a cash award from the Education Foundation.

The overall district Teacher of the Year for 2018 will be announced from among the three finalists **at Ignite Education: A Celebration Honoring Teachers**. The event will be held at **10:30 a.m., Wednesday, Dec. 13, at the Westin Sarasota**. **For more information and to purchase tickets visit <http://www.EdFoundationSRQ.org/ignite>.**

To further amplify the importance of teachers on their students and the community, the Education Foundation of Sarasota County will also recognize the nominees for Alumni of Distinction and honor the winner of the inaugural award.

The district Teacher of the Year will represent Sarasota County Schools at the Florida Department of Education-Macy's Teacher of the Year program and will serve as a spokesperson for and representative of the teaching profession at various events throughout 2018.

## **About the Education Foundation of Sarasota County**

The Education Foundation of Sarasota County is an independent partner working to advance philanthropic support for Sarasota County Schools. Its mission is to enhance the potential of students, promote excellence in teaching and inspire innovation in education. Guided by the belief that education changes lives, the Education Foundation strives to match each donor's passion with high-impact projects created to ensure students graduate with purpose and are prepared for a post-secondary pathway. The Education Foundation of Sarasota County and its philanthropic investors are champions for students, teachers, and schools. For more information on how to be a champion for education, visit [EdFoundationSRQ.org](http://EdFoundationSRQ.org).

## **About Sarasota County Schools**

Dedicated to academic excellence, Sarasota County Schools is home to 53 schools, 43,000 students and 5,000 employees. It is one of only two Florida districts to be graded A by the Florida Department of Education every year since grading began in 2004. Learn more at [SarasotaCountySchools.net](http://SarasotaCountySchools.net).

## **PHOTO CAPTIONS (Please include this credit: Photos by Rod Millington):**

1. Venice Elementary teacher Bethany Burnett is swamped by students congratulating her on being named Sarasota County Schools Elementary Teacher of the Year Nov. 14.
2. Booker Middle teacher Allison Cohen, middle, shares the spotlight with students Jakiah Mills, left, and Valeria Hernandez, right, after being honored as Sarasota County Schools Middle School Teacher of the Year.
3. Riverview High students Samantha Chaulsett, left, and Jakob Dubin, right, celebrate the moment with teacher Es Swihart, who was named Sarasota County Schools High School Teacher of the Year.