



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Kasey Bennett

STEM

Grades K - 4

**Northwest Heights Elementary
Durant Public Schools**



The moment that truly influenced me to become a teacher was when I realized how powerful it is when a child feels successful in learning. One of my most meaningful accomplishments is founding our school's Science Fair/STEM Night. What makes this event truly meaningful is its commitment to inclusivity: every student-regardless of background, ability or learning style- has a place to shine. Families often share that it is the first time their child has felt confident participating in an academic event. And every day, my students- not the curriculum, not the lessons- are the reason I continue this work with innate joy, steadfast purpose, and unwavering dedication.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Keely Flynn

Physical Education
Grades Pre-K - 5

Lindbergh Elementary
Tulsa Public Schools



Long before I committed to education full time, teaching had become an undeniable part of who I was. Everything I had lived had quietly prepared me to build culture through movement and relationships. I'm proud of what we've built, but the moments that fuel me most aren't awards- they're the everyday reminders that students feel connected. It's a child counting down the days until their next P.E. class. It is when students are proudly sharing they chose water instead of juice, went on a walk with family, or tried a new food because we talked about balance. Those are the moments that make the long hours worth it- and they remind me I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.



OKLAHOMA
Education



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Tobi Gordon

Deaf Education

Grades 7 - 8

**Brink Junior High School
Moore Public Schools**



By combining my knowledge of educational interpreting and deaf education, I strive to create a learning environment where deaf students can not only succeed academically and linguistically, but also build confidence, leadership skills, and a sense of belonging. I believe that some of my greatest accomplishments as an educator so far include helping create a school environment that is understanding and accepting of deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and one in which students are not simply passed along, but are expected to learn and to be great.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



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2026 Finalist

Tracie Grunewald

Geometry
Grades 9 - 12

Oklahoma Virtual High School
Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy



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My decision to become a teacher was influenced by a strong belief in the power of education to change lives, and a desire to serve students in meaningful, lasting ways, and- mostly- by the teachers who touched my life. Those teachers not only encouraged me; I watched them do the same for others. I became a teacher because I know firsthand the lasting impact educators can have on students' lives. After eighteen years in the profession, that knowledge and that passion continue to guide and motivate my work. I remain deeply committed to my students, to young people, and to the profession that helped shape who I am today.



OKLAHOMA
Education



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Vanessa Jones

**Biology 1 & Honors Biology
Grade 10**

**Bethel High School
Bethel Public Schools**



My greatest contribution to education lies in how I approach teaching science- by engaging students in the process of discovery. Rather than simply telling them what they need to know, I guide them to reason through problems and uncover answers for themselves. The greatest accomplishment of my 20-year career as an educator isn't something flashy or bold- it's simply making science accessible and engaging for all my students. I want them to see science as a tool for understanding the world, solving problems, and contributing thoughtfully to society. I emphasize that science is not a static body of facts to be memorized, but rather, a study of dynamic and evolving processes.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Serena Neely

Grade 1

**Will Rogers Elementary
Shawnee Public Schools**



I am grateful for the opportunities I've had to grow as a teacher, leader, and individual. The success of my students, the relationships I've built with colleagues, and my ongoing pursuit of professional development are all part of a larger mission: to serve, inspire, and empower the next generation of learners. I got into the education field for the love of my children... and convenience. I quickly learned that education isn't convenient at all. Education is urgent. I live and breathe education for the love of all children: mine, yours, and future generations yet to be impacted by encounters, big or small. I used to think that I happened upon my career in education. I now know that it was a calling. All I had to do was answer the phone.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

LeeAnn Pressler

Special Education
Grades 6 - 8

Central Middle School
Bartlesville Public Schools



Over the past decade, I've learned that sometimes the path we resist most becomes the path that shapes us the most. My students have taught me patience, resilience, humor, and the extraordinary power of believing in someone before they believe in themselves. In special education, victories come in many forms. Sometimes it's a breakthrough on a tough concept. Sometimes it's a student advocating for themselves for the first time. Sometimes it's a smile from a child who hasn't smiled in days. These moments remind me why I show up, why I stay, and why this work matters. Middle school is a complicated, messy, beautiful stage of life. I never thought I would find my purpose here. But I did. And I found a career that reminds me, again and again, that impact is built one connection at a time.



OKLAHOMA
Education



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Ellie Pryor

**Library Media & Literacy Skills and
Research
Grades 1 - 4**

**Cedar Heights, Highland Park, and
Horace Mann Elementary
Woodward Public Schools**



A philosophy for anything in life should be dynamic- ever-growing and ever-changing. My philosophy for teaching is no exception. The beauty of teaching lies in understanding how humans grow, change, and learn- and crafting learning experiences that reflect this understanding. I strive to create experiences for my students that will stay with them for a lifetime. Whether it's growing an indoor hydroponics garden, hatching eggs into baby chicks, or recreating a wedding complete with cake, bubbles, and gifts to teach essential phonics skills, I am dedicated to making learning unforgettable.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Elizabeth Reed

**Advanced English Language Arts
Grade 8**

**Owasso Eighth Grade Center
Owasso Public Schools**



I am the result of educators who chose to see possibilities where others might have seen limitations, and that belief drives my purpose in the classroom today. I teach with the understanding that growth rarely looks perfect up close. My greatest accomplishments occur in small, micro-moments each day and throughout the year when a student's eyes light up, reflecting understanding. Building on the lessons of my own journey, I view my classroom as a carefully connected whole, where each student brings unique experiences, strengths, and perspectives that create a learning community far stronger than any single piece on its own.



**OKLAHOMA
Education**



OKLAHOMA TEACHER *of the* YEAR



2026 Finalist

Mary Tyree

**Physical Science, Engineering,
Aeronautics, Crime Scene
Grades 9 - 12**

**Alva High School
Alva Public Schools**



I am proud of the classroom I have developed to create inclusive and engaging lessons. There is an increasing need for careers in the STEM world, and because of this I have started the Aeronautics program, TSA chapter, and Esports Club. Outside the classroom, I was able to take on my first season as a cross-country coach. With each of these programs I mentioned, I did not seek out what only interested me but rather found a need, listened to the students, and provided what they needed to succeed. I am deeply passionate about listening to what our youth need and helping them find a way.



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