

East High educator named Ohio Teacher of the Year



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YOUNGSTOWN — Jennifer Walker, a teacher at East High School in Youngstown city schools, was named the 2009 Ohio Teacher of the Year by the Ohio Department of Education.

Walker said she was “very surprised” by the honor, which is “great for our district.” What quality does she have as a teacher that singled her out? “I think I was able to express and share my passion and love for teaching and my students,” she said. “Every day is different ... no two days are the same. You may spend hours on lesson plans but then the students dictate where it goes,” she said.

Walker, a 14-year teaching veteran, has taught English and reading in the junior high and high school grades. She has taught English in Youngstown city schools for 10 years. “I want my students to use what I teach in their lives. I want them to be able to relate to what they’re reading,” Walker said.

Her current duties include teaching English and Advanced Placement Literature and Composition to ninth- through 11th-graders, as well as serving as lead literacy teacher and chairperson of the English department at EHS.

Walker taught English and Foundations of Reading to ninth- and 10th-graders at Rayen High School for four years before it merged with Wilson High School to form EHS in 2007. Before that, she taught Language Arts to seventh- and eighth-graders in Choffin Junior High’s Gifted and Talented program.

Previously, she taught English and reading at Geneva High School in Geneva City Schools for four years.

Walker’s accomplishments include achievement of National Board Certification in 2002 in Early Adolescence/English Language Arts, and being named a fellow in the National Writing Project. She also is a member of the Ohio Council of Teachers of English.

“It is my passion to help students see school and my classroom as a place that is safe, a haven. A place where they can feel confident and successful, loved and nurtured. This is my greatest contribution, and my passion, as a teacher,” Walker has said.

Walker has received numerous honors and recognition for her teaching including: 2008 Teacher of the Year for Youngstown city schools and East High School; recipient of National Education Association Books Across America grant; recipient of WYTV Steel to Scholars grant; Best Academic Practice School Teacher Award, Rayen High School; and chief EHS coordinator for Youngstown State University’s English Festival. She received both a bachelor’s in English education and master’s in education from Youngstown State University.

As the lead literacy teacher, Walker has refined her instructional techniques and team responsibilities. She designed a literacy manual, used newsletters to share literacy strategies and led the literacy team in presenting at school wide professional development meetings.

Walker also served for three years on the governance team that converted EHS to a “small school” model as part of a KnowledgeWorks grant. She is a teacher leader for The Freshman School of Excellence.



On the next page is an article that in appeared in January, 2009 in the Akron Beacon Journal. Jennifer is quoted.

Ohio debates best path to training top teachers

Researchers who agree that good teaching is invaluable to student learning struggle to determine what makes a great educator. Factors up for debate include teacher training, state certification, an advanced degree and years of experience, according to a package of Saturday stories by The Plain Dealer.

Adam Gamoran, interim dean at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, says the question has been studied for more than a century. Researchers focused first on personality, then qualifications, then work done in the classroom. "It's a hard nut to crack," Gamoran said. "The things that are easy to measure don't matter that much, and the things that matter aren't easy to measure."

The National Council on Teacher Quality concludes that, among other factors determining a teacher's skill: _Master's and other advanced degrees don't appear to improve teachers' effectiveness, although such degrees along with experience largely determine how much teachers are paid. _The value of classroom experience seems to level off or become unpredictable after the first four or five years._Attributes such as a sense of responsibility and the ability to motivate count for a lot.

Jennifer Walker, a Youngstown high school teacher who is Ohio's teacher of the year, says teaching is both an art and a science. "I could tout my degrees, grade-point averages and certifications, but if I didn't have a genuine love for students, I would be nothing in the classroom," she said. Walker also said the best educators know their subject and state standards well.

"Good teachers don't waste their precious time complaining about the Ohio achievement and graduation tests; they find strategies to help their students learn," she said. Teachers have become accountable for the performance of every child in the classroom since the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. That law requires scores to be analyzed by a variety of factors, from income to race to English fluency. Some teachers resent the way their success in the classroom can be so closely monitored, while others use the data to their advantage by pinpointing individual students' strengths and weaknesses.

The state has established a number of professional development programs for teachers. Those include mentoring young teachers, encouraging educators to become nationally certified and establishing a "master teacher" designation.

Critics of teacher performance sometimes point to teachers of the past, many of whom did their job well without such programs and incentives. But Eric Gordon, chief academic officer for the Cleveland Public Schools, says the pressure to be accountable has created an entirely new ball game for teachers.

"There is a toxic nostalgia that suggests in past generations every child was able to read, write and compute well, when in fact large numbers of students dropped out after eighth grade to work in factories or graduated high school without reading," Gordon said.