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Six educators named Teacher of the Year finalists

Austin - Six outstanding educators from throughout Texas have been chosen as finalists in the Texas Teacher of the Year program, Commissioner of Education Robert Scott announced today.

The six finalists – three elementary and three secondary school educators – were selected from the 39 regional Teachers of the Year from each of the state’s 20 education service center areas. The finalists will now contend for the honor of being named Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year and Texas Secondary Teacher of the Year.

The elementary school finalists are:

- Maricela Alarcón, a fifth-grade teacher at Burke Elementary School in Northside Independent School District (ISD);
- Donna Patrick, a sixth-grade math and language arts teacher at Southern Hills Elementary School in Wichita Falls ISD;
- Virginia Solis-Cera, a fifth-grade language arts and social studies teacher at J.L. Sambrano Elementary in San Elizario ISD.

The secondary education finalists are:

- David Bolster, a seventh-grade science teacher at Bernard Harris Jr. Middle School in North East ISD in San Antonio;
- Keeley Lowery, a biology teacher at Carroll High School in Carroll ISD;
- Yushica T. Walker, a sixth-grade science teacher at Morehead Middle School in El Paso ISD.

“These six exceptional teachers inspire their students to excel not only in the classroom but in their daily lives. They represent the many dedicated teachers throughout Texas who strive to make a difference, and I am grateful for their service,” said Scott. “My congratulations go to each one of them for earning this recognition of all the hours of hard work and dedication.”

In their Teacher of the Year applications, each educator offered insight into their teaching philosophy and style.

Alarcón, the fifth-grade teacher at Northside ISD, writes: “As a student, I overcame language and socioeconomic barriers as a result of parent and teacher motivation. Through my experiences, my goal is to offer every child access to what is possible. Passion, determination, desire, commitment and making a difference in young people’s lives—these are the qualities that fuel me.”

Patrick, who this year is teaching math and language arts at Southern Hills Elementary, writes that her struggles in 6th grade math taught her that “great teachers do a lot more than work three problems and sit down. I am particularly drawn to the struggling students. I tell them that I know what it is like. I hold them by their shoulders, look them in the eye and say, ‘You and I are going to work together so you can learn this.’ They are my success.”

Solis-Cera, the J.L. Sambrano Elementary School language arts and social studies teacher, writes that educators have a responsibility to set high standards and goals for their students. “To expect anything less than what the students can achieve if they try and work hard, is a failure on the part of the educator. To accept mediocrity from the students when we know they are capable of more is mediocrity on the part of the educator. This is why it is extremely important for educators to always remain cognizant of this and give their best every single day.”

Bolster, seventh-grade science teacher in North East ISD, said in his application: “There is no greater accomplishment than helping a child. That is why I teach. Knowing that I am sending young people out into the world with a heightened sense of their role as citizens, consumers and learners makes me feel good about what I do. I know I am making a difference with them, and that’s what I get out of bed each morning to do.”

Lowery of Carroll said that when she started teaching she envisioned herself as Mighty Mouse, “waiting for another summons to change the world. What I began to realize, over time, was that changing the world is impossible. What I have discovered, though, is that I do have the ability to influence the smaller areas that become part of the big picture. So even if I have discovered that I cannot change the world, I do have gifts that allow me to influence the world, one student at a time.”

Walker from El Paso believes that every child can learn with a great facilitator. “Teaching is unconditional love; therefore, I believe that teaching has to come from the heart and students are keenly aware of teachers that truly love to teach. My teaching style displays that relationships foster knowledge and it is a powerful tool to use to reach today’s students.”

The six finalists were selected by a panel of judges who represent the state’s four teacher organizations. The judges were: Angela Davis of the Texas State Teachers Association; Susan Lewis of the Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Ana Pomar of the Texas AFT; and Sam Spurllock of the Association of Texas Professional Educators.

The six finalists will now be invited to Austin for interviews on Sept. 12 before a larger judging panel, which will determine the top elementary and secondary teacher. One of the top winners will also be selected to go forward to be considered for National Teacher of the Year honors. The national program is sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers. The Texas Education Agency has sponsored the Texas Teacher of the Year program since 1969.

The teachers selected as the Texas Elementary and Secondary Teacher of the Year will be announced at a luncheon and awards ceremony on Oct. 30 at the AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center in Austin. All 39 regional winners will be honored during this event. Each of the regional winners will receive a \$500 check and a trophy. The top two teachers will receive a \$5,000 cash prize, a technology package valued at more than \$15,000, a trophy and other mementos.

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