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Ysleta and Keller teachers named 2008 Texas Teachers of the Year

AUSTIN – For the second year in a row, teachers from the Ysleta and Keller school districts have been named the Texas Teachers of the Year.

Paul Cain, a mathematics and physics teacher at Ysleta High School in El Paso’s Ysleta Independent School District, has been selected as the 2008 Texas Secondary Teacher of the Year from amongst 20 regional secondary Teachers of the Year. Cain, a 31-year veteran of the classroom, will also represent Texas in the National Teacher of the Year program.

Grant Simpson, a fourth-grade teacher at Hidden Lakes Elementary School in Keller ISD, which is a Fort Worth suburb, was selected the 2008 Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year from amongst the 20 regional elementary Teachers of the Year.

Last year, Dana Boyd from Dolphin Terrace Elementary School in Ysleta ISD was the Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year and Nika Maples from Fossil Ridge High School in Keller ISD was the Texas Secondary Teacher of the Year.

“This is the first time in the history of the Texas Teacher of the Year program that two districts have had back-to-back winners. Ysleta and Keller can be proud of this accomplishment. Clearly, high quality teaching occurs in these districts daily. Thank you, Mr. Cain and Mr. Simpson, for creating caring classrooms in which all students feel valued,” said Robert Scott, acting commissioner of education.

Texas has recognized Teachers of the Year annually since 1969. With today’s announcement, Ysleta also became the Texas district with the largest number of teachers given this prestigious award. Cain is the fifth Ysleta teacher to win this top award. Previous Ysleta winners were Boyd, 2007; Miguel Igancio Tinajero, 1995; Rosa Lujan, 1992; and Rita Harlien, 1982.

The last time two male teachers won the top honor was 1998.

Paul F. Cain

When Paul Cain graduated from high school, he had two possible career paths to pursue—the military or teaching. He initially chose the military but the Army ultimately recognized his potential and put him in the classroom as a mathematics instructor. After more than a decade of military service, he resigned from the Army and was hired to teach math in Ysleta.

That first year, he was given a schedule, a textbook and a classroom and virtually no guidance. With no support or direction, he quit in frustration at the end of the year, convinced that he had made the wrong career move. That summer, his assistant principal tracked him down

at the cafeteria where he was working and told him that he had the makings of a good teacher and asked him to come back and try it again.

He decided to give teaching another try and has been at Ysleta High School ever since. Because of his experience, he helped create a mentoring system so that new teachers have someone to turn to when they need advice or help.

During his 18 years as chair of the mathematics department, he made sure that a new teacher is given a mentor who teaches at least one of the same classes as the novice educator and has the same conference period as the new teacher. Every math teacher also teaches at least one Algebra I class. “This had the effect of making our entire department responsible to assist our youngest and least motivated students to learn and it created a pool of teachers willing to share techniques, methodologies, strategies, teaching styles, and information to improve all our teaching skills,” Cain said.

Cain said he believes teachers are the “most positive individuals in the world. Despite complaints from individual teachers that students ‘never listen’ I believe they are always listening. They are eavesdropping on adults regularly and take to heart what is said about them. Too many times young people are painfully aware of their shortcomings... These messages come from the adults in their lives and are delivered both in words and actions.”

Consequently, he said, “They become more interested in nonjudgmental friends or solitary activities, such as watching TV, listening to music, surfing the Internet, or playing a video game. Students already know their problem areas and often are unaware of any strengths they might have. It is our job as teachers to find those strengths, point them out to the students and use them to motivate students to participate in the learning process.”

Grant Simpson

Simpson has taught fourth grade in the Keller and Crowley school districts for the past five years. A child of educators, he was always around schools and even as a child got to go inside the inner sanctum – the teacher’s lounge.

But it was football that helped convince him to become a teacher. Once he made the varsity football squad in high school, he was eligible to coach in a local flag football league. He and a friend coached the same team for three years. “Watching kids learn something that I taught them was an incredible feeling that sparked my interest in the education profession.”

He also went through an educational internship while in high school and worked with a fourth-grade teacher. Although normally an introverted person, Simpson quickly felt at ease and comfortable in this classroom. “What I understood immediately was that I had found my haven in a world that constantly freaks me out!”

Now he works to create a safe and supportive haven for his fourth-grade students. “One of my goals every year is to develop a family or community atmosphere in our room,” he said. He creates a huge community calendar in which the students post their activities such as sports events, choir concerts, church events and more. “I make a promise to each one who brings a schedule that I will attend at least one of their functions.” So he and his wife, who uses the same calendar concept in her third-grade class, can often be found roaming football fields, auditoriums and churches to watch their students perform.

He takes a photo of himself and his student at these events and then posts it in the classroom. “It’s an incredible feeling to see the pride in their eyes the next day when during our morning meeting they get to share how I came to their event,” Simpson said.

It is important to Simpson to develop a “relationship-driven classroom. I felt that if I could connect with my students on a personal level, the chance they would want to come to school would improve.”

He said, “I will teach the required material in an intriguing way, all the while teaching my students how to think. I want them to be ready and eager for a lifetime of learning, not test taking. I believe it was the late, great Dr. Seuss who said, ‘You’ve learned the things you need to pass that test and many more – I’m certain you’ll succeed. We’ve taught you that the earth is round, that red and white make pink, and something else that matters more – we’ve taught you how to THINK!’ ”

Cain and Simpson were selected as the state Teachers of the Year after having been named district and regional Teachers of the Year. They, along with four other state finalists, were interviewed by an 11-member judging panel on Saturday in Austin.

The judges were State Board of Education member Ken Mercer; State Board for Educator Certification member Janie Baszile; Thomas Randle, president of the Texas Association of School Administrators; Jim Ash, president of the Texas Association of School Boards; Jan Wilkerson, first vice president of the Texas Congress of Parents and Teachers (Texas PTA); Diane Parks, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association’s National Distinguished Principal of the Year; Cindy Kirby of the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals; Brad Domitrovich, president-elect of the Texas School Public Relations Association; Kathrin Brewer, executive director of the Austin Partners in Education and Boyd and Maples, the 2007 Texas Teachers of the Year.

Boyd and Maples noted that they abstained from voting when the teacher from their district was under consideration.

Mercer, who chaired the judging panel, said, “I applaud the judges who each represented a different statewide area in education for their hard work in making this selection. The six finalists are all winners in my mind. My sincere congratulations to each of the finalists and to our winners.”

The state winners, as well as the regional Teachers of the Year, will be honored at a luncheon on Nov. 3 at the Sheraton Austin Hotel. Each regional winner receives \$500 in cash, as well as a trophy. The state’s top two educators will receive a cash prize of \$5,000, a technology package worth an estimated \$15,000, and a trophy.

The Texas Teacher of the Year is sponsored by the Texas Education Agency. The program is generously supported by long-time sponsors AT&T, H-E-B, the SMARTer Kids Foundation and the state’s major education associations.

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