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Champlin Park Educator Named Recipient of $15,000 Award for Excellence

Verna Wong, a teacher at Champlin Park High School in the Anoka-Hennepin School District, was surprised with the news that she is a recipient of a 2021 WEM Outstanding Educator Award, an honor that is accompanied by a $15,000 award.

Wong is one of six educators being honored by the WEM Foundation and Synergy & Leadership Exchange for outstanding accomplishments and contributions to student learning. She is one of two recipients of the Ethics in Education award, which recognizes educators who embody ethical behavior and promote ethical development for students through classroom or school activities, policies or curriculum.

Wong has been teaching for 12 years and is currently a high school English language teacher. A significant percentage of the students in her program are Long-Term English Learners, which mirrors the large population of multilingual students who have been tracked in the EL program throughout their schooling. At the start of the year, Wong talks about the complexities of language, how everyone can use English for different purposes and why the students are in her class. Wong believes this provides students the framework to see multilingualism as their strength and recognize the relationships language has with the various communities and spaces they are a part of.

A colleague said, “Ms. Wong honors the humanity in her colleagues and her students. She challenges systems that do not fully embrace students and their multiple, beautiful identities. And she takes action to increase her knowledge and change those systems. Those of us privileged to work alongside of her are better teachers and better human beings because of her steadfast influence.”

Another engaging technique Wong utilizes is having her students find opportunities to involve their families. One of the ways she has done this is through students interviewing their parents and elders in their communities. Because many of her EL students come from oral storytelling traditions, the stories connect to them in many ways. From these interviews, students investigate a question to research in hopes that they find research is relevant to their lives. She wants her students to value the assets and resources available to them. Wong shares, “We need to start seeing students' homes, backgrounds and loved ones as assets and means of valuable connection.”

In addition, Wong created a family focused event designed to connect families with community agencies and school officials, offer support, promote activity through engagement in games and activities, as well as provide a meal for the guests who attend. A multitude of interpreters also support the event to bridge the gaps that often exist for their EL families. The event has been such a success for their families and the format has now been used at several other school sites across the district.

In addition to the Ethics in Education Award, honorees are recognized with the Academic Challenge Coach Award (teachers who are exemplary coaches of student teams that participate and compete in academic challenges approved by the Minnesota Academic League Council), Teacher Achievement Award (exemplary teachers who support, inspire and assist students to attain greater learning as evidenced by student achievement) and Athletic Coach Award (teachers who are exemplary coaches of athletic teams).

Educators are first nominated for the WEM Outstanding Educator Awards Program by students, parents, colleagues or community members. Those who accept the nomination provide additional information for consideration by Synergy & Leadership Exchange and a blue-ribbon selection panel, which reviews and ranks the nominees. In addition to the six statewide honorees, additional educators have been selected as regional honorees for 2021.

Synergy & Leadership Exchange is a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering collaboration to advance the development of ethical citizens, providing educational resources, and celebrating achievement and best practices in Minnesota schools, businesses and communities. For more information on the WEM Outstanding Educator Awards and Synergy & Leadership Exchange, visit [www.synergyexchange.org](http://www.synergyexchange.org).