

As we approach the end of the school year, we always take time to thank our employees for their dedication and hard work. (We also honor many students, but that's another column that will be coming soon.)

We have several special award programs for staff members who have earned special distinction. Parents, and other community members, play a key role in one of these programs. We call it the School Bell award. If a teacher or other staff member receives a letter (on paper or email) of thanks and/or praise, we recognize them at a staff meeting and present them with a certificate noting it. Many of these letters are breathtaking in their depth of feeling and gratefulness. I sometimes read a portion of the letter aloud (though I don't mention any names or other details that would identify the writer or the student.)

Another thing we do is honor our retiring employees, and that will actually happen at tonight's school board meeting. This year we have only seven employees who have officially submitted their retirement as of the date I'm writing this. This is fewer than most years, and I guess it's one more effect of the difficult economic situation.

At a school board meeting in May we will present what we call the Golden Apple award. The actual award itself is actually a nice glass piece, with the employee's name etched in the glass and the letters filled with gold-colored paint. We award just two of these in each school and district department. (We give three at the high school, because it has a much larger staff.) The principal or department administrator selects the winners, and at the board meeting we read aloud a short description of what the employee has done to earn this special honor. We have about 1,000 employees in the school district, and we present only 29 of these awards, so it's an honor that is rightfully perceived as very special.

And there is one honor given to just one person each year – the Teacher of the Year. (Though for the first time, two years ago, a two-person teaching team won, when Linda Napier and Jim Yates received it.) The Teacher of the Year during this current school year is Tim McKillip, a math teacher at the Middle School.

The nominations come from our staff. If a parent or other community member thinks a particular very special teacher should be nominated, they could certainly suggest that to the principal of the teacher's school. We accept nominations near the end of the school year, and then select the winner from among the nominees during the summer. Our principals pick the winner, often after some spirited discussion.

It's our district's tradition to keep the winner's name a secret (though not from the winner) until the moment it's announced. That happens at our Opening Day meeting a day or two before the start of school. It's the only time all year that all our teachers are in one place, and it's always a very emotional and special moment.

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