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Date: January 3, 2022
To: All News Media
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For Immediate Release:

Aberdeen Public Schools Foundation Presents Golden Apple Awards

The Aberdeen Public Schools Foundation announced the sixth annual Golden Apple Awards, recognizing individuals that are dedicated, inspiring, and making a difference in the Aberdeen School District. This year's honorees are Renae Wensmann, JoAnn Kokales and Jennifer Weishaar. Each received \$500 and an engraved golden apple.

Renae Wensmann, Lincoln Elementary administrative assistant.

Have you ever had someone at school leave a special place in your heart? Wensmann has been working for 10+ years and is better than you think.

Wensmann is the heart of the school. She is often offering to do things beyond her job description such as decorating and organizing staff luncheons, baking treats for testing, and looking for ways to take extra work off of a teachers' workload.

Wensmann puts in many extra hours finding ways to make things run smoothly. If she doesn't know the answer to a question she makes it a priority to find the answer. She works efficiently and her organizational skills are top notch. Even during the craziest of days, she lightens the mood with humor and keeps things in perspective. She is the first person to offer support, whether it be a word of encouragement, a hug, or a meal for a family.

Wensmann's willingness to go above and beyond extends to students as well. She often volunteers to read with children, help with their school work, and can be found popping into classrooms getting students excited about their learning. One student remarked, *"In 4th grade we had to do a big test which none of us were excited about so she baked every student a muffin which cheered us up. Mrs. Wensmann is just someone who lights up the room when they walk in. She is one of my favorites because she would always give me a big bear hug even when I was just walking by. Mrs. Wensmann deserves this award not just because she is helpful, always happy, and positive, but because she makes our school a better place."*

JoAnn Kokales, retired CC Lee Elementary librarian

It is a rare privilege in life to know, and if you are lucky enough, to work with someone who is so devoted to their profession, who strives with such purpose and sacrifice toward a vision of how things can be made the best that they can and should be, regardless of how much time and effort are required, that they literally become known as an institution. An institution, as in one of those special people everyone knows, everyone has a story about, and no one will ever forget, no matter the years that go by. Kokales is that institution for generations of coworkers, and hundreds if not thousands of school children over the years whose lives were touched by her cheery smile, her big heart, and her energetic enthusiasm for a great book.

Kokales spent her entire career creating a library which would become a magical place of award-winning books, engaging literature, and notable authors. She created engaging programs which highlighted Caldecott illustrations, Newbery award winning authors, and the South Dakota children's book awards. She encouraged children to explore reading through the Hundred Reading Club by honoring their achievements with certificates and awards along the way. She believed in kids doing their work, doing their best, and behaving, and for her, they always did.

One of the grandest events ever celebrated under Kokales' direction was National Library Week. There was always a theme which included an original play, costumes, school-wide activities, and a special bookmark for every student. The event concluded with a cake made from scratch which matched the theme and was shared with all attendees.

As you can see, there are many reasons Kokales is more than deserving of a Golden Apple, but for those of us who have known her throughout the years, perhaps the greatest reason is that it would never occur to such a humble woman that she would even be considered for it.

Jennifer Weishaar, Mike Miller Elementary Grade 1 Teacher.

Weishaar goes above and beyond daily for her students. She spends her time and energy getting to know each of her students and their individual needs. Her calm demeanor and genuine compassion set her students at ease. Her theatric performance of each and every picture book makes the story come alive and students love learning from her. She puts in countless hours of her own time making sure everything is perfect for her students. It is not uncommon to see her car parked at school at 5:00 am on a Saturday getting ready for the week ahead, planning engaging activities, and working on ways to best meet the needs of each of her students.

Weishaar has been a mentor to many other teachers by working with first year teachers, NSU students, and her colleagues. She is willing to share her professional knowledge and resources, and shows kindness and grace to those learning from her. She sees the best in everyone and has a calm, sweet voice. She is the perfect example of what a true professional educator should look like.

One parent wrote, "My son was blessed to have Mrs. Weishaar as his teacher. She made a lasting impression on him and he still remembers that she was the only teacher that ever gave him an award. She could see the goodness in him that wasn't always easy for others to see. My son was asked to write a letter to his favorite teacher and these are his words: You are funny, nice, kind, helpful, and generous. You were my BEST teacher so far! You made me nice because I was really naughty in kindergarten at another school. I'm saying like pink slip every week! It was crazy. YOU changed my world and my heart. This is why you are the BEST teacher!"

The Golden Apple awards are a special project of the Aberdeen Public Schools Foundation.

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Attached photo – Renae Wensmann, JoAnn Kokales and Jennifer Weishaar