Butler-Hooton named 2021 Oregon Teacher of the Year, cited for inclusiveness

Elementary educator goes beyond instruction to build lasting relationships with students, families

EUGENE, Ore. – In a first-of-its-kind surprise announcement during a Zoom staff meeting on Sept. 29, Irving Elementary School second grade educator Nicole Butler-Hooton was named Oregon's 2021 Teacher of the Year.

Gov. Kate Brown and Oregon Department of Education Director Colt Gill virtually joined Bethel School District Superintendent Chris Parra and Irving Elementary Principal Nathan Bridgens in honoring Butler-Hooton for her transformational rapport with students, families and the school community at large.

"Every day, Nicole demonstrates how inclusive and culturally competent education has the power to shape our future for generations to come," said Brown. "Her seamless incorporation of equity into the classroom sets an example for us all as we work to make Oregon a welcoming place that sets every student up for success from cradle to career."

Butler-Hooton, who is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and has Tribal affiliation with the Apache Tribe, committed to the values of family, friendships, community and growth, both in and outside of her classroom.

Butler-Hooton was raised in a small coastal town, earned her bachelor's degree in sociology with a minor in ethnic studies from the University of Oregon, and was awarded the Sápsik'ʷałá grant provided to high-performing American Indian students striving to earn a master's degree in education.

After completing her master's, Butler-Hooton started teaching second grade at Irving Elementary in Bethel, which has been her work home for 14 years. Her vibrant, inclusive and culturally competent teaching style is highly respected and supported by the school community.

She is Eugene/Springfield's local representative for the Oregon Indian Education Association and is also a local expert in Bethel, mentoring and coaching student teachers and colleagues.

"The trust Nicole establishes with students and families is invaluable for meeting needs both seen and unseen," said Gill. "Nicole centers equity in every aspect of her instruction and outreach, honoring the cultures of each home represented in her class. Her leadership and expertise will be an incredible benefit this school year as we navigate unfamiliar conditions and strive to support every learner."

In a letter of recommendation, Butler-Hooton was described as "a shining example of a teacher," supporting the individual and diverse needs of students and families, collecting and analyzing data to advocate for students and fostering a classroom community where students become leaders.

"I'm always looking for ways to show my students and families that we are a village," said Butler-Hooton. "My hope is that these offerings, these sentiments, these actions, this TIME is a way to transcend learning and love beyond the classroom. Home to school connection is beyond valuable and it is imperative to my practice as an educator."

The Oregon Teacher of the Year program is sponsored by the Oregon Department of Education in partnership with the Oregon Lottery. Butler-Hooton was awarded 2021 Regional Teacher of the Year in May and receives a $5,000 cash award as 2021 Oregon Teacher of the Year. A matching $5,000 is also awarded to Irving Elementary.

Courtesy photo by Pat McGillivray of the Bethel School District

Nicole Butler-Hooten with her Teacher of the Year award and her family – husband Matt, daughter Avery and son Beckett

"Now more than ever, we appreciate the contributions Oregon teachers make to our students and our state," said Lottery Director Barry Pack. "Teachers like Ms. Butler-Hooton show that when faced with mounting challenges, the best of us rise to the occasion – finding a way to make our communities better."

The Oregon Teacher of the Year is selected after an extensive application process. Nominees from schools throughout Oregon submitted packets of information including testimonials and letters of support from administrators, students and colleagues. From the written material, applicants were assessed on leadership, instructional expertise, community involvement, understanding of educational issues, professional development and vision.

As the 2021 Oregon Teacher of the Year, Butler-Hooton will serve as a spokesperson and representative for all Oregon teachers. She will also receive year-long professional development and networking with other state Teachers of the Year through the Chief Council of State School Officer's (CCSSO) National Teacher of the Year program.

Do you know an outstanding teacher? You can nominate them for the 2022 Oregon Teacher of the year by visiting Oregonteacheroftheyear.org.

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