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May 14, 2009

Teacher back from leave wins Golden Apple

Peruvian weavings brighten a bulletin board, a Mexican drum and Bolivian flute sit in the instrument cupboard, and colorful paper cutouts in the Mexican tradition of papel picado hang across Kristin O'Rourke Salamanca's kindergarten classroom, reminders of how far she traveled before returning to the North Shore to teach students in a blend of Spanish and English.

Today, her energy, ready smile and commitment to a dual-language education at Highland Park's Red Oak Elementary School earned Salamanca a Golden Apple Award, an honor given to 10 top educators each spring.

Salamanca, a Bannockburn native, is the first teacher from the school to receive the award. Two others were honored today in Chicago and the suburbs, joining seven who were surprised in class Tuesday.



Kristin O'Rourke Salamanca with her kindergarten students at Red Oak Elementary School in Highland Park today. (Tribune / Nancy Stone)

And fittingly, it was in a mix of English and Spanish that Salamanca reacted when school officials, parents, students and old friends burst into her classroom to present the award.

"Thank you so much. Gracias a todos," Salamanca said. "This is about how we've all done it together, and I'm just the representative here today."

She returned from her maternity leave Wednesday morning to teach 17 kindergartners in the dual-language program, giving parents an opportunity to observe before enrolling their children next year in a ruse created by Principal Susan Cahail to keep the surprise.

Parent Lisa Jaffe-Richter nominated Salamanca for the award. Salamanca taught her daughter in kindergarten and keeps up with Madison, now in 3rd grade, and many other students as they advance, whether attending a skating exhibit or a science fair presentation.

"Every day she boosts my daughter's confidence because Kristin can give her a look, just a look, and it's a special connection. ... She has an energy that comes out of every pore and just screams love," Jaffe-Richter said.

Salamanca and other winners get a tuition-free spring-term sabbatical at Northwestern University, a computer, \$3,000 and membership in the Golden Apple Academy of Educators.

Other honorees announced Wednesday were music teacher Melissa Hooker of Oscar Mayer Magnet School in Chicago and teacher Jeanette Hachmeister at the Child's Voice School in west suburban Wood Dale, which teaches children with cochlear implants how to speak and hear.

--[Tara Malone](#)