

Plainfield, Illinois

## **Teacher Plainfield's first Golden Apple Award finalist**

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Sun staff

Holly Bontkowski is not only a great teacher of children; she is also a great teacher of peers.

Her ability to lead by example, with both her classroom and her co-workers, has made the John F. Kennedy Middle School eighth grade language arts teacher one of only 30 finalists for the 2008 Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Bontkowski, who has been teaching in Plainfield School District 202 for 12 years, is also District 202's first finalist for the prestigious award. The Golden Apple Award has been given to only 230 other educators since the program's inception in 1986.

About 850 teachers from Cook, Lake, Kane, DuPage and Will counties were nominated this year. The 30 finalists will be honored March 15 at a brunch at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place in Chicago.

Indian Trail Middle School's Lisa Boe was named one of 86 semifinalists in the competition.

A panel of experienced educators selects each year's Golden Apple winners who exemplify the highest standards and practices of the teaching profession, school district officials said. Among the qualities considered are: demonstrating distinguished classroom practice; professionalism and collegiality; high standards for themselves and their students; the ability to create a classroom environment conducive to learning; the ability to reflect on practice; creativity; commitment to students and their learning; and contribution to the wider school community.

Golden Apple Award winners receive a paid semester sabbatical at Northwestern University, during which they may take as many courses as they wish in any subjects they choose. As part of the sabbatical, the group of winners designs a seminar series for individuals who are making significant contributions in education.

Winners also receive a laptop computer, \$3,000 in cash and induction into the Golden Apple Academy of Educators.

Bontkowski helped open John F. Kennedy, the district's seventh middle school, last fall. It was one of three schools to open this year, and one of nine that voters approved for construction in a March 2006 referendum.

Because of the intense construction schedule, JFK teachers were not able to get into the school to arrange their classrooms until the day before school opened last August.

"Opening a new school is a huge undertaking. We had 32 teachers transferred from four district middle schools in addition to the hiring of another 30 new teachers, so we had over 60 certified teachers embarking on this new journey together," wrote JFK Principal Nancy Voise in her nomination of Bontkowski.

The construction delays caused a lot of stress among the staff members who could not get together to plan for the first few days of school as a team.

"Holly was calm, supportive, prepared for everything, and constantly smiling. She and her teammates met over the summer numerous times to get acquainted through dinners and planning sessions, so they were able to hit the ground running when school started. As a result they have emerged as a very strong, cohesive team who others look to for leadership," Voise wrote.

Bontkowski also agreed to help mentor new teachers at Voise's request. Among other professional obligations, Bontkowski serves on the state ISAT writing team, and she has provided in-services and workshops statewide.

"I recently asked her to work with our staff in an attempt to improve our extended response scores on the ISAT, and what she did was incredible," Voise wrote. Bontkowski sought and worked with volunteers to become trainers.

The group worked after hours to prepare for a full-day institute day in November. She and her volunteers provided extensive information on writing extended response questions, and she validated what teachers were already doing. Bontkowski provided breakout sessions for teachers to experience hands-on activities that they could take to their classrooms and use the next day.

"Teachers told me that this was the best district in-service they had ever attended. They said they felt more validated in 15 minutes than they had in 15 years," she said.

Bontkowski, a Plainfield native who attended Central Elementary, Indian Trail Middle and Plainfield High schools, said she is amazed by the opportunity to work with people who were among her own teachers.

She downplayed her role in helping to smooth the opening at JFK.

"I had been at Drauden (Point Middle School) when it opened, and it was similar, so if you've been here a while you kind of know what to do," Bontkowski said.

Nonetheless, she said she is flattered by and proud of the Golden Apple Award nomination.

"Education is absolutely my life. This district and the teachers in it, I just feel awestruck by the whole thing. I live and breathe education. To be in the same pool with some of those teachers is very flattering," Bontkowski said.