

Advocate

Texas State Teachers Association/National Education Association

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Teacher of the Year



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Karen Shepherd—Plano Senior High School science department chair, advanced placement biology and research science teacher, LASER sponsor, and TSTA member—talks about education and what it's like to be named the Texas Teacher of the Year.

Surprised?

I almost wrecked. They said, “We’ll call you either way. If the commissioner is the one who calls you, it means you won.” We were driving to Galveston to visit my parents, and I saw the 512 area code on my cell phone. I thought, “Here it is.” And when I heard, “Hi, Karen, this is Shirley,” I just burst into tears, and I said, “You have to wait a minute because I’m trying to drive and cry at the same time.”

My essays are from the heart. When I went to the interview—which is pretty scary, one person interviewed by 10 or 11 people—I thought, “I’m just going to be me,” so I had a great time and enjoyed answering the questions. I even sang to them; that was kind of scary. My husband was like, “What were you doing? They were laughing so hard I could hear them down where I was sitting.”



They made me ride in the homecoming parade, and I thought, “How silly am I going to look riding in the parade and waving to people?” But if I could give one moment, out of all the moments I’ve had so far, to every teacher, it would be that one.

I don’t know how many times I cried, because people would read the sign on the car and start cheering. It was just amazing! My curriculum director, who was driving, said, “Let’s do it again, that was fun!”





It was one of those pivotal points. You always hear that your words really do have an impact. We were at the 2000 International Science and Engineering Fair, and we rode on the bus with students from all over the country. It was a great year for us, and as my students were getting off the bus, I was saying, “You’ve done great, you’ve had a great day, go have fun,” and literally the next kid stopped. I didn’t know him. He said, “Excuse me, ma’am, you haven’t greeted ME.” My kids would not let me sit down until I had greeted everyone.

It left me wondering. A lot of the time we think our AP and high level kids don’t need to hear that, but all learners, whether they’re Harvard-bound or workforce-bound, need a positive word. I constantly am telling my students that they’re doing a great job and giving them little stickers. They love their little stickers. Big, burly football players will ask for a sticker. We all need positive words. We get so focused on the learning and what’s going on in our classrooms that we sometimes forget to say, “I appreciated you today. I liked what you did. Good work!”

Sometimes you think nobody really cares about teachers. I know our communities appreciate us, but not every teacher gets to feel what I felt that day.

How many times have I thought about writing a letter to a teacher I had or my kids had to say thank you, and I’ve never gotten it done? We all need to do that more.

It doesn’t have to be flowers or cookies; just “thank you and I appreciate you” makes our day.





If I ruled the world, I would find some way to take into account something other than just test scores, because when the focus is so much on one thing, the things we do to achieve those goals are frightening. We lose sight of what is important, which is learning.

First off, I would not exempt all the special education kids, but I would show the progress that they've made. Right now, we're pushing and pushing and pushing to get them exempted, so they don't negatively affect our report card. I would love to see an accountability system that looks at what those children have gained rather than, "Did we hit the bottom line number?"

I would love to see taken into account all of our kids in science fair that have made it to competition, and all of our kids in speech that have made it to competition, and all of our band and orchestra kids that have come home with high division ratings.

I would love for someone to come see our cluster concept in band, where we start them as sixth graders who have never played an instrument and by Thanksgiving they are playing beautiful songs.



All the beautiful artwork I see when I walk down the hall: none of that is factored into our report card, and it's all very much about who we are.

"Karen has set up several community outreach projects to promote science to younger students, particularly those with limited English who may not fully understand the opportunities in that field.

"For the last two years, she has taken students to several schools to present experiments and talk to students in order to develop their understanding of science.

"Karen and the LASER Club have worked with those young students to develop and complete science fair projects. While the success of the program was a boon for science, Karen was even more delighted to see her own students learn about the power and reward of helping others."

—Dr. Doyle Dean, principal of Plano Senior High (right, with Superintendent Otto)





ENTHUSIASM

Enthusiasm is contagious! Singing, dancing, and even crying with my students helps keep them engaged in the learning process. The result is a place where they can take risks and soar.

LIFELONG LEARNING

I am a lifelong learner who encourages my students to adopt this philosophy. In science this is a matter of survival because they will compete in an ever-changing technologically advanced world. Knowing where to find answers, knowing how to perform research, and recognizing what is fact or fiction are all vital skills necessary for success in the real world. Facts students learn in class may become outdated, but if the skills they learn serve them for the rest of their lives, then I have earned the right to be called teacher, guru, mentor, counselor, and educator.



MUTUAL RESPECT

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I'll be here a long time. Maybe not as long as my teaching partner—she turns 80 this spring and is in her 48th year of teaching—but I'll be here. When I try to think of what to give up, I don't want to give up my research kids and I don't want to give up my AP biology kids. I love it all. I don't want to be in curriculum; I don't want to be a principal.

I want to be in the classroom. I love the day-to-day interaction.

