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REGIONAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION
KANE COUNTY

Patricia Dal Santo, Regional Superintendent

Central High School teacher, St. Charles North graduate named 2025 Kane County Educator of the Year

SAINT CHARLES, Ill. – Over 700 guests gathered at the Q Center in St. Charles to celebrate the exceptional contributions of educational professionals across Kane County at the 49th Kane County Educator of the Year Banquet on Friday. The annual event, hosted by the Kane County Regional Office of Education (ROE) was a showcase of the dedication and passion of educators in all types of roles as well as the impact they make on students and their communities.

Among the 46 nominees, Gemma Gurney of Central High School was named the 2025 Kane County Educator of the Year. Ms. Gurney, a second-year teacher in Central Unit School District 301, accepted the award among friends, family, and colleagues as she spoke about her profound dedication to her students and community.

“Being an educator always just felt like the thing that I was supposed to do. I went to St. Charles North High School, so a lot of my influence comes from Kane County schools,” Gurney told the ROE in an interview before the banquet. “I’m not the same person I was in high school, and it’s okay to show who you are and be vulnerable. I watch teachers do that, and I think it’s admirable, to be who you truly are in front of your students. Mine know when they are going to have the authentic version of me.”

Gurney expressed her desire to consistently create meaningful moments in the classroom and to use visual, interactive elements to engage students with historical topics as well as current events.

“I’m successful when my students experience learning and not just ‘do’ learning. That means they create a memory around my classroom. I want their classroom experience to be alive. If they can associate the content I’ve taught them with something they’ve physically seen or interacted with in my class, then when they graduate, they can connect the content back to that memory.”

The evening was not only a tribute to outstanding educational staff, but also a celebration of the contributions made by 181 retiring educators. Those in attendance were recognized for their 4,618 combined years of service, most of which was spent among the nine public school districts across the county.

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Highlighting the collaborative spirit of students, staff, and community, the East Aurora High School Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps presented the colors for the evening, while the Bartlett High School Jazz Combo provided entertainment throughout the night.

“This event is meant to celebrate the dedication, leadership, and inspiration of these individuals that shape our schools and enriched the lives of our students,” said Patricia Dal Santo, Regional Superintendent for Kane County. “What makes this process so memorable is because of the collaboration involved. Entire school communities come together to acknowledge those who are just beginning their careers, those who are stepping away after decades of dedication, those who are no longer with us, and those who simply try to make every day meaningful.”

Among the attendees were Illinois State Representative Matt Hanson (D-IL), Corinne Pierog, Madam Chair of the Kane County Board, and fellow board members, representatives of the Kane County Governmental staff, and Kane County ROE Regional Board of Trustees members.

“The Kane County Educator of the Year Awards are always among our most anticipated events each year because this reminds us of what is worth advocating for in education,” said Dal Santo. “The people make the difference, and this is our way of letting these educators know that we see their hard work and recognize every bit of themselves that they pour into their relationships with students, families, and colleagues.”

Nominations were reviewed by a group of student teachers, retired teachers, university representatives, business representatives, national board certified teachers, and Kane County ROE staff members. Other winners from the event include:

Regional Superintendent Award

Monika Hubble (Rotolo Middle School, Batavia 101)

Educational Service Personnel

Heather Mendel (Rotolo Middle School, Batavia 101)

Student Support Personnel

Olivia Bennett (Geneva High School, Geneva 304)

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Early Career Educator

Micah Hook (West Aurora High School, West Aurora 129)

Elementary/Early Childhood Teacher

Michelle Bannerman (Hampshire Elementary, District 300)

Middle School Teacher

Kari Pitstick (Kaneland Harter Middle School, Kaneland 302)

High School Teacher

Ben Provencher (St. Charles East High School, St. Charles 303)

School Administrator

Dr. David Ballard (East Aurora 131)

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About Kane County Regional Office of Education

Kane County Regional Office of Education serves the residents of Kane County, IL. and assists nine school districts (U-46, Batavia 101, West Aurora 129, East Aurora 131, District 300, Central 301, Kaneland 302, St. Charles 303, and Geneva 304). Located at 28 N. First St., Geneva, IL, Kane ROE serves over 9,831 educators and covers 524 square miles. Kane ROE was recognized, in 2023, by the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) with two Blue Pencil & Gold Screen Awards. The awards recognized excellence in government communication & were presented for outstanding work in the Annual Report & Video Education categories.