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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Harford County Public Schools Announces 2026 Teacher of the Year and more at Celebration of Excellence in Education

Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) is proud to announce the 2026 honorees recognized at the Celebration of Excellence in Education. These outstanding individuals, representing various roles within the school system, have demonstrated exceptional dedication to the students and families of Harford County.

The winners are:

- Teacher of the Year: **Michael James**, *English Teacher, North Harford High School*
- Principal of the Year: **Jennifer Gasdia**, *Old Post Road Elementary School*
- Assistant Principal of the Year: **Caitlin Sieracki**, *Bakerfield Elementary School*
- Education Support Professional of the Year: **Tara Lloyd-Laurence**, *Paraeducator, Bakerfield Elementary School*
- Student Services Professional of the Year: **Karen Cunningham**, *School Counselor, Edgewood Elementary School*
- Operations Professional of the Year: **Christopher McKelvey**, *School Safety Liaison, C. Milton Wright High School*
- General Education School Bus Driver of the Year: **Kimberly Bennett**, *Bus 720*
- Special Education School Bus Driver of the Year: **Dawn Mahaley**, *Bus 323*
- Bus Attendant of the Year: **Elizabeth Cole**, *Bus 474*

The fourth annual Celebration of Excellence in Education was held on April 16, 2026, at Edgewood High School. The event brought together nearly 500 guests, including school system leaders, educators, staff, students, families, elected officials, and community sponsors, to recognize those who make an impact on the lives of Harford County Public Schools students every day.

“Each of these individuals has made a real and lasting impact on our students, schools, and community. Whether they’re in the classroom, supporting day-to-day operations, creating safe and welcoming spaces, or providing essential services, their dedication helps ensure our students have what they need to succeed,” said Dr. Dyann Mack, interim superintendent of HCPS.

“Education is truly a team effort, and tonight is about recognizing the passion, commitment, and

excellence that make HCPS such a special place to learn and work. We're grateful for everything they do and proud to celebrate the difference they make every single day."

The event opened with the induction of William Ekey and Alice Puckett into the HCPS Educator Hall of Fame. Mr. Ekey served HCPS for 33 years, from 1973 to 2006, as a secondary teacher, administrator, and director. Ms. Puckett dedicated 33 years to HCPS from 1983 to 2016 as a secondary teacher and field hockey coach. This longstanding tradition celebrates individuals who have made a lasting impact on the school system.

Here is more information about this year's honorees:



Michael James (*Teacher of the Year*) is an English teacher at North Harford High School. He is a National Board-Certified Teacher and the North Harford High School English Department Chair. He centers his practice on growth for students, teachers, and communities. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Washington and Jefferson College (1993) and a Master of Arts in Reading from Towson University (2004). Before starting at North Harford, Mr. James taught in several schools and served multiple communities. He has served Harford County Public Schools as a teacher, coach, curriculum writer, and professional development leader. He works in district work groups on grading, reading, and technology. Mr. James advocates for student voice as the Voices of Equity advisor and editor of *Misentity* magazine.



Jennifer Gasdia (*Principal of the Year*) is the Principal at Old Post Road Elementary School. She is a proud product of Harford County Public Schools and has dedicated 23 years to serving students, staff, and families as an educator and school leader. She earned her bachelor's degree in education from Towson University in 2003 and a master's degree in human resources with an educational leadership track from Towson University in 2009. Mrs. Gasdia served as assistant principal at Havre de Grace Elementary School for seven years and principal for four years. Since September, she has served as interim principal at Old Post Road Elementary School. In October of 2025, she received the Harford Education Foundation Principal Achievement Award in recognition of her leadership. Her work is guided by the belief that "a successful school beats with one heart," uniting students, staff, families, and community partners to move a school community forward with purpose and shared commitment.



Caitlin Sieracki (*Assistant Principal of the Year*) is the Assistant Principal at Bakerfield Elementary School. She has been an educator for 19 years, proudly serving the students and community of Harford County. Mrs. Sieracki earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Towson University and her master's degree in administration and supervision from Notre Dame of Maryland University. She taught in grades three and four at Old Post Road Elementary and earned National Board Certification for literacy in 2013. Mrs. Sieracki served in a variety of Title 1 leadership roles at Edgewood Elementary before becoming assistant principal in 2022 at Bakerfield Elementary.



Tara Lloyd-Laurence (*Education Support Professional of the Year*) is a reading paraeducator at Bakerfield Elementary School, where she supports students in kindergarten through fifth grade. In her role, she leads intervention groups and collaborates with classroom teachers to provide small group instruction tailored to meet each student's needs and foster their growth. Ms. Lloyd-Laurence has been a part of Harford County Public Schools since 2017 and joined the Bakerfield Elementary community in 2020. Originally from St. Martin, she brings a unique perspective and a deep appreciation for education to her work each day. As a proud mother of four children who all attended HCPS, Ms. Lloyd-Laurence understands firsthand the impact that strong educators can have on a child's journey. She is passionate about her work and finds joy in helping students discover their potential. One of the most rewarding aspects of her role is igniting a love for reading, watching students gain confidence, curiosity, and excitement as they unlock the power of words. Ms. Lloyd-Laurence truly loves what she does and is committed to making learning meaningful, engaging, and inspiring for every student she serves.



Karen Cunningham (*Student Services Professional of the Year*) is a school counselor at Edgewood Elementary School. She earned her bachelor's degree in special and elementary education from Maryland College and a master's degree in school counseling from Loyola University, Maryland. She served Harford County Public Schools as a special educator for ten years and has been a school counselor for 16 years. Ms. Cunningham is an active member of her school's Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports Team, School Performance and Achievement Team, Student Support Team, Care Team, and Attendance Team, and has mentored 14 interns. She also volunteers with Penn-Mar Human Services and the Stewartstown Food Pantry.

Ms. Cunningham is proud that Edgewood Elementary is the only school in Harford County to earn the prestigious American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Recognized ASCA Model Program® (RAMP®) designation for delivering school counseling programs that demonstrate the school's commitment to supporting both the school and district.



Christopher McKelvey (*Operations Professional of the Year*) is the School Safety Liaison at C. Milton Wright High School. He was born in Maryland and spent several years living in Wisconsin before returning to Maryland, where he graduated from Bel Air High School in 2013. He began his career with Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) as a Custodian I at Edgewood Middle School. In 2018, he was promoted to Chief Custodian at Havre de Grace Elementary School. Three years later, he transitioned into the role of School Safety Liaison at C. Milton Wright High School. With a decade of dedicated service to HCPS, Christopher has built a career marked by growth, commitment, and a strong focus on supporting safe and effective school environments.



Kimberly Bennett (*General Education Bus Driver of the Year*), driver of bus 720, is a lifelong Harford County resident and Bel Air High School graduate (1978) with 39 years of service to HCPS. Her current route services North Harford High, North Harford Middle, and North Bend Elementary schools. She comes from a family deeply rooted in school transportation. Known for her warmth and creativity, Ms. Bennett builds strong connections with students—greeting each by name, dressing up for holidays, and creating a joyful, safe environment on her bus. Students and families praise her kindness, patience, and dedication, noting her commitment to both fun and safety. She takes pride in her rural route and the relationships she's built, often saying she has six biological grandchildren and 66 "bonus" ones from the students she cares for each day.



Dawn Mahaley (*Special Education Bus Driver of the Year*), driver of bus 323, is a lifelong Harford County resident and Edgewood High School graduate who has spent 27 years driving a school bus, the last 15 with Harford County Public Schools. Her current route serves students at Joppatowne High, Old Post Road, Deerfield, and Edgewood elementary schools. She brings the same warmth and consistency to every route she has driven throughout her career. Ms. Mahaley's approach to her work is built on communication and adaptability. She advises new drivers to always be willing to learn, to recognize that each child has individual needs, and to keep parents informed so they feel confident their child is safe and well cared for. Her nominators, including colleagues and supervisors, describe her as dedicated, compassionate, and professional in every aspect of her role. She is known for her ever-present smile, her willingness to step in whenever help is needed, and her ability to create a joyful and nurturing environment on the bus. One colleague wrote that her presence alone uplifts those around her. To say she loves her job, Ms. Mahaley notes, is an understatement. Over 27 years she has met many people, some of whom have become her closest friends, but what she values most is the students themselves- watching them learn and grow from one season to the next. Welcoming them in the morning and sending them home at the end of the day, she says, makes getting out of bed almost effortless.



Elizabeth Cole (*Bus Attendant of the Year*) is the bus attendant on bus 474. She has served Harford County Public Schools for 13 years, working with students at C. Milton Wright High, Meadowvale, William S. James, and Havre de Grace elementary schools. Originally from Jacksonville, MD, Ms. Cole wakes up every day committed to doing the best job she can and says being nominated for this recognition is truly an honor. Ms. Cole believes that teamwork is at the heart of the job. She advises new attendants to make the most of their time together and to always work as a team with their driver. Her nominators describe her as someone whose investment in her students goes well beyond the daily routine. Over three years, she played a central role in helping one student with special needs move from anxious and uncertain about bus rides to completely comfortable and confident, ultimately no longer needing the special needs bus at all. She worked closely with the family throughout, collaborating on the best pickup and drop-off locations and even initiating the idea of dropping the student at his behavioral therapy center. Ms. Cole says one of the most rewarding parts of her work is staying long enough to watch students grow and move on to new schools. For her, those milestones make every day worthwhile.

Visit www.hcps.org for more information on all 2026 finalists.

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