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Maggie McHugh named 2019 Middle School Teacher of the Year

La Crosse educator to receive \$3,000 from Herb Kohl Educational Foundation

MADISON — In a surprise ceremony at her school today, Maggie McHugh of Sparta, a sixth-grade teacher and adviser at the La Crosse Design Institute, was named Wisconsin's 2019 Middle School Teacher of the Year.

State Superintendent Tony Evers made the announcement during an all-school assembly. As part of the Teacher of the Year honor, McHugh will receive \$3,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation.

"Our teachers wear many hats, yet their dedication to children is constant," said State Superintendent Tony Evers. "From the classroom to the conference room to the community, they focus on our kids and their education. It is an honor to recognize educators who do so much for Wisconsin's students and our public schools."

Herb Kohl, philanthropist, businessman, and co-sponsor of the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year program through his educational foundation, said he supports the program because "I want to help teachers pursue their unrealized goals for their classroom, their school, or their professional development."

"My school doesn't teach me, I teach myself through my failures and mistakes and how to overcome those," said a student of her experiences at the La Crosse Design Institute. The student's words reflect McHugh's teaching practice: to teach students how to learn, not what to learn. She focuses on differentiation through Universal Design for Learning, providing students multiple access points such as reading, listening to a podcast, exploring through manipulatives, or engaging in dialogue as they pursue personalized, project-based learning. "When educational experiences match real-world opportunities, student learning moves far beyond what could be imagined," she observed.

McHugh plays many roles in the "Playgrounds for All" project as she helps students understand mathematical concepts and connect with experts to gain background information. Students learn about equity as they discuss that playground accessibility goes beyond physical disabilities to include children with other sensory needs such as hearing, vision, or intellectual issues. Additionally, students gain perspective on

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the costs of buying accessible equipment compared to traditional playground equipment. The “Walls” project helps students understand physical and invisible walls that divide people by race, socioeconomic status, or gender. They create a physical manifestation of the invisible walls they explored to show their learning. In both these projects, students present to an “authentic audience.” McHugh, who continues to teach a class at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, invites students and faculty from the university to listen and provide feedback.

A colleague from UW-La Crosse commends McHugh for “creating novel opportunities for my teacher candidates to investigate how middle school students learn mathematics.” These opportunities range from interviewing her sixth-grade students on their understanding of fractions, bringing students into pre-service classrooms so they teach future teachers how to integrate technology into learning experiences, and working with future mathematics and science teachers in the design and implementation of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) lessons.

Recognizing that family desire to help their child hits an obstacle as content moves outside adults’ comfort zone, McHugh provides events to teach families how to foster a curious mindset about the world. “Families can be involved in their student’s educational experience by asking open-ended questions, discussing family history connected to major world events, and discussing aspects of their career that connect to the project process,” she said.

McHugh is an active board member of Sparta Transitions, a non-profit that helps Wisconsin Challenge Academy graduates integrate into work, college, or the armed forces, serving as a host mom to a Challenge Academy cadet. She serves on the Wisconsin Mathematics Council (WMC), where students join her in presenting on project-based learning during the organization’s fall conference. Additionally, she spearheaded the WMC #mathchats, a biweekly Twitter professional learning opportunity for teachers around the country.

A project-based learning charter school in the La Crosse School District, La Crosse Design Institute students take elective classes such as music, physical education, and technology education at Longfellow Middle School. McHugh began at the La Crosse Design Institute in 2013. Previous professional positions include the Brookhill Institute of Mathematics in Waukesha, UW-La Crosse, and Bangor High School. She earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on social justice mathematics from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, N.M. She holds bachelor and master’s degrees from UW -La Crosse.

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