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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FINALISTS FOR NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR ANNOUNCED

“Alabama Teacher of the Year Katie Collins Selected as One of Five Finalists for 2026 National Teacher of the Year!”

EMBARGOED – For release 1 p.m. EST on Tuesday, January 27, 2026

Montgomery, Ala. – The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) today announced that five inspiring educators from across the country are finalists for the 2026 National Teacher of the Year.

CCSSO coordinates the National Teacher of the Year Program. Each year, states, U.S. territories, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity select outstanding educators to serve as State Teachers of the Year.



From a cohort of 56 State Teachers of the Year, the National Teacher of the Year Selection Committee, comprising 15 individuals and education organizations, selected the national finalists based on applications. This year's finalists are:

- **Katie Collins, the 2026 Alabama Teacher of the Year**, is a first-grade teacher at Bluff Park Elementary School in Hoover, Alabama. Collins' Teacher of the Year bio and application available at [National Teacher of the Year- Katie Collins](#)

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Alabama Teacher of the Year Katie Collins Selected as 2026 National Teacher of the Year Finalist

- **Rachel Kinsaul, the 2026 Georgia Teacher of the Year**, teaches agriculture at Morgan County High School in Madison, Georgia. Kinsaul's Teacher of the Year bio and application at [National Teacher of the Year - Rachel Kinsaul](#)
- **Michelle Gross, the 2026 Kentucky Teacher of the Year**, is a seventh grade mathematics and gifted studies teacher at Spencer County Middle School in Taylorsville, Kentucky. Gross' Teacher of the Year bio and application available at [National Teacher of the Year - Michelle Gross](#)
- **Linda Wallenberg, the 2026 Minnesota Teacher of the Year**, is a ninth through 12th grade English teacher at Eden Prairie High School in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Wallenberg's Teacher of the Year bio and application available at [National Teacher of the Year - Linda Wallenberg](#)
- **Leon Smith, the 2026 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year**, is an Advanced Placement U.S. history and Advanced Placement African American studies teacher at Haverford High School in Pennsylvania. Smith's Teacher of the Year bio and application available at [National Teacher of the Year - Leon Smith](#)

“I congratulate these finalists for their outstanding commitment to education and impactful teaching that advances student outcomes,” said CCSSO Chief Executive Officer Carissa Moffat Miller. “Thank you to the Selection Committee for their work selecting these finalists.”

The finalists will next travel to Washington D.C. and interview with the National Teacher of the Year Selection Committee, and CCSSO will announce the 2026 National Teacher of the Year this spring.

“This is an exciting announcement and our entire state is proud of Mrs. Collins and her inspiring dedication to the teaching profession,” said State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Eric G. Mackey. “Alabama has some of the best and brightest educators in the country who continue to exceed all expectations. Mrs. Collins is well deserving of this tremendous achievement and this opportunity to represent our state at the national level.”

The 2026 National Teacher of the Year will spend a year serving as an ambassador for education and uplifting the teaching profession.

“The 2026 National Teacher of the Year finalists exemplify the highest teaching standards, empowering students to be future problem solvers through project-based learning and community collaboration,” the Selection Committee said. “Their work is rigorous and intentional, embodying everything you want to see in a finalist.”

More information about the *2026 State Teachers of the Year* and CCSSO’s National Teacher of the Year Program is available at [the National Teacher of the Year website](#)

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