



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Top NYC Public School Teachers Recognized with FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence and \$315,000 in Prizes

— Five Teachers Win \$25,000 Each, Plus a \$10,000 Prize for their Schools, and  
10 Finalists Win \$10,000 Each, Plus \$2,000 for their Schools —

— Winners Recognized for Developing New Approaches to Better Teach the  
Curriculum, Encouraging Students to Explore New Fields of Study, Creating  
Dance and Leadership Classes for Students, Leading One of Two Competitive  
Marching Bands in New York City, and Creating a Unique Art Program that  
Combines Technology and Multimedia—

(June 22, 2022, New York, N.Y.)—Today, the [FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence](#) announced five grand prize winners—one from each borough of New York City—who are shining examples of the best in public school teaching. **Anastasia Difino**, an English Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at PS 120 in Queens; **Joshua Modeste**, a science teacher at The Urban Assembly School for Global Commerce in Manhattan; **Persephone DaCosta**, a dance instructor at Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn; **Laurie D’Amico**, a music teacher and marching band director at Tottenville High School in Staten Island; and **Cheriece White**, an art teacher at The Metropolitan Soundview High School in the Bronx will each receive a \$25,000 cash prize, and their schools will receive a \$10,000 grant.

“Public school teachers are among the most important pillars of our communities. They make sacrifices year-round to educate and mold our children into the next generation of productive members of society. This year’s winners exemplify the best of the teaching profession. The teachers we got to know through this process all put forth a phenomenal effort to create environments where their students learn and grow and it is an honor to recognize these individuals,” said **Glenn Fuhrman, Co-Founder of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**.

“This year’s winning educators proved themselves to be outstanding individuals who had a tangible impact on the lives of their students,” said **Risa Daniels, Co-President of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**. “It is truly a pleasure to recognize them for their tremendous work,” added **Laura Twersky, Co-Founder of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**.

The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence, which just completed its third year, received close to 1,000 nominations from students, parents, principals, and teachers. Thirty-five semifinalists

were selected from the nominees and were required to complete a comprehensive application, participate in an interview process that included an interview with their principal, and submit supplementary material.

The \$25,000 cash prizes for the winners are for teachers' personal use. The additional school awards of \$10,000 each are to be used for arts education initiatives with input from the winning teachers. (Arts education is an area that is often underfunded in public schools.) There are also ten finalists who will receive \$10,000 for their personal use, and their schools will receive \$2,000 each to use toward an arts-based initiative. And 20 semi-finalists will receive \$500 for their personal use, and their schools will receive \$500 each.

An independent jury comprising education, community, and philanthropic leaders, including **Dr. Betty A. Rosa, Commissioner of Education and President of the University of the State of New York**, selected the winners based on criteria that emphasize the student experience. Additional jury members include last year's winner, **Dana Monteiro**; **Thelma Golden**, Director & Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem; **Pam Haas**, Executive Director of the New York region of Facing History & Ourselves; and **Ashleigh Thompson**, University Dean for Education of the City University of New York.

### **About the Grand Prize Winners - Including Teacher Quotes**

#### ***Queens: Anastasia Difino, PS 120***

Anastasia Difino has been a game-changing force at her school. She single-handedly altered the way fourth and fifth-grade English and Social Studies are taught at PS 120, a school with many immigrants and foreign language speaking students. She introduced and wrote a curriculum that makes learning more fun for students, with units like "Christopher Columbus – Hero or Villain". Her class is now used as a "lab classroom" by the Department of Education to instruct other teachers on successfully implementing this in their classrooms.

She is also one of the teachers asked to pilot the Department of Education's "Civics for All" program in its first year of being incorporated at the school. She is helping design how each grade will approach various topics within the "Civics for All" umbrella as well as working with the student council on related school-wide initiatives. Difino would like to use the grant money to expand the "Civics for All" program and create a Civics Art Club that would engage in projects across the school such as beautifying the school with murals.

"The work I do, the time and energy I put toward my students and my school community come naturally to me, it never feels like a job," said Difino. "It's something I love with all my heart - to see their smiles, their growth, to see them shine, to see my school community thrive. Thank you for this recognition and for all you do for teachers that go that extra mile. This is definitely one of the best days of my life!"

#### ***Manhattan: Joshua Modeste, The Urban Assembly School for Global Commerce***

Modeste is a champion of diversity. He wants more of his students, who are Black, Hispanic, and mostly come from low-income households – to know they can have careers in the STEM fields. He uses a creative approach to get them excited about science, including Shark Tank-themed challenges, and lesson plans that cover topics of importance to students of different backgrounds, special guests, and field trips.

He and his students founded a Science Research club at his school where students actually present their findings in front of professional scientists at conferences. He would like to use the grant money to transform the empty space in his classroom into various tactical discover drawers, inspired by the drawers at the Boston Museum of Science, that his students would design and build.

"I am so humbled and grateful to be chosen for this honor!" said Modeste. "I want to thank my school community and my students for continuing to encourage my creativity and use of Social Justice to get them excited about science."

***Brooklyn: Persephone DaCosta, Khalil Gibran International Academy***

High school dance teacher Persephone DaCosta is passionate about empowering students. She brought in the R.O.S.E.(Respectful Outstanding Sisters of Excellence) program as an extracurricular club and when she noticed its positive effects on young women—increased attendance, improved grades and behavior—she turned it into a regular academic class. In this class, Persephone is teaching her students to be leaders, and they help plan school-wide events and serve as mentors to other female students. They are also learning basic etiquette training, visiting college campuses, and learning self-care and mental wellness. She also teaches dance, which offered a great outlet for self-expression for her students during the pandemic.

Persephone would like to use the grant money to renovate the dance studio with basic things such as ballet barres and dance equipment and bring in teaching artists. She would also like to establish a Community Dance Performance Troupe.

"I love that the school and myself are both awarded funding because there is so much more to do. This work is demanding because our children have lots of needs," said DaCosta. "If we can't pour anything into ourselves we get depleted and can't give as much to others. My goal is to make me better, to go into the next school year reenergized and ready to pour all that I can into our students. Thank you for filling my cup and making it easier for me to continue giving more of myself to our students."

***Staten Island: Laurie D'Amico, Tottenville High School***

Laurie D'Amico is a music maestro. She teaches different levels of band, an AP Music Theory course which she started; serves as the assistant director of the school's marching band (one of only two competitive marching bands in all of NYC); advises multiple music-related clubs,

coordinates concerts, and festivals; and paves a path for students to have careers in music. To help her students who could not afford a music program at the local university, she reached out to Montclair State and developed a partnership that offers in-state tuition for any New York City student who wishes to enroll in the course. D'Amico plans to use the grant money to create a music production lab for students to record, edit, and collaborate on music.

"I am lucky to have been influenced by so many educators, students, and school administrators who make a positive impact on my life," said D'Amico. "I strive to continue the lessons I learned from my teachers of inspiration and creativity. I am humbled receiving The Flag Award for Teaching Excellence, and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to enhance the education of the students at Tottenville High School with the generous gift from the Flag Foundation."

### ***The Bronx: Cheriece White, The Metropolitan Soundview High School***

Cheriece White is the queen of creativity. She founded the arts program at her school and several after-school arts and design clubs. In her art program, she focuses on combining traditional art skills with practicable tools and skills like branding and content creation. Students can then apply these lessons with assignments such as creating movies and commercials based on social issues, building decks for businesses they hope to start one day, and even designing materials for other teachers to use in their classrooms and for events. And the work isn't contained to the art class. She's known to collaborate with other teachers, partnering, for example, with the science teacher to have students design environmentally friendly products related to their science class lessons.

She would like to use the grant money for supplies and equipment in her classroom, including new desks for collaborative working, a 3D printer, and Cricut Machines, all of which will help in her pursuit of the kids learning professional skills.

"This award goes way beyond the monetary cash prize that you and your school will receive," said White. "All the years dedicated to ensuring that my students had a place to feel heard, appreciated, and a part of something more than just the walls of our school has made my long hours of planning, researching, and creating programs for them absolutely worth it. As a high school public school art teacher, to be recognized by an organization so prestigious as the FLAG Award and its highly intellectual and influential jury who selects you is out of this world!"

### **2022 FLAG AWARD Finalists**

Each finalist received a \$10,000 prize and a \$2,000 grant to their school.

Jordan Haynes, The William W. Niles School, J.H.S. 118 (Bronx)

Cailin Schiller, P373K - Brooklyn Transition Center (Brooklyn)

Nicole Hamilton, P373K - Brooklyn Transition Center (Brooklyn)

Gary Wellbrock, PS 347 The American Sign Language and English Lower School (Manhattan)  
Lisa Mazzariello, Cascades High School (Manhattan)  
Michael Paoli, The Ella Baker School (Manhattan)  
Ariel Sacks, The Renaissance Charter School (Queens)  
Cindy Wong, PS 41Q The Crocheron School (Queens)  
Deborah Walters, Port Richmond High School (Staten Island)  
Meredith Feigel, IS75-Paulo Intermediate School (Staten Island)

### **2022 FLAG AWARD Semi-finalists**

Each finalist received a \$500 prize and a \$500 grant to their school.

Caitlin Tchaikowitz, PS 35x (Bronx)  
Erin Moughon-Smith, The Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters (Bronx)  
Lisa Blackman, P. S. 304 Early Childhood Lab School (Bronx)  
Alyssa Infranco, The Daniel Mucatel School (Brooklyn)  
Brittany Beck, High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (Brooklyn)  
Maya Pincus, Bushwick Leaders High School for Academic Excellence (Brooklyn)  
Bianca Duec, NYC Lab School for Collaborative Studies (Manhattan)  
Christina Hiras, East Side Community High School (Manhattan)  
Deborah Lissauer, High School of Fashion Industries (Manhattan)  
Dejinay Reed, Future Leaders Institute Charter School (Manhattan)  
Diamond Emerald Skinner, MS 245 The Computer School (Manhattan)  
Elliot Locco, PS 116 Mary Lindley Murray (Manhattan)  
Erin Flaherty, Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering (Manhattan)  
Igor Kantor, The Mott Hall School (Manhattan)  
Jessica Quenzer, Stuyvesant High School (Manhattan)  
Matt Lassen, High School of Art and Design (Manhattan)  
Regina Mian, International High School at Union Square (Manhattan)  
William Yusah, New Explorations Into Science, Technology, and Math (M539) (Manhattan)  
Dr. Elechi Osueke, PS 136 Roy Wilkins School (Queens)  
Jessica Siu, PS 41Q The Crocheron School (Queens)

### **About the FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**

[The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence](#) award, founded by Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, recognizes and celebrates extraordinary public school teachers who inspire learning through creativity, passion, and commitment. This award is funded by The FLAG Foundation for Excellence in Education and by The Fuhrman Family Foundation. It is administered by co-presidents, Risa Daniels and Laura Twersky.

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