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Making the Grade: FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence Recognizes NYC's Top Public School Teachers with \$400,000 in Prizes

— Six grand prize winners awarded \$25,000 each, plus a \$10,000 prize for their schools; 10 finalists winning \$10,000 each, plus \$5,000 for their schools —

(June 26, 2023 New York, N.Y.)— Today, The [FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence](#) recognized the tremendous impacts of the best teachers in New York City by announcing the six grand prize winners of its annual prize, one from each borough in the city, including a tie between two Brooklyn teachers. Twenty-nine other teachers are recognized as finalists and semi-finalists. In total, recognized teachers and their schools will receive \$400,000 in prizes.

Grand prize winners include **Brian Sweeney**, an English teacher at Townsend Harris High School in Queens; **William Green**, a chemistry teacher at A. Phillip Randolph Campus High School in Manhattan; **Sarah Slack**, a science and STEM teacher at I.S. 223: The Montauk School in Brooklyn; **Jessica Abrams**, a STEM teacher at Liberty Avenue Middle School in Brooklyn; **Zach Rosch**, a STEM and aviation teacher at Tottenville High School in Staten Island; and **Talia Jaime**, a theater teacher at Renaissance High School for Musical Theater & Arts in the Bronx. Each teacher received a \$25,000 cash prize, and their schools received a \$10,000 grant.

“Educators play such a huge part in our children’s lives, and they deserve recognition for their impact on the future lives of their students,” said **Glenn Fuhrman, Co-Founder of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**. “We are grateful to recognize these hard-working and inspiring NYC public school teachers. Our children are in great hands with these teachers guiding them.”

The FLAG award is in its fourth year and has recognized 122 teachers across the five boroughs and given away \$1,130,000 in prize money.

“There are so many amazing educators, and we are glad we can honor a few individuals who have made a lasting impact on the lives of their students,” said **Risa Daniels, Co-President of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**. “Great work shouldn’t go unnoticed, and I’m thrilled we could recognize and reward these outstanding teachers,” added **Laura Twersky, Co-President of The FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence**.

This year's FLAG Award for Teaching Excellence received the most nominations in its history, with 1,337 submissions 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 will be used for arts education initiatives with input from the winning teachers. (Arts education is an area that is often underfunded in public schools.)

Additionally, ten finalists will receive \$10,000 for their personal use, and their schools will receive \$5,000 each to use toward an arts-based initiative, and 19 semi-finalists will receive \$1,000 for their personal use, and their schools will receive \$1,000 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, **Anastasia Difino**; **Richard Haynes**, Director of School Support at NYC Men Teach; **Eugenie Tsai**, the John and Barbara Volgestein Sr. Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum; and **Bob Hughes**, Director of K-12 Education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About the Grand Prize Winners

Queens: Brian Sweeney, Townsend Harris High School

Brian Sweeney is a man of action striving to help his students reach their full potential. He oversees the school newspaper, which has over 150 contributors and publishes daily. He also created and directed a writing center for students where newspaper editors serve as writing tutors. In the wake of the school's declining reading performance, Sweeney helped spearhead the school's reading initiative, which included an all-night Halloween Read-a-thon with breakout rooms such as Edgar Allan Poe ghost stories and s'mores. Through efforts and events such as these, students in the school have logged over a million minutes of independent reading this school year.

For high school seniors, Sweeney helped create, organize, and pilot the senior symposium. This program challenges students in the spring of their senior year to participate in a research course in which they create a syllabus, choose a text as a focal point for their project, and write a long-term research paper using resources from Queens College for presentation at the college library. Sweeney hopes that this initiative will be implemented for seniors across the boroughs in the future.

Sweeney also bridges the classroom and the real world by connecting his students with resources to execute their vision. For example, he helped one student partner with PEN America to create a podcast. The podcast became so successful that the student obtained press credentials from Universal Studios and other production companies to interview filmmakers and attend movie screenings.

Manhattan: William Green, A. Phillip Randolph Campus High School

William “Billy” Green believes elevating student voices is essential to creating a school community where students feel seen, heard, and understood. In his classroom, he will often have student teams teach specific lessons to one another, finding students often have new ways of conveying content that is more relatable to their peers. Other teachers have since adopted this style of teaching. He also has his students host monthly professional development for the science department. These workshops are designed for teachers to learn from their students and develop classroom spaces to bridge engagement gaps in teaching and learning.

Green connects with students on their level by using their experiences and interests as launching points in his lessons. He incorporates the arts, especially dance, which he has a background in, into his curriculum to make content accessible, engaging and memorable.

Green is working toward his doctoral degree in Science Education. He spends his summers participating in teacher travel opportunities. Last summer, he went to Accra, Ghana with the Opus Dance Theatre, and as the Director of Curriculum, he provided over 200 students with arts-in-education programming. This summer he will be traveling to Poland as part of his fellowship with the Auschwitz Foundation.

Green is the 2023 New York State Teacher of the Year.

Brooklyn: Jessica Abrams, Liberty Avenue Middle School

Jessica Abrams goes above and beyond to show her students how what they learn in the classroom can be applied in the real world. As the only STEM teacher at her school, Abrams uses a self-designed curriculum to reach various learners. She is a licensed special education teacher in an integrated co-taught classroom and also teaches two dual language science courses and a science enrichment class for gifted students. Abrams wrote and obtained grants providing \$250,000 for technology in STEM equipment and \$175,000 to start a hydroponics lab in the school. She has led students in the Samsung Solve for Tomorrow competition for several years, resulting in a combined \$87,000 in prize money. She has recently petitioned the NYC Parks Department to dedicate an outdoor space next to the school so she can expand the hydroponics lab and create a sustainable community garden for the families and the broader community.

Abrams finds creative ways to empower her students to serve as leaders. Having been trained in Culturally Responsive Team techniques, Abrams piloted student-led restorative justice

circles. She also facilitates a girl's group called Girls Empowerment Movement (GEM). Recently, the GEM hosted a community town hall to better understand the food Insecurity in their community and responded with action and service learning. They have been responsible for a community fridge and a clothing drive. Some of the GEMs joined Jessica when she took 25 students to Europe in May to submerge themselves in different cultures and life experiences as part of a leadership program culminating in a service learning project based on what they learned as global citizens.

Brooklyn: Sarah Slack, I.S. 223: The Montauk School

Sarah Slack is not only teaching science but is also teaching her students to be scientists. In tandem with learning about science, Slack wants her students to learn the associated skillset and critical thinking skills that come with technical knowledge. She received a grant to acquire multiple hydroponics towers installed throughout the school, which she uses to build connections with other subjects. For example, she has worked with an ENL teacher to grow popular herbs used in students' home countries.

Slack encourages her students to create connections to the larger world of science by taking advantage of research opportunities that she infuses into lessons in the classroom. She has studied wolves across North America to develop a lesson on evolution, traveled to Antarctica to study glaciers and the effects of climate change, and spent a year working on a research team with NASA's Climate Change Research Initiative.

Outside of the classroom, Slack engages in many opportunities to improve the quality of science education and increase access to engaging resources on a broader level. She is the District 20 STEM coach, helping create district-wide STEAM events. She is also on the Middle School Science Leadership team, is a co-chair of the NYCDOE's Climate Education Leadership Team, and is also working with the NYCDOE's Office of Sustainability on a Professional Learning series in which more than 100 teachers learn how to incorporate climate education into their classrooms.

Staten Island: Zach Rosch, Tottenville High School

Zach Rosch helps his students to soar to new heights. Looking for a new way to interest his students in STEM, Rosch developed a curriculum for an aviation class that has become one of the most popular courses at his school. Rosch incorporates physics, math, earth science, and robotics into this unique class, in which he designed the entire curriculum for himself, given the unique subject matter. His students learn how to fly using flight simulators and drones. The course has inspired some students to pursue their pilot's license for an aviation career.

Rosch wants to support his students' education and will go the extra mile to help them achieve their goals. When students mentioned their interest in learning on a real plane, Zachary found someone willing to donate one, and that plane now sits in the school's parking lot. The students learned how to rivet and put the plane together and are now building computers to run virtual reality simulators on the aircraft.

Rosch encourages his students to excel, whether that means pushing some students to apply for a Space Prize tailored towards women in STEM or enlisting students who maybe wouldn't traditionally succeed in math and science to be part of his STEM ambassadors.

He also serves as the STEAM Operations Director at the High School, which means he is also a resource to any other teacher at or outside of the school wishing to incorporate more STEAM elements into their courses. He hosts a "Day of Flight," where he brings grammar schools from the area to experience the program that he has built and encourage their interest in STEM. Outside of the classroom, he is a NASA CCRI Education Ambassador and a NADA Product Reviewer, a small group of teachers from around the country who meet and work with NASA scientists to distill their data into enriching lessons for students.

The Bronx: Talia Jaime, Renaissance High School For Musical Theater & The Arts

Talia Jaime believes in teaching *through* students rather than teaching *to* students. Her lessons are kinesthetic, and students learn by actively doing. She teaches students at all levels and abilities, ranging from those with no acting interest, who she may reach through lighting design or stage management, to those with advanced acting skills. She also founded "The Renaissance Players," a performing arts troupe outside the classroom. They do one monthly showcase, performing on important, topical subjects such as bullying.

She has a partnership with the New York Theater Workshop, allowing students to see a matinee show and work with a teaching artist on preshow and post-show workshops. The partnership also includes a residency with the class that offers students to choose from a wide range of jobs in theater production, from writing and performing monologues to costume design. She also started a series called "The Professional in the Classroom," where she invites professionals from all different areas in the theater industry to come into the classroom and share what they do. She strives to have this series represent the demographics of her students and brings in as many diverse voices as possible.

Outside the classroom, she facilitates citywide PDs for theater teachers alongside the DOE's theater director. She is an alumna of the Arthur Miller Fellowship Foundation, and just recently, she joined the education team for a new Broadway show, consulting on what the education plan will be when it premieres in NYC.

2023 FLAG AWARD Finalists

Each finalist received a \$10,000 prize and a \$5,000 grant to their school.

Brittany Beck - High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology (Brooklyn)

Joseph Alvear - Fort Hamilton High School (Brooklyn)

Sasha Roopchand - The Brooklyn Green Magnet School for Eco Activism (Brooklyn)

Noah Gordon - Special Music School (Manhattan)

James Foster - East River Academy (Queens)

Jo Ann Westhall - P.S. 31Q (Queens)

Jorge Santos - Metropolitan Expeditionary Learning School (Queens)

Matthew Palermo - Epic High School South (Queens)
Ryuma Tanaka - I.S. 145Q Joseph Pulitzer (Queens)
Kristen Fusaro-Pizzo - Staten Island Technical High School (Staten Island)

2023 FLAG AWARD Semi-finalists

Each finalist received a \$1,000 prize and a \$1,000 grant to their school.

Cynthia Cruz - P.S.359X- Concourse Village Elementary School (The Bronx)
Niove Theoharides - Gotham Collaborative High School (The Bronx)
Vincent Cueva - Gotham Collaborative High School (The Bronx)
Andrew Boorstyn - Brooklyn Collaborative Studies (Brooklyn)
Rachel Porter - Edward R. Murrow High School (Brooklyn)
Romina Keper - P.S. 86K (Brooklyn)
Anthony Bonini - Eagle Academy Young Men II at Ocean Hill (Brooklyn)
Cynthia Turnquest-Jones - P.S./M.S. 046: The Arthur Tappan School (Manhattan)
Eleanor Williamson - Urban Assembly School of Design and Construction (Manhattan)
Elliot Iocco - P.S. 116: Mary Lindley Murray (Manhattan)
Keira Dillon - P.S. 163: Alfred E Smith (Manhattan)
Matt Lassen - High School of Art and Design (Manhattan)
Niki Lederer - High School of Art and Design (Manhattan)
Amanda Papa - East Elmhurst Community School (Queens)
Maureen Owens - Forest Hills High School (Queens)
John Cucuzza - The Michael J. Petrides School (Staten Island)
Kelly Pares - P.S. 53: The Barbara Esselborn School (Staten Island)
Ryan Murphy - I.S. 75: Frank D. Paulo (Staten Island)
Vivian Porcu - P.S. 74: Future Leaders Elementary School (Staten Island)

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 The Fuhrman Family Foundation. It is administered by co-presidents Risa Daniels and Laura Twersky.

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