
# Friday, April 17, 2026

## 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Kensington North Room, Majestic Gardens Hotel
900 South Disneyland Drive | Anaheim, CA

## President's Address

Welcome to the 2026 NSTA Teacher Awards and Recognition ceremony. It is my absolute honor, as President, to celebrate and congratulate the incredible educators receiving the 2026 National Science Teaching Association Awards. Today, we recognize their unwavering dedication and amazing impact on students' lives.

And in this year, 2026, a year where the very foundations of scientific understanding face unprecedented challenges, your dedication takes on an even deeper significance. We are living in a time when the pursuit of truth through evidence and inquiry is often met with skepticism and even hostility. Yet here you stand, educators who have persevered, who have instilled in your students not just scientific knowledge, but the critical thinking skills to navigate a complex world. You have shown them, and us, that even in the face of doubt, the light of scientific curiosity cannot be extinguished.

Remember, every experiment conducted, every question asked, every student inspired, is a testament to the enduring power of science. You are the guardians of that power, the beacons of reason in a world that sometimes struggles to see. Your resilience, your unwavering commitment to truth, is not just a professional achievement; it is a vital act of hope. You remind us that even when the path is difficult, the pursuit of knowledge is a journey worth taking, a journey that will ultimately lead us to a brighter, more informed future.

A heartfelt thank you to the NSTA Awards and Recognition Committee for their tireless efforts behind the scenes. Their dedication ensures that excellence in science education is celebrated and that the spotlight shines on those making a true difference.

These awards would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors and partners. On behalf of our members, we extend our utmost thanks for their continued commitment to supporting science educators and science education. In addition, I would like to thank the NSTA Awards and Recognition Committee for their time and commitment to identifying distinguished science educators.

To all of our outstanding NSTA 2026 award winners—congratulations! Your work is shaping the future, and today, we celebrate you!

*Beverly R. DeVore-Wedding, Ph.D.*

**Dr. Beverly DeVore-Wedding**

NSTA PRESIDENT, 2025–202

2025-2026

## Teacher Awards & Recognition Committee

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Chairperson

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2025-2026

## Shell Science Teaching Award Judging Panel

**KENDRA MALLORY**
Chairperson

**AMANDA UPTON**
NSTA Sr. Manager, Shell Programs

**CHARLES HAYES**

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**ROBBIE KEUCHLER, JR.**

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**LAURA YAGER**

# ANGELA AWARD

**WINNER**

## NETHANIA AJAN

**8TH GRADE STUDENT**
Canyon Vista Middle School
Austin, Texas

**This award honors one female student in grades 5-8, who is involved in or has a strong connection to science. The award has been established in honor of Gerry Wheeler and his outstanding dedication to NSTA and lifelong commitment to science education.**

**The awardee receives a $500 cash prize. The President will present her award at the awardees' school each spring.**

Growing up, I have always shown a keen interest in biology. From reading books about the human body at the age of 3 to writing my second research paper about preventing thyroid cancer, science has always been a big part of my life. I wrote my first research paper in 7th grade to explore real-world scientific problems and understand how biology connects to human health.

In addition to research, I have been deeply involved in science-based extracurricular activities. Last year, I competed at the HOSA International Leadership Conference, where I earned a top-10 international finalist placement after placing 1st in Texas. This experience challenged me to apply my scientific knowledge in a competitive environment while also developing my communication and leadership skills. I also competed in Science Olympiad, where I placed in all five of my events at the Rice University Regionals, allowing our team to move on to the state level. HOSA and Science Olympiad have played a major role in my growth as a science student, and Science Olympiad has given me opportunities to collaborate with others who share my passion for healthcare and research.

To further explore my interest in cancer research, I attended the Rosetta Institute of Biomedical Research Camp, where I took the Cancer Bioinformatics course. This experience introduced me to advanced research methods used in oncology and reinforced my desire to pursue cancer-related research in the future. Learning in a professional research environment helped me better understand how scientific discoveries translate into real medical advancements. All of these experiences have shaped my goal of becoming an oncologist who improves diagnosis, treatment, and patient outcomes. I want to combine a strong scientific background with compassion, using research and innovation to develop more effective cancer therapies while supporting patients through their journeys.

Jennifer Sweet, Advanced Biology, Aquatic Science Teacher Westwood High School Science Department, shares that Nethania's "combination of curiosity, initiative, and drive demonstrates how her love for science creates real-world impact, inspires others, and elevates the opportunities available to her peers."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Shelita Augustus

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Yvonne B. Miller High School
Petersburg, Virginia

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I teach earth, environmental science, and chemistry at Yvonne B. Miller High School, located within Bon Air Correctional Center, Virginia's only correctional center for youth. My primary goals for attending the NSTA Conference are to become a more effective science teacher for my students and to leverage the experience to raise awareness and build camaraderie among correctional science teachers nationwide. My students represent a unique and deserving population—mostly minority males, with over 50% requiring individualized educational plans. Because of this, my professional development must be focused on equity and access.

At the conference I will concentrate on workshop themes that emphasize equitable participation in classroom discussions, ensuring all students' ideas are shared and valued. I plan to pursue sessions that offer practical strategies to ensure all my students can engage in appropriately challenging STEM learning. A significant focus of my professional growth is making science concepts directly relevant to my students' lives and experiences. I will look for sessions on culturally responsive teaching strategies, such as using storylines to help students build deeper conceptual connections.

A longer-term objective is to bridge the gap between my students and the external science community. I intend to seek out workshops on building environmental literacy through local phenomena that provide tools for selecting local phenomena and finding community partners who can help adapt a unit to include environmental justice issues relevant to my students. The knowledge gained at the conference will enhance my practice and elevate the quality of science instruction for a population that needs it most, while establishing a supportive network for other educators navigating the intricacies of teaching science in a correctional environment.

Lisa Coates, Assistant Principal, Yvonne B. Miller High School, says, "Ms. Augustus actively works to increase community partnerships to make science relevant for our students. She is currently collaborating with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) scholars to develop live, virtual programs for her environmental science classes. This effort connects her students to real-world science and career pathways."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Jonathan Bailey

**8TH-GRADE SCIENCE TEACHER**

Gila Vista Jr. High School
Yuma, Arizona

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Attending the NSTA national conference promises to be a transformative experience that will significantly enrich my teaching methodology and, consequently, enhance my students' learning experiences. The sessions on three-dimensional assessment tasks and phenomenon-based learning will equip me with innovative instructional strategies that will help me create dynamic lesson plans that cater to diverse learning styles, fostering a deeper understanding of scientific concepts among my students. Equally compelling is the session titled "I can't wait for science class!—The How and Why of 3D Phenomenon-Based Learning." Exploring phenomenon-based learning can inject enthusiasm into science lessons, making them more engaging for students. This approach aligns with the shift towards more hands-on and experiential learning, creating an environment where curiosity thrives.

Recognizing the diversity in my classroom, "Strategies to Support English Learners in the Science Classroom" is an essential session. Learning effective strategies will enable me to create an inclusive learning environment where all students—regardless of language proficiency—can actively participate and thrive in science education. From three-dimensional assessment tasks to creative STEAM labs and engaging with popular culture, each session contributes to a comprehensive approach to science education that fosters curiosity, critical thinking, and a passion for lifelong learning. Science education is the bread and butter of life and encouraging young minds to pursue a career in STEM is a privilege.

Frank Núñez, Principal, Gila Vista Jr. High School, shares that "Jonathan is an innovative and dedicated educator who constantly seeks new strategies to engage students in meaningful scientific inquiry. His passion for helping students build critical thinking skills and his ability to integrate hands-on, real-world applications into the classroom make him an outstanding teacher and role model."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Joyeth Brown

**7TH-GRADE SCIENCE TEACHER**

Pin Oak Middle School
Bellaire, Texas

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When I began my teacher certification journey, my yearlong internship was both demanding and transformative. I learned to balance lesson planning, classroom management, and the responsibility of guiding students through scientific discovery. That experience solidified my commitment to becoming the kind of educator who not only teaches content but also inspires curiosity. Now, in my first year as a certified teacher, I see the NSTA national conference as the next step in my professional growth because it offers a chance to connect with a national community, deepen my practice, and bring back strategies that will benefit my students and colleagues. I plan to focus my time at the conference on three areas that directly connect to my classroom needs: Equity and Access in Science Education, Inquiry and Phenomena-Based Learning, and Technology Integration.

The impact of this conference will extend beyond my classroom. I plan to share what I learn with colleagues through a professional development session at my school in Houston, Texas. I will model lessons, distribute resources, and encourage others to adopt strategies that promote inquiry and equity. I am also from Jamaica, so I plan to contribute here to the United States and also to the education system in Jamaica, ensuring that the benefits reach educators far and wide. For my students, I will translate the conference's excitement into inspiration by telling them about the scientists and educators I met and the innovative ideas I encountered.

Over the next five years, I aim to build a repertoire of best practices that will position me as a leader in science education within my district. As a new teacher, I am eager to prove that investment in my growth will yield lasting benefits for students, colleagues, and the broader science education community regionally and internationally.

Jonathan Terrel, Science Department Chair, Pin Oak Middle School, says that "Students in her class are always engaged in the high-rigor lessons that she facilitates. Ever since I have met her, she has pursued professional development more actively than any teacher I have ever encountered. She is continuously working to improve herself, her classroom, and the outcomes for her students."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Kole Hobbs

**CHEMISTRY TEACHER**

Hillsborough High School
Hillsborough, New Jersey

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To date, I have attended one local conference, where I found both the professional development and opportunities for networking to be valuable. That experience reinforced the importance of shared reflection and collaboration and motivated me to seek out a national conference where I could learn from, and contribute to, a larger community of science educators. I currently teach College Preparatory and Honors chemistry and, this year, am teaching In-Class Resource (ICR) chemistry for the first time in a co-taught setting. Across all levels, my instruction is grounded in inquiry-based, student-centered practices. Conference sessions align closely with how I structure lessons around phenomena, modeling, and explanation rather than lecture or procedural labs. In my classroom, students are asked to analyze data, construct and revise models, and use evidence-based reasoning to explain chemical behavior. Learning from educators who have implemented these approaches in a variety of contexts would help refine my lesson design and improve consistency and coherence across courses.

Equity and differentiation are central to my current professional growth, particularly as I work to support students with a wider range of learning needs in an inclusive classroom. Sessions focused on equitable science instruction and differentiated chemistry practices would help me strengthen scaffolds for modeling, classroom discourse, and sense making tasks while maintaining high expectations for all students. I have chosen to pursue a master's degree in chemistry education to more effectively integrate learning theory with classroom practice. Attending the conference would complement this coursework by exposing me to strategies that are both research-informed and grounded in day-to-day classroom realities. In addition to learning from presenters, I am eager to contribute to sessions and discussions by sharing my own classroom experiences, challenges, and reflections as part of the broader professional community.

Lisa Kiel, Supervisor of Science, Hillsborough High School, shares that "Kole is particularly adept at seeking out resources and planning creative and challenging lessons. He intentionally incorporates varied modalities and scaffolding to ensure meaningful inclusion and access for ALL students. He possesses a rare gift for connecting with students, leveraging his compassionate nature to build strong rapport and engage them deeply through real-world examples and experiential learning."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Ariela Ikezawa

**2ND- AND 4TH-GRADE TEACHER**

Menachem Mendel Seattle Cheder Day School
Seattle, Washington

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I teach 2nd and 4th grade in a small elementary school, which means I'm responsible for all core subjects with limited time for each. This reality has shaped how I think about science instruction. I don't want science to be the subject we skip when time runs short or the isolated block that competes with literacy and math. Instead, I'm working to weave it in throughout the day, into the texts we read, the problems we solve, and the questions students ask. My goal is to make science feel like a natural part of how we learn, not an add-on.

As a new teacher, attending the NSTA National Conference helps me build the skills to do this well. The past two conferences have been essential to my development as a teacher. I first went as a student and then as a first-year substitute teacher. I come back each time with concrete strategies I can use immediately and a clearer sense of how experienced educators handle the same challenges I face. These workshops are so valuable because they are practical, used in real classrooms, and focused on what actually works with students. This year, I want to focus specifically on integrating literacy and science with more intention. I'm embedding science into reading and writing lessons. I'm challenging students to develop explanations from evidence and discuss their findings in small groups. Learning from the largest community of science educators in the country gives me access to proven models I can adapt, moving me from reactive teaching to more thoughtful, proactive planning.

Deborah Hanuscin, Professor, Science Math and Technology Education, says, "Throughout my many interactions with Ariela, she has struck me as competent, thoughtful, organized, and committed. She has reached out, followed up, and pursued suggestions without prompting. She has demonstrated the capacity to read and comprehend research, synthesizing it at a practical level in terms of actions she can take as a teacher. She cares deeply about social justice and equity—using these as lenses to consider her own actions as well as the systems in which she works and lives."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Clare Nolan

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Wolcott College Prep
Chicago, Illinois

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As an educator who is consistently striving for opportunities to grow in my profession, I am confident that attending the NSTA annual conference will help me foster creativity, independence, and scientific excellence in my classroom. As I begin my fifth year of teaching, I am excited by the experience of meeting like-minded colleagues, learning ways to adapt my curriculum to meet the needs of my students, and developing new perspectives on experiments and activities within my curriculum. I teach at a small school that serves bright students with learning differences, specifically those that impact executive function. Given our population, it is essential for me to remain adaptable in my approach to learning and to cultivate a strong classroom community.

I plan on learning about how I can bring socioemotional learning to the forefront of curricula and hear from experienced teachers about how they embed these practices into their teaching and learning. By attending NSTA, I would be able to connect with other chemistry teachers, hear their perspectives, and bring my learning back to my classroom. As someone who regularly integrates new ideas and initiatives, I would apply my experience in NSTA sessions to implement changes in my curriculum, designing stronger experiments, refining approaches to providing feedback, strengthening classroom management, and enhancing my engagement strategies. The NSTA conference will be an incredible opportunity to become a better teacher for my students, colleagues, and community.

Mackenzie Pryor, Science Department Chair, Wolcott College Prep, shares that “Clare puts the mission of our school at the forefront of each and every day by creating engaging lessons that leave her students excited about Chemistry. She conducts on average 2 labs per week in each of her classes and never sacrifices the education and engagement of her students for an activity that would be easier to prep. Whether the students are designing fireworks, balancing equations to solve a crime, or witnessing her famous ‘Halloween Show,’ students are engaged and left with the realization that Chemistry may be something they are actually good at!”

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Mary Oloyede

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Francis Hammond Middle School
Alexandria, Virginia

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The NSTA conference represents the best opportunity to synthesize my theoretical interests into a coherent teaching practice. My attendance plan is structured around three interconnected themes that address the core challenge in modern science education: how to help all students not just learn facts, but think, speak, and design solutions like practicing scientists and engineers. Based on my interest in computational design thinking and student sensemaking, I have designed an intentional schedule to transition research into actionable classroom strategies.

I will start with the Teaching Strategies and Classroom Practice strand, immersing myself in sessions that model the integration of the four pillars of sensemaking (phenomena, practices, student ideas, and science ideas). I will also explore the Three-Dimensional Assessment to Evaluate Student Sensemaking strand, attending sessions that move beyond evaluating content recall to assessing students' ability to engage in critical thinking through application of knowledge. On the third day, I will attend a poster session to survey a variety of successful implementations, targeting posters that illustrate the "before, during, and after" stages of lessons that integrate place-based or storytelling approaches to make science more relevant and culturally responsive. Finally, I will synthesize the instructional practices I will implement once I am back in my classroom. This conference will enable me to collaborate with other educators to share ideas and propose innovations to support the field of science education. This is an opportunity to bring back strategies I have learned to my team of science teachers.

Danielle Maxwell, Head of Science Department, Francis C. Hammond Middle School, says, "Mary consistently demonstrates a deep commitment to advancing meaningful learning experiences that cultivate curiosity, critical thinking, and academic confidence in students. She employs instructional strategies rooted in evidence-based pedagogy, including inquiry-based learning, dialogic teaching, and the integration of STEM-focused practices that actively engage diverse learners, particularly those who face linguistic or academic challenges. Students frequently highlight her ability to create an inclusive classroom environment that supports every learner's success."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Divya Palakkil-Irinav

**CHEMISTRY TEACHER**

Paradise Valley High School
Phoenix, Arizona

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Over the past three years, my work as a high school chemistry teacher has been shaped by constant reflection, steady growth, and a genuine commitment to student-centered instruction. Every year has taught me something new about how students learn and how I can better support them, especially in courses such as Honors Chemistry, AP Chemistry, and my Dual Enrollment chemistry classes. Over time, my teaching has naturally shifted into a more inquiry driven and hands-on approach. I've seen how much more confident students become when they have opportunities to analyze data, interpret evidence, and build their own understanding of chemical concepts.

Attending the NSTA National Conference will provide the kind of professional learning that directly supports my growth and the needs of my students. Receiving the 2025 Arizona Science Teachers Association's Novice Science Teacher of the Year award was a meaningful moment for me. It affirmed the work I've put in during these early years, but more than that, it encouraged me to keep improving. I want to keep strengthening my curriculum, the way I design assessments, and the systems I use to support students. Outside my own classroom, I hope to bring everything I learn back to my department. I enjoy sharing ideas with colleagues, and our PLC meetings are a great place to discuss new strategies. I also hope to incorporate some of these ideas into ChemClub, where students get to explore chemistry in fun and creative ways. Overall, this opportunity would help me continue growing into the educator I want to be: reflective, student centered, and committed to providing high-quality, equitable chemistry instruction.

Ian Deonise, Principal, Paradise Valley High School, shares, "Everything Divya does is done with passion, caring, and excellence. I am very grateful and happy to have her on my team at PVHS. All of us, teachers, administrators, and students, are elevated as a result of her influence."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Swapnila Pawar

**7TH-GRADE SCIENCE TEACHER**

Strawberry Hill School
Stamford, Connecticut

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My participation in the March 2025 NSTA conference strengthened my instructional practice by reinforcing the value of hands-on biology, student sense-making, inclusive design, and thoughtful assessment. The sessions I attended emphasized hands-on investigation, student sense-making, and teacher agency—all of which directly support my work as a middle school science educator and enhance learning experiences for my students.

Looking ahead to future NSTA conferences, I am particularly interested in sessions that build upon these experiences. The 2026 session "Designing 3D Assessments in Partnership with Generative AI" aligns directly with my goal of strengthening assessment practices in life sciences. Building on my work with phenomena-based instruction, this workshop would support my ability to design NGSS-aligned, three-dimensional assessments that capture students' knowledge-in-use. The focus on ethical and responsible use of generative AI is especially valuable, as it emphasizes teacher judgment, student voice, and local classroom context. I am also interested in sessions focused on inclusive science instruction, such as those addressing Universal Design for Learning and learning maps for individualized instruction. These sessions would provide concrete strategies for adapting investigations, supporting diverse learners, and maintaining high expectations for all students. Finally, sessions that integrate environmental literacy and action, such as "Science Activities That Inspire Environmental Awareness and Action," connect life science learning to real-world relevance. These approaches support systems thinking and empower students to apply biological concepts to sustainability and environmental challenges. Continued participation in future NSTA sessions will allow me to build on this foundation, ensuring that my students experience rigorous, engaging, and equitable life science instruction.

Rob de Andrade Jr., Assistant Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Supervisor of STEM, Stamford Public Schools, says "Mrs. Pawar demonstrates a strong commitment to professional growth and high-quality science instruction. She actively strengthens her practice through professional learning. Mrs. Pawar designs engaging, hands-on learning experiences that connect science to real-world contexts. These experiences promote inquiry, problem-solving, and deep conceptual understanding."

# MAITLAND P. SIMMONS MEMORIAL AWARD FOR NEW TEACHERS OF SCIENCE

**WINNER**

## Gabryella Wilder

**BIOLOGY SCIENCE TEACHER**

Northern Lehigh
Slatington, Pennsylvania

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In education, we often talk about the gap between theory and practice. This is the distance between the standards written on paper and what actually happens in a classroom. As I balance the roles of biology teacher and instructional coach, my daily reality is living in that gap. The NSTA conference represents an opportunity for me to step back from this balancing act and focus on building the bridges our district needs right now. My plan for the conference is not just to gather resources, but to target three specific areas of growth: stabilizing our middle school implementation of Open SciEd, continuing to aid teachers in our STEELS standards transition, and sharpening my own skills as an educator.

As we work through our Open SciEd curriculum adoption, our teachers are in need of training for teaching as a facilitator and letting students guide inquiry. I plan to attend sessions focused on Open SciEd to learn how to manage the productive struggle that comes along with teaching this kind of curriculum. I intend to immerse myself in sessions that break down three-dimensional assessment. To keep my own classroom practice fresh, I will be attending biology-specific sessions. I am particularly interested in how other biology teachers are weaving in current events, such as climate resilience or genetic engineering, to make the content feel urgent and real. Attending the NSTA conference is about equipping myself to support our middle schoolers today while paving the road for our transition to STEELS tomorrow. I plan to return with a notebook full of ideas and a clear, actionable vision to help teachers and students thrive through these changes.

Dr. Lori A. Bali, Principal, shares, “Perhaps most impressive is Mrs. Wilder’s dedication to the students of the school. She continually goes above and beyond the nature of her assignment to address the diverse needs of the students she serves. In my experience as a teacher and administrator, I have not seen an educator more dedicated to the profession.”

# ROBERT E. YAGER EXEMPLARY TEACHING AWARDS

SPONSORED BY:

## Yager Family Trust

**This award recognizes excellence and innovation in the field of science education. This award acknowledges teachers who share Robert Yager's passion for education and continued professional development. This award also honors Robert Yager's effort to make excellent science education accessible to students of the 21st century and beyond. Awardees will have exhibited excellence and innovation in the field of science education and embody the mission statement of NSTA. Six awardees will be selected annually.**

**The individual awardees will receive $1,000 to participate in any of the NSTA 2025-2026 conference offerings and a plaque.**

**WINNER**

## Rebecca Maynard

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

District I (CT, MA, RI)
Framingham High School
Framingham, Massachusetts

In my 23 years of teaching in New York and Massachusetts, I have taught a wide range of science courses at varying levels, from alternative education to advanced placement college level courses. The most important factor in motivating students and being a successful educator is forming strong student-to-teacher bonds. I develop in students a respect and commitment to protecting our environment. To do this, I use strategies to connect students to nature.

The easiest way to show students the splendor of different environments is through experiential learning. I work hard to give students these opportunities by applying for grants, connecting with community members, and presenting at school committee meetings. My students attend Northeastern University's Marine Science Symposium and visit their marine science center yearly where they sample microplastics, investigate abiotic and biotic factors within tide pools, and learn about active research projects. We also visit Drumlin Farms to see how sustainable farming practices increase productivity. Many of my laboratory exercises use a wooded area with a small wetland behind our school. Here, learners conduct species surveys, identifying plants, animals, protists, and fungi.

I have had visiting PhD students from Woods Hole present about their research on coral degradation, plastic pollution, and eutrophication. I also have a local artist visit yearly, who teaches students that you can find beauty everywhere and that the interconnectedness between humans and all species is vital to our survival. I have found a passion for teaching through my experience teaching AP environmental science and running our school's Environmental Awareness Club. Inspiring students to make lifestyle changes to lower their ecological footprint, listening to their stories about discussions with family and friends, and seeing many pursue a degree in environmental science solidifies that I am making a positive impact.

Mark R. Albright, Principal, Framingham High School, shares, "Rebecca's classroom is grounded in inquiry, real-world problem solving, and authentic scientific investigation. She engages students through hands-on learning, data analysis, and field-based experiences that deepen their understanding of environmental systems and stewardship."

# ROBERT E. YAGER EXEMPLARY TEACHING AWARDS

SPONSORED BY:

## Yager Family Trust

**This award recognizes excellence and innovation in the field of science education. This award acknowledges teachers who share Robert Yager's passion for education and continued professional development. This award also honors Robert Yager's effort to make excellent science education accessible to students of the 21st century and beyond. Awardees will have exhibited excellence and innovation in the field of science education and embody the mission statement of NSTA. Six awardees will be selected annually.**

**The individual awardees will receive $1,000 to participate in any of the NSTA 2025-2026 conference offerings and a plaque.**

**WINNER**

## Sarmistha Ghosh

**BIOLOGY TEACHER**

District VI (NC, SC, TN)
Hawthorne Academy of Health Sciences
Charlotte, North Carolina

With over a decade of U.S. and international experience as an AP Biology educator and science education leader, I make science real, fair, and inquiry-driven, engaging students to think and act like scientists through observation, modeling, and experimentation. In my school, I bring Robert E. Yager's vision to life by designing NGSS-aligned, phenomenon-based lessons anchored in topics like antibiotic resistance, energy transformation, and genetic variation that transform students into active investigators and informed citizens. I believe biological processes must be experienced, not merely explained. Many students are multilingual or have IEPs; instruction is scaffolded with bilingual visual supports, tactile materials, and step-by-step lab diagrams. Students don't memorize terms; they practice forming questions, building models, analyzing data, and defending claims with evidence.

I believe equity is the engine of excellence. I founded the Innovative Minds STEM Club to ensure that students, regardless of background, engage in genuine investigation. Projects include low-cost hydroponic systems, water-quality monitoring of local creeks, and testing eco-friendly materials. I present on phenomenon-based modeling, AI integration, sustainability, and inclusive design. In workshops I lead, teachers experience modeling first—folding, building, arguing from evidence—then leave with NGSS-aligned resources. Colleagues share these sessions "rekindle their curiosity," a reminder that teacher learning drives student wonder. In my classroom, science is a way of life; students ask deeper questions, seek stronger evidence, and design solutions. Through modeling, authentic inquiry, inclusivity, and leadership, I nurture confident, compassionate problem-solvers who see themselves and their communities through the lens of science.

Dr. Kirill Afonin Professor, Department of Chemistry University of North Carolina at Charlotte, says, "Ms. Ghosh is not only a master educator but also a visionary leader who embodies the ideals of equity, innovation, and excellence in science education. Her unwavering dedication to fostering scientific curiosity and providing equitable access to authentic research experiences truly distinguishes her as one of North Carolina's most impactful science teachers."

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**WINNER**

## MATTHEW HOLDEN

**TEACHER**

District VII (AR, LA, MS)
Fayetteville High School
Fayetteville, Arkansas

Prior to becoming an educator, I worked as a conservation biologist and ecologist, which instilled in me a passion for science, inquiry, and the environment. A major goal is to instill the same passion and appreciation for conservation and the environment in my students and provide them with the skills to become future global changemakers. I emphasize an explorer mindset and help students develop the skills, knowledge, and attributes necessary to think critically and creatively to solve the world's most pressing problems. By developing an explorer mindset, students better understand the interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds and develop an appreciation for diverse communities and cultures. I provide opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom through partnerships with nonprofit organizations, municipalities, and universities, as well as summer international scientific research trips.

One lesson that I developed to increase student engagement and foster positive learning outcomes involved students investigating major sources of pollution and their effect on the environment, public policy, and the economy. I co-founded Youth Guardians of Conservation NWA, a nonprofit aimed at increasing authentic scientific research opportunities for underrepresented students throughout the region. Through the nonprofit, students have been able to participate in local, regional, and international scientific experiences that would otherwise be unattainable. By engaging in real-world lessons, revealing the connections between the human and natural worlds, celebrating diversity in the scientific field, and providing opportunities for students to take part in authentic experiences outside the classroom, my students not only master NGSS standards, but develop an explorer mindset and the skills necessary to become future global changemakers.

Leah Stallcup, former Honors Biology 9 student, says, "Mr. Holden works tremendously hard to engage his students in his class every day by listening to them and hearing their ideas, as well as understanding their perspectives when it comes to schoolwork. His overwhelming passion for his subject and his job seem to overflow from his welcoming personality, and he has such a profound influence on everybody that he teaches, or is even around."

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**WINNER**

## CHRIS EMBRY MOHR

**SCIENCE & AGRICULTURE TEACHER**

District XII (IL, IA, WI)
Olympia High School
Stanford, Illinois

Throughout my 32 years as a high school agriculture and science teacher, I have had the opportunity to teach students enrolled in agriculture—the science of how food and agricultural systems work—while also engaging students in traditional science courses through real-world phenomena and authentic problems. My students and I developed and proposed the construction of a 30×96-foot greenhouse. Students participated in every phase of the project, from calculating materials and pouring concrete to securing donated supplies from local businesses and designing a storage shed. This project became a cornerstone for applied science and engineering activities for science, agriculture, and math. Over the years, students have conducted plant growth experiments examining environmental factors. We grow plants hydroponically and raise tilapia for several years. Produce grown by students has been served in the school cafeteria, and tilapia are prepared by students in foods classes, allowing students to experience the full cycle of food production.

One of our most impactful projects is an ongoing collaboration with the University of Illinois. Crop Sciences professor Dr. Tony Studer works with students to collect and analyze data on popcorn as part of university research. Students analyze popping quality, plant growth, and yield data, then make decisions about which popcorn lines to plant the following year. I strive to make science relevant and challenging by incorporating real-world examples, industry speakers, and investigations. Students learn that failure is part of scientific progress, a lesson reinforced by researchers who explain that most experiments fail before succeeding. After more than three decades in education, my focus remains the same: creating meaningful learning experiences for students and supporting educators in transforming science instruction for all learners.

Kristin Rademaker Past-President, ISTA, shares, "I have come to see Chris Embry Mohr as a transformative leader in science education. She strikes me as one of the most genuine caring people I have ever met. Her love of working with both students and adults is contagious. Her deep commitment to personal growth reflects in her students."

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**WINNER**

## SELENE VERHOFSTAD

**VIRTUAL INSTRUCTOR**

District XIII (NM, OK, TX)
Pasadena Virtual School
Pasadena, Texas

My work as a science educator is grounded in the belief that meaningful science learning must be inquiry-driven, student-centered, and accessible to all learners. I serve as an online science teacher through Pasadena Virtual School, where I teach physics, chemistry, and environmental science. Teaching online has strengthened my commitment to instructional design that prioritizes student thinking, collaboration, and engagement with scientific ideas. My instruction emphasizes sensemaking rather than memorization. Each unit begins with a phenomenon or guiding question that students explain using evidence, data, and reasoning. Students observe patterns, ask questions, test ideas, and revise thinking over time, helping them understand science as an active process rather than a collection of facts.

A central feature of my teaching practice is modeling instruction, which places student thinking at the center of learning. I began implementing modeling during pandemic-era hybrid instruction and have continued refining it. Adapting this approach to an online environment required careful planning. I use digital whiteboards, simulations, annotated visuals, and collaborative documents to support model development and revision. Students share models asynchronously, analyze peer work, and revise explanations based on feedback. This structure preserves modeling while allowing students time to think deeply and engage with content.

My instructional practices center student thinking, inquiry, and engagement. Scientific discussion is regular; students compare models, debate explanations, and support claims with evidence. Responsibility for learning is shared through peer feedback, reflection, and revision cycles, building a classroom culture grounded in cooperation, respect, and curiosity.

Jay Forrest, Program Manager, Pasadena Virtual School, says, "Dr. Verhofstad has transformed virtual science education through rigorous instruction and collaborative leadership. Her courses exemplify an inquiry-driven approach tailored to virtual learning, integrating conceptual understanding with authentic scientific investigation through simulations and virtual labs to deepen reasoning beyond traditional methods."

# ROBERT E. YAGER EXEMPLARY TEACHING AWARDS

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**WINNER**

## CHRISTOPHER SARKONAK

**PHYSICS AND SCIENCE TEACHER**

District XVIII (Canada)
Crocus Plains Regional Secondary School
Brandon, Manitoba

The physics program at Christopher Sarkonak's school has nearly tripled in size from what he took over seven years ago; there are more girls interested in physics, and there are more students from every academic background that now know that they can be successful in a challenging program with his guidance. Sarkonak often introduces most topics with a lab or demonstration, hooking students, but the way he prompts and guides students leads them to discover most of the topic before they even begin speaking about it. He has them discuss their observations and coaches them in how to think scientifically so that they can come to the conclusions themselves.

Understanding students' test anxiety and how that can interfere with the demonstration of learning, he runs a classroom without tests. Having students from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, he does his best to respect and value their time, so there is also no homework in his classroom. Valuing students' well-being and mental health is a large part of what has led him to innovate and create a system that is more sustainable for the students and him. This perspective has led Sarkonak to create a system based on feedback and building portfolios of work, so as not to punish, discourage, and demotivate students in their learning. To develop grades and give students agency and ownership, he builds the course with students at the start of the semester. He talks to them about their learning: what they want to get out of a course and the things that stand in their way. This has led to a student-driven program that is among the most popular programs in the school.

Elliot Baldwin, Science Teacher, Crocus Plains Regional Secondary School, shares that "Students are even requesting to be transferred from other schools even if only for this singular course and teacher. After talking with some of these students, they confirm that Christopher Sarkonak's course is often more challenging than others, but they are drawn in regardless because of how accessible he makes the content and how enjoyable he makes the learning experience."

# SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD

## 2026 SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD RECIPIENT

### Melissa Kowalski

**MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE TEACHER**

Put-in-Bay School
Put-in-Bay, OH

SPONSORED BY:
Shell USA, Inc.

**This award recognizes one outstanding classroom science teacher (K–12) who has had a positive impact on his or her students, school, and community through exemplary classroom science teaching.**

**The two finalists receive a citation and expenses to participate in any of the NSTA 2025-2026 conference offerings. In addition to expenses, the awardee receives a check for $10,000, formal citation, and commemorative clock.**

Melissa Kowalski's K–12 school building is located in a unique setting, on an island in Lake Erie accessible only by ferry or plane. This physical location offers environmental settings that are easily accessible within a class period, including Lake Erie and nature preserves boasting prairies to woodlands to wetlands. She uses the local environment as her classroom and strives to promote experiential learning. For example, she uses a nearby wooded nature preserve as an "outdoor classroom" and conducts virtual fieldtrips where students can directly chat with research scientists and industry specialists about their role. Students also collect and analyze real-world data, which gives them a better understanding of the process of science and why it is so important to be consistent with data collection methods. The school is in the direct path of various bird and pollinator migratory patterns. Each year during peak avian migratory season, Kowalski coordinates with a researcher from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History to take all K–12 students bird banding. They experience real-world science as they assist in collecting data on bird species, sex, weight, and more using industry tools and techniques. Students learn about the value of sharing their findings with others, which is further solidified by classroom analysis of the longitudinal data collected over decades, where students gain firsthand insights about the importance of their particular location to bird migrations. Through these experiences, students take ownership over the conservation efforts on the island that are designed to protect natural habitats from residential and commercial development.

# SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD

## 2026 SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD FINALIST

### Crystal Doi

**ELEMENTARY STEM TEACHER**

Kapunahala Elementary School
Kaneohe, HI

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Crystal Doi believes that science isn't just found in a book; it's something you do. Her classroom is an active lab where students are scientists and engineers. She sees herself less as a teacher and more as a guide, helping students transition from soaking up information to becoming confident, 21st-century problem-solvers. The heart of her teaching is scientific inquiry. She challenges students to look at the world around them, find something interesting, and define their own problem to solve. Students use the engineering design process like a GPS for every project, naturally integrating all parts of STEM, which makes the learning feel real and relevant. Her students are always building and testing models. They're figuring out how to use the technology, designing the solution, and using math to analyze results. She constantly changes projects to match what's going on in the news or in the community. She makes sure her students know it's okay to fail. She intentionally lets them try out crazy, innovative ideas. Failure is just really good data! These setbacks force students to think differently, collaborate with their peers, and push their solutions further. It builds their resilience and teaches them to be creative innovators. By giving students the confidence to fail and encouraging collaboration, she ensures that students whose strengths lie in design, manual dexterity, or teamwork—rather than purely traditional academics—can thrive. Her teaching ensures every child, regardless of background, develops the resilient, creative problem-solving mindset needed to become an innovative scientific engineer.

# SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD

## 2026 SHELL SCIENCE TEACHING AWARD FINALIST

### Jason Dokie

**ELEMENTARY SCIENCE TEACHER**

Helendale Elementary School
Helendale, CA

Jason Dokie provides students with hands-on experiences in real scenarios while partnering with community members to ensure the best learning opportunity possible. Through STEM, all students apply scientific and engineering methods to observe, question, research, hypothesize, test, collect, analyze, collaborate, and conclude, which all apply to the real world. If their idea doesn't work, then they re-design the prototype until it meets the needs of their solution. Experiences that excite all the senses have proven to be long-lasting and effective in skills development and knowledge retention. So, Dokie provides students with educational experiences that are dynamic with an overload of feedback. His students have hiked mountains, snorkeled and kayaked in the ocean, interacted with ocean and lake life, traversed rivers and streams, snowboarded slopes, rafted Class V rapids, zip lined over forests, submerged themselves in snowmelt waterfalls, and SCUBA dived to 60 feet. These experiences are unforgettable and truly a milestone in many of their lives. When working in any of his programs, his students network with professionals, interviewing them and collaborating to create new paths to solving problems. His students have surveyed and interviewed the public to determine a core problem in the community, partnered with local and international nonprofits, collaborated with city organizations, and sacrificed hours of their personal lives reviewing data to determine a conclusion. STEM education is more than a subject in a textbook—it's a lifestyle of learning.

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# SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE

**2026 SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE GRAND PRIZE WINNER**

*ELEMENTARY*

## Mistie Barron

Fairmont Elementary School
Pasadena, TX
Deer Park Asset

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OUTFITTED BY:

FLINN SCIENTIFIC

**This award recognizes exceptional and innovative science educators, in K–12 school programs for their exemplary approaches to science lab instruction utilizing limited school and laboratory resources and raise awareness and exposure of the outstanding work being done in the science education field in areas near Shell assets. Grand Prize winners have won lab makeovers and a trip with their administrator to participate in at NSTA's spring National Conference on Science Education.**

Mistie Barron's philosophy for teaching science is centered around creating a student-focused environment that emphasizes active, inquiry-based learning. She firmly believes that students learn best through hands-on experiences. In her classroom students are not passive recipients of information; they are active explorers and experimenters. Barron strives to make every activity student-centered, encouraging curiosity and engagement where students are actively exploring and testing the concepts they are learning. Students engage in lab-based activities, working directly with materials to explore scientific concepts. This hands-on approach allows them to see the real-world applications of their studies. Barron attended the fall NSTA conference, where she gained valuable insights into STEM best practices and connected with educators nationwide. This experience inspired many ideas for her lab transformation. The funds from this award that helped upgrade the lab has revolutionized her teaching. With organized cabinets, labeled resources, and hands-on kits, she can now deliver inquiry-based lessons efficiently. Students are more engaged and curious than ever. Tools like stream tables, adaptation stations, and circuit kits make abstract concepts tangible. Live organisms and interactive kits have sparked excitement, leading to deeper understanding and improved participation. It shifted her approach from teacher-led demonstrations to more beneficial student-driven investigations.

# SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE

**2026 SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE GRAND PRIZE WINNER**

*MIDDLE SCHOOL*

## Erica Carter

Houma Junior High School
Houma, LA
New Orleans Asset

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Erica Carter believes that every student has a natural curiosity for science, and her role is to nurture that curiosity while building a strong foundation in scientific thinking. Her classroom is a supportive space where students are encouraged to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them. She emphasizes the value of evidence-based reasoning and real-world problem solving to help prepare students for both academic and career success. By fostering a dynamic, student-centered learning environment, she aims to ignite a lifelong passion for science and empower students to see themselves as capable, innovative thinkers who can make meaningful contributions to the world. The award funds for her lab update have transformed science instruction for approximately 700 seventh- and eighth-grade students by making hands-on, inquiry-based learning routine. New kits allow students to collect data, model abstract concepts, and engage in evidence-based investigations. A demonstration table with a portable sink has produced labs that are safe, efficient, and repeatable, letting students focus on investigation rather than logistics. Providing safety goggles for all classes ensured equitable access to hands-on experiments across grade levels, and a schoolwide weather station expanded STEM opportunities beyond her classroom, allowing students to collect and analyze real-world data while making cross-curricular connections. Student learning has grown through increased engagement, collaboration, and confidence. Students are now more willing to take intellectual risks, analyze data critically, and communicate evidence-based conclusions.

# SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE

**2026 SHELL SCIENCE LAB REGIONAL CHALLENGE GRAND PRIZE WINNER**

*HIGH SCHOOL*

## Jose Rivas

Lennox Math, Science, and Technology Academy
Lennox, CA
Carson Asset

Jose Rivas's classroom is driven by autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Students take ownership of their learning in a flexible learning environment where they have opportunities to fail without consequences and grow. On a typical day, he works with individual students and teams to set up learning goals to help students plan short- and long-term projects. Rivas minimizes lectures and provides a forum for discussion driven by collaboration between students and himself, between peers, and between visiting professionals who work with students. This classroom environment models the environment he had while working at Boeing. However, for this environment to work, the "why" of their projects must drive how they connect and engage with the solutions they are developing. The "why" should be culturally relevant and connect to their immediate lives, to what is happening in their homes or in the community. Rivas empowers his students to create their own personal brand that reflects their beliefs to improve their community through the lens of social justice and design thinking principles. The funds from this award have transformed his science program. Upgraded equipment has allowed teachers to redesign instruction around hands on investigations that strengthen both scientific understanding and academic language. The new equipment also improved instructional alignment. The department was able to vertically coordinate the curriculum and intentionally select tools that support science literacy at every grade level. The state science proficiency rose to 55%, demonstrating a clear connection between updated equipment, stronger instructional practices, and improved outcomes.

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# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

**WINNER**

## NANA BAFFOUR

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

David Crockett Middle School
Richmond, TX

From the moment Nana Baffour stepped into a job fair and confidently declared that she could teach science simply because "I know how to read," she began navigating an unconventional path into science education. That moment marked the beginning of a career shaped by curiosity, determination, and a commitment to learning alongside her students. Since she did not come from a traditional science background, she actively found opportunities to build her scientific knowledge and instructional skill. She immersed herself in professional learning, leaned on colleagues, and worked intentionally to understand scientific concepts and how to communicate them in meaningful ways. Her goal has always been to make science accessible, engaging, and relevant so her students could connect it to their everyday lives rather than view learning about science as distant or intimidating. The formula she discovered for effective teaching is simple but powerful: relationships first. Building strong relationships allowed students to believe in themselves and the science. Throughout her career, Baffour has continued to pursue professional growth, which has challenged her thinking, strengthened her practice, and shaped her students' science experience while also giving her the confidence to mentor teachers, lead workshops at conferences, and serve as an instructional coach. She is attending the NSTA conference not only to strengthen her own classroom practice, but to gather tools, strategies, and insights that will allow her to better support other science teachers. At the conference, she plans to engage with innovative teaching methods, research-based practices, and sessions focused on student inquiry, engagement, and conceptual understanding. Ultimately, this will help her continue growing into a more effective, impactful educator.

SPONSORED BY:

Shell USA, Inc.

**This award provides support to outstanding urban science educators in pursuit of professional development with active participation at the NSTA National Conference on Science Education and serves to increase the science educator talent pool of STEM educators to meet the education workforce challenge of the future.**

**The award consists of $1800 to be used to participate at NSTA's spring National Conference on Science Education. Recipients will be invited to attend a variety of workshops and presentations that are of particular interest to urban teachers at the annual National Conference. Up to seven awards will be given.**

# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Jalavender Clowney

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Saluda Trail Middle School
Rock Hill, SC

Jalavender Clowney developed a strong passion for education while growing up in an underserved community in South Carolina. These experiences shaped her understanding of how opportunity gaps impact student outcomes and motivated her to pursue education as a pathway for equity, empowerment, and long-term change. Her science education journey is rooted in a deep commitment to student growth, equity, and authentic learning experiences. She designs instruction that is student-centered and grounded in real-world relevance. Effective science instruction requires cultivating curiosity, critical thinking, and confidence so students begin to see themselves as scientists, problem-solvers, and future leaders. Simulations and interactive platforms enhance student engagement, monitor progress, and provide timely, data-informed feedback. These tools also help her differentiate instruction and offer multiple pathways for students to demonstrate understanding. Beyond the classroom, Clowney serves as the science department chair, supporting curriculum alignment, facilitating collaborative planning, and leading data-driven discussions focused on improving student outcomes. She also serves as a district professional learning community leader for science, collaborating with educators across the district to share best practices and support the implementation of high-quality science instruction. Her passion for science education extends into the community through her participation in Atrium Health's Pearl Ambassador Program, where she helps develop STEM-focused service projects and partnerships that connect classroom learning to real-world impact. She previously attended the NSTA National Conference in Philadelphia where she presented in a session titled "Bridging STEM Between Charlotte and Philly: A Teacher Talk on Collaborative Innovation." This experience was deeply inspiring and reinforced the importance of collaboration, innovation, and shared leadership within the STEM education community.

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# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Sierra Graves

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Thrive Christian Academy
Tucker, GA

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Sierra Graves's work as a science educator has been rooted in this truth: STEM should be a space where every child discovers their brilliance, their belonging, and their voice. Every lesson she designs, every student she mentors, every program she builds, and every barrier she helps dismantle is driven by reshaping what STEM looks like, who it includes, and who feels at home within it. As a middle school science teacher, she designs inquiry-rich, hands-on experiences that help students see science as something they could question, own, and create. She transitioned into the role of Director of STEM Integration and Innovation while continuing to teach middle school STEM. In this dual role, she leads the science department, oversees curriculum alignment, coaches teachers, and guides the science fair process across grade levels. As director and teacher, she designed a comprehensive STEM program integrating 3D printing, laser engraving, robotics, coding, and digital storytelling, and launched THRIVE's inaugural multiweek Summer STEM Camp to extend learning beyond the school year. This year, she formed and coached THRIVE's first all-Black boys robotics team that placed 5th out of 200 teams in a statewide competition. Former students who once doubted themselves hold degrees in biology, nursing, and engineering and are stepping confidently into laboratories, hospitals, and design firms. Advancing science and STEM education for students of color is not just meaningful—it is urgent, legacy-building, and life-changing. At the NSTA conference Graves will be presenting on her work in equity and advocacy in STEM education and taking the opportunity to learn, grow, and return to her school community with new insights that will enrich instruction and expand student opportunities.

# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Kinya Heard

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Park Forest Middle School
Baton Rouge, LA

Kinya Heard's journey as a science educator has been shaped by a simple belief: all students deserve meaningful, engaging, high-quality science learning experiences. Working with limited resources has motivated her to make science come alive for students and to ensure they experience it as relevant, exciting, and attainable. She emphasizes science and engineering practices by encouraging students to ask questions, investigate problems, analyze data, and explain their thinking using evidence. She is creative and intentional when planning instruction by designing hands-on learning experiences using low-cost materials, group collaboration, and problem-based challenges that reflect real-world science and engineering. She also believes strongly in giving students learning experiences beyond the classroom by organizing and leading educational field trips to NASA in Houston and the Disney Youth Education Series (YES) Program. During these trips, students participated in structured STEM learning and interacted with real-world scientific systems and professionals. Equity is at the heart of her work. Teaching in an urban school has reinforced the importance of advocating for access to quality science instruction and opportunities. She is committed to ensuring students receive learning experiences comparable to those in more resourced schools. She continuously seeks partnerships, professional development, and new strategies to better support her students. Attending the NSTA conference is an important part of her ongoing professional development and commitment to improving science instruction for students in underserved communities. At the conference, her primary goal is to gain instructional strategies and resources that help her clearly connect science content to college and career pathways for her students.

SPONSORED BY:

Shell USA, Inc.

**This award provides support to outstanding urban science educators in pursuit of professional development with active participation at the NSTA National Conference on Science Education and serves to increase the science educator talent pool of STEM educators to meet the education workforce challenge of the future.**

**The award consists of $1800 to be used to participate at NSTA's spring National Conference on Science Education. Recipients will be invited to attend a variety of workshops and presentations that are of particular interest to urban teachers at the annual National Conference. Up to seven awards will be given.**

# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Danielle English Jones

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Proviso West School
Hillside, IL

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Danielle English Jones's journey in science education is rooted in perseverance, opportunity, and a deep commitment to giving back to the community that shaped her. She often had to work harder to make the same academic gains as her peers, but she refused to give up. That determination continues to define both her approach to science and her work as an educator. She began her teaching career in Chicago Public Schools at a turnaround school serving students with significant academic and social-emotional needs. Teaching in this environment was challenging, but it reaffirmed her commitment to equity, access, and excellence in science education. She understood firsthand what it meant to struggle academically, to need multiple exposures, and to persist despite obstacles—experiences that continue to shape how she teaches and supports students. In 2025, she was named an Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Teacher of the Year. Attending the national conference will be a meaningful extension of her work as a science educator and instructional leader focused on inquiry-driven, equitable science instruction. Her professional goal is to continuously refine her practice in ways that make science engaging, relevant, and accessible to all students. This conference provides a valuable opportunity to deepen her learning, explore emerging instructional strategies, and bring innovative practices back to her classroom and school community.

# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Tiffany Scott

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Grovetown Elementary School
Grovetown, GA

Tiffany Scott's love for STEM began in her formative years thanks to Mrs. Frizzle and Bill Nye the Science Guy. Though she didn't know it then, their enthusiasm for teaching and inspiring curiosity would later shape her teaching philosophy and approach to science education. For 17 years, she has taught science to upper elementary students in Louisiana, where she brought authentic, memorable STEM experiences into and beyond her classroom. During her first year teaching third grade, her students extended their learning through a schoolwide Science Day where students worked alongside teachers while rotating through investigation stations. The next seven years of her career were spent teaching fourth grade. Highlights from this time included creating homemade lava lamps, hosting community members who worked in STEM careers, and participating in meaningful field trips. Her final decade in Louisiana was spent teaching fifth grade where she learned the power of building strong relationships with community partners. In her third year, she co-founded the school's first FIRST LEGO League robotics club where students learned to code and competed in district competitions. For the past two years in Georgia she has brought enthusiasm, creativity, and STEM experiences to her fifth-grade scientists. Finally, she would love to empower her students to use AI technology properly, which would further refine their digital citizenship and possibly spark a career interest for a field they had not previously considered.

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# SHELL URBAN SCIENCE EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT AWARD

## WINNER

### Stephanie Trimble

**SCIENCE TEACHER**

Brusly Elementary School
Baton Rouge, LA

Stephanie Trimble's mission is to ensure that every child has access to high-quality, hands-on science learning that builds curiosity, confidence, and identity as a scientist. Her professional practice centers on creating relevant, culturally responsive science experiences that highlight the community's strengths. She designed and implemented a schoolwide agriscience initiative where teachers installed a small animal pen, raised chickens from incubators, established a school garden, and created outdoor learning spaces. Students collect daily weather data, investigate plant and animal needs through direct observation, model habitats, and apply engineering design principles to create protective structures for the chickens. Bringing science to life in this way has significantly increased student engagement and pride. Through the success of this initiative, Trimble has taken on a leadership role in expanding STEM access for historically underserved populations. She collaborates with general education and special education teachers to differentiate investigations so all students can experience success. She also serves as a mentor teacher for interns and new hires, supporting their growth in aligned science instruction, effective student discourse routines, and integration of engineering design challenges. She collaborates with colleagues to plan professional learning communities focused on data-driven decisions to close gaps in science literacy. Last year's NSTA conference reinforced her commitment to equitable STEM education and inspired her to implement new inquiry routines. Her goals for the next NSTA conference include building a network of educators committed to equity in STEM, gathering resources and strategies to lead professional development in her district, and planning sustainable follow-through to impact students and community.

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# SYLVIA SHUGRUE AWARD FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

SPONSORED BY:

## Shugrue Family Trust

**This award honors an elementary school teacher who has established (or is establishing) an interdisciplinary, inquiry-based lesson plan. The lesson plan will fully reference sources of information and any relevant National Science Education Standards and benchmarks found in the Atlas of Science Literacy.**

**The awardee receives $1,000 and up to $500 to participate in any of the NSTA 2025-2026 conference offerings.**

**WINNER**

## Charlotte Catalina Collins

**TK / KINDERGARTEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER**

Los Berros Elementary School
Lompoc, North Carolina

Charlotte Catalina Collins is an elementary educator whose science teaching is guided by a deep belief that early experiences shape how students—and their teachers—come to see science. Drawing on more than a decade of experience across K–12 science education, she designs inquiry-based learning that is rigorous yet accessible, ensuring that science feels meaningful and approachable. Her lesson, Force: Pushes and Pulls, reflects this purpose. Designed for grades K–2 and aligned to NGSS performance expectations, it engages students in hands-on investigation using stomp rockets to explore how forces cause motion. Students ask questions, plan and carry out investigations, analyze data, and construct explanations grounded in evidence, building foundational understandings of cause and effect and engineering design through developmentally appropriate inquiry.

Equally central to the lesson's design is support for elementary educators. Clear procedures and scripts help reduce barriers for teachers who may feel uncertain about teaching science, making inquiry feel manageable rather than intimidating. By intentionally integrating science with literacy, history, and social-emotional learning—including Common Core–aligned narrative writing—the lesson reinforces existing instructional priorities while strengthening scientific thinking. Assessment is embedded throughout instruction using a triangulated approach that includes oral reasoning, classification tasks, and written conceptual transfer. This system provides reliable evidence of student understanding while honoring diverse learning profiles, including multilingual learners and students with disabilities. By introducing science early—through experiences that are joyful, structured, and human-centered—this work aims to prepare students for the scientific challenges of the future while empowering teachers to teach science with confidence.

Drew Gibson, Special Education Teacher Chapel Hill, Carrboro City Schools, says, "Ms. Collins is a dedicated classroom teacher, leads from the trenches, and is a strong advocate for students who are too often underestimated. Her work reminds us that equity in science education doesn't happen by accident—it happens because someone is committed to making it happen. I have never seen someone show such dedication to using all of her talents to serve those who are too often left out or left behind."

# 2027 NSTA Teacher Awards

## OVER $72,000 IN CASH AND PRIZES

Apply Today

| Awards | Who Can Apply | Award Description |
|---|---|---|
| **Angela Award** | 5th–8th grade female science student | $500 Cash Prize |
| **Maitland P. Simmons-Memorial Award for New Teachers** | NSTA Members who are teachers that have taught less than five years full-time at the time of application | $1000 toward expenses to attend the National Conference (if applicable) |
| **Shell Science Teaching Award** | K-12 science teachers with a minimum of eight years of experience (not including the current school year) as a teacher of science | **Winner:** $10,000 cash prize & an all-expenses paid trip to attend the National Conference (if applicable).<br><br>**Finalists:** All-expenses paid trip to attend the National Conference (if applicable) |
| **Shell Urban Science Educators Development Award** | K-12 science teachers in an urban setting. Classroom science teachers at the elementary, middle or high school level who are part of underrepresented populations in STEM are eligible. | $1800 for expenses to attend the National Conference (if applicable), a year's membership in NSTA, AMSE, and a year's subscription in the Shell Educator Cohort |
| **Sylvia Shugrue Award** | Full-time elementary school teachers (grades K–6) with a minimum of five years of experience | $1000 cash prize, & $500 for expenses to attend the National Conference (if applicable) |
| **Robert E. Yager Award** | K–12 science teachers residing in NSTA's districts | $1000 cash prize & $1000 for expenses to attend the National Conference (if applicable) |

**Deadline for 2027 award application submission:**

**December 19, 2026**

Note: All award offerings are contingent upon funding from our sponsors.