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Indianapolis Public Schools Names 2021 Teacher of the Year



John Hesser
Harshman Middle School

(June 5, 2020) — Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) has named John “Jack” Hesser as the 2021 Teacher of the Year. Hesser is a science teacher at Harshman Middle School where he’s worked for the last four years.

From dissecting animals and building mousetrap vehicles to chemical scavenger hunts and building rockets to launch, Hesser’s class is a favorite destination for his students. His popularity extends throughout the building. When teachers needed help with corrective instruction, he created surveys for students to self-report their learning gaps. When teachers and students were frustrated with the bell schedule, he facilitated feedback sessions and created a new one. When the teacher who led the daily announcements left, he stepped up and transformed them into “must-see” TV the students and teachers looked forward to each morning.

In May, he was named 2019’s Outstanding Earth Science Teacher of the Year for Indiana by the National Association of Geoscience Teachers (NAGT). The award is given to Grade K-12

educators who provide “exceptional contributions to the stimulation of interest in the Earth Sciences at the pre-college level.”

Of that honor, Hesser said, “One of the things I try to acknowledge is that attention span is a huge obstacle and students already spend too much of their day sitting. So, any way that we can shake things up, we need to, and science lends itself well to that.” He continued: “There are times we’ll do standing notes, gallery walks or interactive thoughts — where you put your thoughts on a sticky note and then place it on the wall, the windows.”

Hesser is a leader among colleagues, setting an example for how to cultivate strong learning partnerships with students from all backgrounds, ensuring racial equity.

“Recognizing bias without action perpetuates a racist system. I have worked hard to create a positive classroom culture where my students feel seen and heard,” he said.

“With his reflective nature, relationship-building capabilities, highly effective teacher moves, and his wraparound vision, Jack is an unwavering asset to our school culture and a critical key to the success we have experienced here at Harshman. He is one of the most exceptional educators I have ever seen do this work and truly represents everything this award is meant to celebrate,” said Jim Larkin, Harshman principal, in his TOY letter of recommendation for Hesser.

Hesser graduated from Ball State University, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in biology. He earned his master’s in teaching from Marian University.

Here are the other teachers who made the Top 3 TOY finalist list:

William Strother III – Center for Inquiry School 70

William Strother teaches language and literature to students in Grades 6-8 at Center for Inquiry School 70. He’s taught in IPS for four years, and at CFI 70 for one year.

Strother is an urban educator who embeds comic books and pop culture into his language and literature classroom. Through inquiry and student-led approaches, he inspires students to use reading and writing to not only navigate middle school, but also reflect, connect and grow as globally-minded learners.

Strother’s students are empowered by their questions, rather than answers and are celebrated for their growth rather than their perceived proficiency. This, in turn, creates an environment where students feel challenged but celebrated for their hard work. Strother is also a leader of trauma-informed instruction.



Rachael Mitchell – Newcomer Program

Rachael Mitchell is an elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at the Newcomer Program where she is a compassionate, driven and positive educator with an unwavering love and bold spirit for education.

Mitchell teaches English to students in Grades 3-6 who are part of IPS' immigrant and refugee community while also serving in various school and leadership roles. She cultivates a classroom community that is welcoming and inclusive, addressing the social and emotional needs of her students and disrupting inequities in education. Her colleagues seek her out with the hopes of becoming more impactful teachers in their classrooms, and students and families see her as a beacon of hope and a disrupter of inequitable systems.

Mitchell is continually working to improve the lives of her students and their families, ensuring they have access to food, health care, legal and mental health services.



If you have any questions, contact Carrie Black, IPS communications manager, at 317.605.3797.