

# Top teachers surprised with Licking County Foundation awards

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**Ashley Sykes, a first grade teacher at Hebron Elementary School is congratulated by her family after being presented with a Leaders for Learning award from the Licking County Foundation. (Photo: Jessica Phelps, Jessica Phelps/The Advocate)**

NEWARK – English teacher Brian Stepanic was sweating a bit Monday when he saw a crowd of his superiors standing in the hallway outside his classroom.

They were just sort of lingering there, Stepanic said, which would make any teacher uneasy.

Then, the group popped into the classroom with a surprise: Stepanic earned one of the Licking County Foundation's Leaders for Learning awards. He won a glass apple trophy — hand crafted by The Works — and for the rest of his teaching career, he's eligible to apply for grants of up to \$500 annually for either professional development or classroom supplies.

"I was incredibly honored," said Stepanic, who is finishing up his fourth year at Newark High School.

"I know several other colleagues who have received that award, and all of them were wholly deserving, so to be considered in that number is an honor."

The Leaders for Learning award was created in 1993 as a way to honor area teachers who are among the best in their field. The winners each year — 14 in all — are selected by their principals and superintendents for, among others traits, their desire to make a difference in students' lives, their commitment to professional development and their outstanding classroom skills.

The grants are funded through the Linorf-Warner Memorial fund. The Licking County Foundation doesn't release the specific amount in the fund, but each year it doles out at least \$15,000 in grants, said Connie Hawk, the foundation's director.

Hawk has been involved in the program seven years, and her favorite part is always watching student reactions when their teachers get surprised with the awards, she said.

In Stepanic's case, for example, several of his students retweeted a picture of him and Newark City Schools Superintendent Doug Ute posing with the apple trophy.

"We really want to recognize teachers who inspire the young leaders of tomorrow," Hawk said. "They also inspire folks in the community. They inspire us. We just really want to be able to recognize that leadership. It's significant."

The winning teachers were surprised one by one in their classrooms this week. For Legend Elementary School second-grade teacher Melissa Broschak, having her students share in the moment was one of the best parts.

"They took such joy in it," said Broschak, who is in her 16th year teaching for Newark City Schools. "They were really excited. I think it's a neat thing that they do give it to you in front of your class rather than in front of your peers. It means more in that setting."

On Friday, the final teacher to get a glass apple was Hebron Elementary School first-grade teacher Ashley Sykes. Her parents, husband, son, aunt and nephew all surprised her, showing up for the presentation ceremony.

Sykes had heard of the awards before, but she never thought she'd be getting one herself, she said, adding that one of the best parts was afterward, when her students kept handing her "congratulations" and "you're the best teacher" cards.

And the winners are:

- Jessica Karr, C-TEC, Junior Culinary Arts
- Lori Fender, Granville Elementary School, third grade
- Thai Sribanditmongkol, Heath High and Middle schools, choir

- Kim Sammons, Oregon Elementary School, second grade
- Ashley Sykes, Hebron Elementary School, first grade
- Megan Johnson, Flying Colors Early Education Center, Early Education Classroom
- Rhonda Daniels, Licking Heights West Elementary School, first grade
- Janine Bock, Licking Valley Elementary School, general music and band
- Melissa Broschak, Legend Elementary School, second grade
- Cathy Allen, Liberty Middle School, eighth grade social studies
- Brian Stepanic, Newark High School, English
- Melissa Pfister, Utica Elementary School, intervention specialist
- Elizabeth Muhlenkamp, Northridge Middle School, seventh grade social studies
- Tracy Hare, Pataskala Elementary School, third grade

Source: Licking County Foundation