



NJDOE News

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Clearview Regional High School English Teacher Named 2003-04 State Teacher of the Year

It didn't hit Diane Cummins until the middle of the night almost 20 years ago.

"I woke my husband up and said, 'This is it,' " Cummins, of Mt. Ephraim, Camden County, said recently. "I thought, 'What do I have to be afraid of? I can do this.' "

So Cummins, married with a son, decided to go back to school to pursue a bachelor's degree in education. She received it in 1989 from Glassboro State College and began teaching 7th-grade language arts that same year. The non-traditional route she took to the classroom and her time in it has certainly paid off.

Today at the monthly State Board of Education meeting, Cummins was named the 2003-2004 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year.

"Diane Cummins is a teacher committed to the basic fundamentals of reading in her classroom and beyond," Commissioner of Education William L. Librera said. "It is apparent from letters written by students and peers in support of this award. She is an educator who uses reading to broaden the horizons for her students — her dedication is clearly apparent and we believe she is an excellent role model for students and her peers throughout the state."

The National Teacher of the Year is announced in April 2004 at a special ceremony in the Rose Garden at the White House. As New Jersey Teacher of the Year, Cummins will be asked to be an advocate and role model for the teaching profession. She will also speak on behalf of teachers statewide and she will represent New Jersey in the National Teacher of the Year competition.

"The Department of Education is proud to name Mrs. Cummins the State Teacher of the Year," Librera said, announcing the recipient of the coveted award. "It is clear to people who meet and talk to her that she has an innate love of teaching and respect for her students' minds. She challenges her students to become better learners each day by introducing to — and reminding them of — the importance of a good book and how it can relate to their lives."

Cummins was selected by a panel of judges who represent the state's educational associations. The panel reviewed the applications of the 21 county teachers of the year and selected Cummins from a field of six finalists.

In an essay on her philosophy of teaching, Cummins wrote: "As a teacher of English, I have the good fortune of teaching students great pieces of literature; they don't always feel so 'fortunate' nor might they deem these pieces as 'great' literature. Times change, events change, settings change, but the human condition does not.

"As a teacher of literature, it is my role to take students outside of the book itself — to connect literary characters and themes to the timeless human condition, for it is in this very place where students will discover insights into truth and life itself."

Cummins spent one year teaching at Maple Shade Junior/Senior High School before moving to the Clearview Regional School District in Gloucester County. She taught language arts for grades 7-9 from 1990 to 1993 before moving to the high school, where she is now the English Department Chairperson. She continues to teach honors English for seniors and remedial English for juniors.

"We are pleased to recognize Diane Cummins as the state Teacher of the Year," said Arnold G. Hyndman, the state board of education president. "The board is proud of Mrs. Cummins accomplishment in the classroom, especially as it relates instruction in literacy. Diane Cummins is the type of teacher all educators should emulate."

Mrs. Cummins is currently pursuing a doctorate in education. She received her Master of Arts in Reading Education from Rowan University in 2000. Her basic teaching philosophy focuses on "3 R's" — Keep it **R**ead, Keep it **R**elevant, and Give Students **R**espect.

Her students say she has challenged them since day one.

"Diane Cummins is more than just a teacher, she is a friend," wrote Timothy P. Makaro, one of her former students. "She has restored a sense of trust and security between the youth and the educator. Many laughs, emotions, and brilliant conversations were shared in and out of her classroom. I am honored to have known her, and I can think of no better way to express my, and the entire school's, gratitude than with this prestigious award."

Pat Carroll, Clearview Regional's Assistant Superintendent, said Cummins "provides an exemplary student-centered instructional program. She is a resourceful and creative individual who designs lessons that include peer interaction, self-reflection, and cognitive conflict components. There is never a time when Mrs. Cummins declines any request the district asks of her."

Cummins spent a year at Douglass College in New Brunswick before leaving to raise a family. She said with each classroom visit with her son, Christopher, she found herself drawn more and more to the teaching profession. When she decided to go back to school to become a teacher, she said her family's support was instrumental in both her decision and determination.

"I could not have done this without them," Cummins said of Christopher and Richard, her husband of 29 years. "I would do school work non-stop on the weekends. They would go on ski trips and I would go with them — but I'd stay in the lodge and do school work."

Cummins said her first day in the classroom, like for most teachers, was a challenge.

"They think you know everything when you really don't," Cummins said. "That's where keeping it real comes in. Kids sense things. They know when you're not being honest. I never have to pretend. Something happens. Something happens that you make them feel safe enough to learn."

Cummins' basic tenet for teaching is one she shares often.

"As educators, we have to believe in kids for them to believe in themselves," she said. "It's our job to believe in every kid."

NOTE TO EDITORS AND REPORTERS: [Attached is a list of the 2003-04 County Teachers of the Year.](#)