



NJDOE News

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Teaneck Teacher receives \$25,000 Milken Family Foundation Award

For James Darden, homework is not negotiable, and his lessons are not confined to classroom hours. His expectations at Thomas Jefferson Middle School are high, and his students, their parents and the school community at large all know it.

"Most of Mr. Darden's students perform at high levels due solely to his ability to instill a sense of accomplishment in them," said Rebecca Williams, a parent of one of Darden's students. "Because he demands so much excellence, no student is willing to give him less."

"It annoys me sometimes when teachers let me get away with everything just because I'm a good student," one of Darden's pupils wrote in a thank you letter to him. "I learned so much in your class. I felt like an employee at a company, where my opinions were useful and valued, but I still had a responsibility to myself and you to get my job done."

It is for these reasons that James Darden received a Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award at a special assembly inside Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Teaneck. There, Darden received a check for \$25,000 and became New Jersey's 11th award recipient.

"It is always important to recognize the effort good teachers bring to their students," acting Gov. Richard J. Codey said. "James Darden is an excellent example of what all teachers should aspire to be: he sets the bar high and his students respond."

"When we honor teachers with National Educator Awards, we are reminded just how vital all teachers are for our children's future," said acting Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy. "Honoring Mr. Darden today is a reminder for all teachers across the state that the effort they make does not go unnoticed. Without good teachers, our students won't be prepared when they enter the workplace. But with teachers like James Darden, they have the best chances."

National Educator Awards are presented each year to educators in the state who are furthering the excellence of the nation's schools. New Jersey and the Milken Family Foundation are in the fourth year of their National Educator Awards partnership. Founder Lowell Milken, the foundation's chairman, created the award program in 1985.

"Excellence must not be the exception in our schools, but rather the norm," Milken said. "By recognizing and rewarding outstanding educators each year, we focus the nation's attention on the critical need to attract, retain and motivate caring, capable people to the American teaching profession."

Darden graduated from Rutgers University in 1993 with a dual major in both English and Africana Studies. He received his master's degree in education in 1997, also from Rutgers. He has taught for eight years, all at Thomas Jefferson Middle School.

Since 2001, Darden has coached the school's eighth-grade mock trial team and has taught in the school's "Before and After School GEPA Language Arts Literacy Preparation" classes. It is in the latter program that Darden reaches out beyond the classroom. He's also known for shooting baskets in the gym with students after school to simply see how they are doing.

"Students have been overheard on the bus ride home discussing Mr. Darden as an inspiration in their lives," said special education teacher Mary Joyce Ragasa. "At this year's eighth-grade moving up ceremony, he received a spontaneous burst of applause from students and parents as he rose to announce the names of his homeroom class."

The Milken National Awards Program, which honors teachers, principals and specialists in public education from

kindergarten through 12th grade, has become the largest teacher recognition program in the United States. There were two (2) recipients in New Jersey last year. Darden is one of two educators selected this year.

Unlike most teaching awards, the Milken Educator Awards have no formal nomination or application process. Educators are recommended for this prestigious honor without their knowledge by a blue-ribbon panel appointed by each state's department of education.

Candidates for the Milken Educator Awards are selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- Exceptional educational talent as evidenced by effective instructional practices and student learning results in the classroom and school;
- Exemplary educational accomplishments beyond the classroom that provide models of excellence for the profession;
- Strong long-range potential for professional and policy leadership; and
- Engaging and inspiring presence that motivates and impacts students, colleagues and the community.

Recipients are presented with unrestricted \$25,000 award checks at the annual Milken National Education Conference, an all-expenses-paid professional development conference held in Washington, D.C.

One-hundred Milken Awards recipients will be announced this year nationwide. Awards totaling more than \$54 million have been presented since the program's inception. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia participate in the program.

For more information about the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Awards, please contact the Department of Education Public Information Office at (609) 292-1126 or the Milken Family Foundation at (310) 570-4775 or www.mff.org.