2026 RCES/ELC Teacher of the Year – Melinda Smith



Today, we honor someone whose impact on students, colleagues, and our school community has stretched across decades. This person's story is rooted right here in Richland County — beginning as a graduate of ERHS, now RCHS, in the Class of 1992, before continuing on to graduate from Eastern Illinois University in 1996.

Shortly after college, she began what would become a lifelong commitment to education, starting as a Teacher Assistant during the 1996-1997 school year. Even then, it was clear she had a natural gift for working with children and supporting those around her. After two years as a TA — and stepping in to help with maternity leaves along the way — she officially joined the teaching staff as a 2nd grade teacher at the Silver School Building for the 1998-1999 school year. What a journey it has been since then.

For 25 years, she poured her heart into teaching 2nd grade students. She didn't just teach reading, writing, and math — she helped children build confidence, curiosity, and a love for learning. Many families in our community can say their child was lucky enough to walk through her classroom doors.

Her leadership extended far beyond her own classroom walls. For many years, she served as a team leader for her grade level, supporting colleagues with the same patience, organization, and dedication she showed her students. In fact, if there were an award for efficiency, she would absolutely be the inventor of it. She sets an incredibly high standard for excellence and encourages everyone around her to achieve greatness.

Then, after 25 years in 2nd grade, she did something remarkable — she embraced a brand-new challenge. During the 2023-2024 school year, she transitioned into the role of STEM teacher and helped build the RCES STEM specials program from the ground up. Once again, she brought creativity, enthusiasm, and innovation to students through hands-on learning experiences that inspire problem solving, creativity, and engineering skills. Whether in second grade or STEM, she is always willing to try new things and push students to step outside their comfort zones and accomplish things they never imagined they could do.

But what truly makes this person special is not only what she does — it is who she is. She is kind, dedicated, organized, dependable, and genuinely fun to work with. She is the first person to reach out and check on you or your family, and she is always ready to jump in and help in any way she can. She loves celebrating others and encouraging people in their endeavors, always making those around her feel valued and capable.

If you know her well, you know she is also incredibly funny. It is nearly impossible to spend time with her and not walk away smiling, encouraged, and better because of it. As both a teacher and a colleague, she somehow always has the right advice at exactly the right time.

She is the type of colleague who will jump into any lesson, activity, or crazy idea with a smile. In fact, she survived every lesson, activity, and shenanigan the second grade team could dream up together — including getting sent to "the other side of the building" with some of her teammates! Through it all, she remained positive and supportive.

Outside of school, her greatest joy is her family — her husband Jason, and their daughters Payton and Reese. And of course, we cannot forget Roxy, the silver Labrador who Jason jokes is really their third daughter. She loves spending time with her family, whether that means a Disney vacation, a trip to the mountains, or an ocean cruise adventure.

Today, we recognize not only an outstanding educator, but also an incredible teammate, mentor, and friend. Someone who has dedicated her career to making school a place where students feel excited to learn and teachers feel supported and encouraged.

It is my honor to present this award to someone who is beyond deserving... Mrs. Melinda Smith.

2026 RCMS Teacher of the Year – Kristin Flanagan



A true Teacher of the Year, Kristin works hard in everything she does. During the past 27 years, Kristin has been an important part of the Richland County school district and more specifically Richland County Middle School. Her time at RCMS as a teacher with a focus on technology has impacted so many students while attending RCMS. Her peers say “she is the best classroom neighbor and sounding board. She is always there to listen and talk through things with and provides a valued perspective on all things teaching and life”.

Kristin is the “ultimate fan” cheering on the OIney Cubs or OIney Tigers in her orange and black over the years supporting her students, her children and her husband. Whether it was Hailey or Kaitlyn dancing or cheering on the sidelines, or Braden on the basketball court or baseball field, Kristin was there supporting them and the team. And in case you thought her fan time was coming to an end, she now is donning her green and white to support and cheer on the Vincennes Lincoln High School “Alice” and her husband Rob as he assumes the head basketball coach for the 2026-2027 school year.

Kristin's positive spirit, dedication, and love for her school community is evident. Kristin, we thank you for your commitment to the students of Richland County and we wish you the best in what lies ahead

2026 RCHS Teacher of the Year – Paula West



This year's Teacher of the Year is an extraordinary educator who perfectly embodies a lifelong commitment to students, colleagues, and the wider community.

This individual is an educator that goes above and beyond in every aspect of life. They are truly one of the most hardworking individuals inside and outside of the classroom. From volunteering in several organizations throughout our community to always being a helping hand in numerous RCHS activities, this individual finds a way to be there for everyone.

This teacher is also deeply committed to helping the students learn practical, real-world skills to ensure our students grow into responsible, successful adults.

Additionally, our Teacher of the Year truly has a growth mindset. Whether it is taking additional classes to improve the curriculum, refining existing skills, or learning something totally new, this individual is definitely a lifelong learner.

This year’s Teacher of the Year is Paula West …….maybe we should make her a shirt!!