

2026 TAA Teacher HEROES



January Elizabeth McClain

Curtis Southerland

February Carrie Brooks

Allen Moody

March Johnathan Elliott

Melanie Anderson

April Russell Bennett

Lauren Baker

May Naomi Pugh

Nathan Dumser

June Rosa Palacios

Tomica Lake

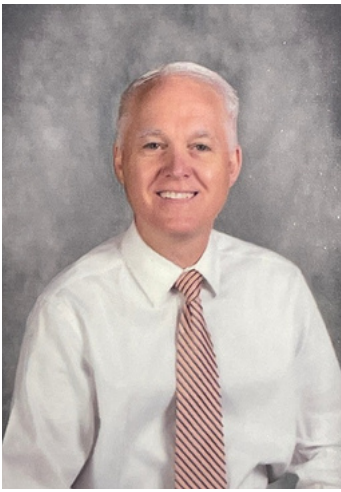
Scroll on to read about each Teacher Hero!



Elizabeth “Betsy” McClain - *January Teacher Hero*
Visual Art Teacher
Signal Mountain High School
Signal Mountain, Tennessee
Principal: Michael Carson
Superintendent: Dr. Justin Robertson
Nominator: Shannon Rodd

For nearly three decades, Betsy McClain has been a cornerstone of the Signal Mountain community, dedicating twenty-nine years to teaching art and inspiring students of all ages. As Department Head for the arts and a member of the Teacher Leadership Committee, she models leadership and collaboration while advancing the role of the arts in education.

She teaches middle school art, high school Art I, and photography, fostering creativity and technical skill. Deeply committed to connecting students with their community, Ms. McClain has partnered with Electric Power Board (EPB), the Hamilton County Humane Society, the Creative Discovery Museum, and other local organizations to showcase student work and raise awareness for important causes.



Curtis Southerland - *January Teacher Hero*
Visual Art Teacher
Dickson County High School
Dickson, Tennessee
Principal: Katherine Perez
Superintendent: Dr. Christie Southerland
Nominator: Christopher Taylor

Curtis Southerland goes above and beyond his role as an art teacher. His creativity extends to a unique system of organization in his classroom, running his classroom much like a restaurant! His room has tables and booths as seating options. He puts his lesson plan on a menu so that students can see the learning that will take place, and sometimes even serves food to his students. Beyond his role in the classroom, Curtis serves in many leadership roles. He generously shares his expertise, ideas, and time with colleagues in his school, district, and beyond. He is a constant learner himself—always seeking new approaches, tools, and strategies to better support student learning, including attendance at the Tennessee Arts Academy Summer Institute. His work at Dickson County High School raises the bar for excellence in teaching and collaborative culture. He was recently named the High School Teacher of the Year for Dickson County, Tennessee.



Carrie Brooks - *February Teacher Hero*
Music Teacher

Carter Elementary School

Knoxville, Tennessee

Principal: Taiesha Young

Superintendent: Dr. Jon Rysewyk

Nominator: JoAnn Gusta

Carrie Brooks goes above and beyond her required duties in all respects. She plans and executes musical performances for all grade levels and helps facilitate the school's Night of the Arts, organizing a grade level performance during that event.

Carrie is a true team-builder: she always helps out her teammates and lifts them up. She is the “momma-bear” of the school, looking out for everyone both emotionally and academically. As her school's Knox County Education Association representative, Carrie helps resolve issues in her building, if one arises. She seeks out special certifications in music to further her teacher content knowledge, and recently completed her training in Orff-Schulwerk. Carrie is soft spoken, but still able to maintain an orderly classroom. She has built a strong rapport with the students, staff, and families, attends school events, and many other community events when possible.



Allen Moody - *February Teacher Hero*
Music Teacher

Idlewild Elementary School
Memphis, Tennessee

Principal: Kiersten Schnackle

Superintendent: Dr. Marie Feagins

Nominator: Bethany Mayahi

Allen Moody's involvement in the Orff-Schulwerk philosophy has been instrumental in his students' knowledge of music and movement, and he is an active member of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA). His students are wonderful musicians who perform at the school and in the community at district-wide events such as board meetings, at the AOSA National Conference, and in the Orff Children's Choir at Memphis Symphony Orchestra performances. Allen has been instrumental in the development of the Orff Music Side-By Side partnership with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. This partnership brings kindergarten through fifth-grade students and professional musicians together for a unique performance opportunity. Allen also arranges for his students to perform twice a year for community partners in his school's neighborhood. The students enjoy this time "caroling" for the community, and the businesses enjoy having the children visit. Allen has also impacted the level of professionalism with new teachers by serving as a mentor. He has presented at the AOSA National Conference and is an AOSA-certified Orff-Schulwerk levels recorder instructor. In 2024, Allen was named a CMA Foundation Music Teacher of Excellence. He was also given the 2025 Educator of the Year Award from the University of Memphis' School of Music.



Johnathan Elliott - *March Teacher Hero*
Music Teacher
Oneida Middle and High School
Oneida, Tennessee
Principal: Stacy Love
Superintendent: Dr. Jeanny Phillips
Nominator: Stacy Love

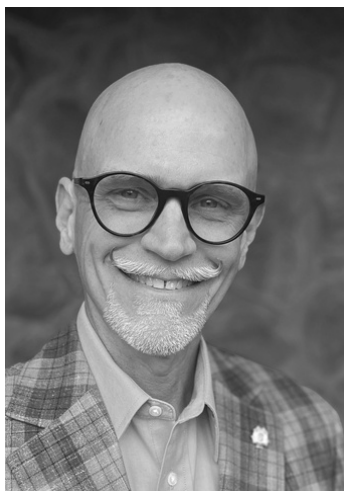
Johnathan Elliott's dedication to music education has transformed the band program into one of pride, excellence, and inclusivity. Dr. Elliott leads the 6–12 grade marching and concert bands with vision, energy, and a commitment to student growth. His ensembles consistently excel in competitions, and he has built a program that not only achieves high levels of performance but also fosters a safe and welcoming environment where every student feels valued. Elliott has created lasting traditions such as spirited pep band performances that engage the student section, memorable community parades, and the much-loved “Night of the Arts.” His classroom culture has extended to families and community members who rally around the band program, attend performances, volunteer, and celebrate the many traditions he has cultivated. He serves as a mentor to other arts teachers in the building, offering collaboration, guidance, and encouragement that elevate the entire arts program. A valued member of the Instructional Leadership Team, he collaborates with colleagues across disciplines and supports school-wide goals with enthusiasm.



Melanie Anderson - *March Teacher Hero*
Visual Art Teacher
Arlington High School
Arlington, Tennessee
Principal: Chris David
Superintendent: Dr. Allison Clark
Nominator: Joy Bowser

Melanie Anderson has served Arlington High School since the founding of Arlington Community Schools in 2014. She has helped to build a high school art program that is widely recognized for both rigor and creativity.

Her professional background in fashion marketing and her extensive artistic training enrich her instruction and give her students access to real-world practices. Her classroom functions as an active studio where students receive guided practice, engage in critiques, and develop independent works that reflect personal artistic voice. She structures her lessons with clear expectations while allowing students the freedom to explore materials and techniques that inspire them. She moves naturally between group instruction and individual conferences, offering detailed and precise guidance that helps students refine their skills. At the Mid-South Scholastic Art Awards, her district was represented with sixty-nine total recognitions including top category awards. She actively develops her skills through museum study, portrait courses, and a scholarship-funded workshop at the Arrowmont School of Art and Craft. She co-organizes the Arlington High School Spring Art Show, which showcases more than a thousand works of student art each year. She coordinates student participation in community events such as the River Arts Fest and the Homecoming Carnival. She brings guest artists to campus and mentors students in the National Art Honor Society. Her combination of expertise, compassion, and dedication makes her an outstanding representative of Arlington Community Schools.



Russell Bennett - *April Teacher Hero*
Visual Art Teacher

Dobyns-Bennett High School

Kingsport, Tennessee

Principal: Dr. Brian Tate

Superintendent: Dr. Christopher Hampton

Nominator: Kathryn Bennett

For over thirty-one years, Russell Bennett has dedicated his life not only to teaching art, but to inspiring countless students to see themselves as creators, problem solvers, and visionaries. Russell has taught all ages of learners and is currently an art instructor at the high school level, teaching a wide variety of drawing, printmaking, painting, and Advanced Placement studio courses. He recently received his Adobe Certified Professional credentials in Photoshop and InDesign. He has created multiple school art programs from scratch, authored a Goals 2000 Grant, and regularly exhibits his students' artwork, featuring their work in local and regional exhibits. Russell was instrumental in creating an Alumni Legacy Gallery of student artwork for his school. Many of his former students have become graphic designers, photographers, art educators, animators, and are active in other visual art fields. In 2024, he created the Russell C. Bennett Alumni Art Award at his high school alma mater, Happy Valley High School in Elizabethton, TN. This purchase award is given to a senior art student, who receives a monetary prize for their artwork, and the art is put on loan to the high school. While teaching ceramics, Russell curated a joint exhibit featuring his work alongside that of his students titled *Eye to Eye: Instructor and His Pupils*, shown at the Johnson City Area Arts Council Gallery. He has also served the Department of Education for the State of Tennessee over the decades in visual art curriculum revisions, visual art standards development, and as a PRAXIS art content area consultant.



Lauren Baker - *April Teacher Hero*
Music Teacher
Clovercroft Elementary School
Franklin, Tennessee
Principal: Elizabeth Pulse
Superintendent: Jason Golden
Nominator: Madeline Bridges

Lauren Baker has taught for more than thirty years, and still is excited about each new school year. She has established traditions at her school, but continues to find new avenues for instruction and new ways to make music meaningful for her children. Lauren has developed a comprehensive music program at her school which includes singing, moving, playing instruments, creating, and listening. Her classroom is a place of joy that is recognized by her administration and colleagues as a superlative learning environment. Her colleagues greatly appreciate her willingness to collaborate with them to infuse the arts with classroom units. Lauren's training includes a master's degree in music education and classes and certifications in numerous methodologies including Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, and Feierabend Conversational Solfege. Lauren has demonstrated leadership in her school, county, and region. She is excited by the opportunity to teach and mentor university students. She willingly takes student teachers, and teaches elementary music methods at a local university. Her pedagogy is sound, exciting, child-centered, and caring. Lauren plans numerous opportunities for the children in her school to perform for their school and family community, and the performances are an outgrowth of the classroom curriculum, not an end in themselves.



Naomi Pugh - *May Teacher Hero*

Visual Art Teacher

Brentwood Academy

Brentwood, Tennessee

Interim Head of School: Jenny Cretin

Nominator: Janet Laws

Naomi Pugh has studied art and practiced her craft since childhood. As a successful 4th grade classroom teacher in Metro Nashville Public Schools, she missed following her creative passion and sought an opportunity to bring her general education experience into the world of middle school visual art.

Naomi obtained a master's degree in art education, making wonderful connections and opening many resources. She is a hard worker, she is empathetic and supportive, and she is providing a classroom where students are engaged, learning, growing and having an amazing time. Her students' works have been well represented in exhibitions in past years, particularly in the printmaking and sculpture categories. Naomi has spent her summers traveling to Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Hawaii seeking out beautiful examples of art and architecture to fill her soul and share with her students. She also donates her time to offer painting classes to young women who have been rescued from having been trafficked, and are trying to reestablish new lives. She is helping them see beauty and promise through creating art. Naomi is passionate about learning, sharing her knowledge with her students, and encouraging creative, independent thinking which helps her young artists find their voices.



Nathan Dumser - *May Teacher Hero*

Music Teacher

St. George's Independent School

Collierville, Tennessee

Head of School: Luke Pruett

Nominator: Anne Merkle

Nathan Dumser consistently goes above and beyond providing musical opportunities for his choir students. He earned a Bachelors of Music in Vocal Music Education from the University of Memphis and a Masters of Music in Choral Conducting from the University of Kentucky. Dumser is in his eighth year of teaching middle and upper school choral ensembles at St. George's Independent School. His students compete in the Southwest Tennessee Honor Choir and the Tennessee All-State Choir and often earn top chairs. The St. George's choirs regularly earn Superior and Sweepstakes ratings at the regional Choral Performance Assessment and the State Choral Performance Assessment.

His choirs have also sung alongside the Memphis Symphony Chorus, and traveled internationally to countries including Germany, Austria, Switzerland and southern Italy. In 2027, he plans to take them to the Baltics. In 2025, St.

George's Singers performed The Drop That Contained the Sea with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. Nathan has worked with the school's American Music Ensemble to record and win two Downbeat Awards for Best High School Pop, Rock, and Blues Group working with Tom Link, his band director. The American Music Ensemble has also shared the stage with Samford University modern band, University of Memphis' Sound Fuzion, and worked under Grammy Award-winner Boo Mitchell. In April 2026, he was named the new conductor of the Memphis Symphony Chorus. Nathan has grown the choral program from an eight member choir to a full forty- five student upper school choir and a thirty student middle school choir. He chooses challenging music and sets high expectations, which the students rise to meet. Nathan has also never turned a student away who wanted to sing in the choir. He is gracious and meets them where they are, helping them to perfect the skills they need to be successful.



Rosa Palacios - *June Teacher Hero*
Music Teacher

Farrar Elementary School

Tullahoma, Tennessee

Principal: Travis Moore

Superintendent: Dr. Catherine Stephens

Nominator: Sarah McVey

Rosa Palacios is an exceptional elementary music teacher whose classroom resonates with creativity, joy, and purposeful student leadership. She empowers her young musicians to take an active role in their own learning by guiding conversations about music, shaping performances, and exploring rhythms, melodies, and movement in ways that encourage curiosity and independence. Rosa skillfully weaves her students' diverse cultural backgrounds into every lesson, helping them see their identities reflected and celebrated through song, dance, and instrumental work. Her classroom is a safe, vibrant space where all learners feel valued, respected, and inspired to share their voices. Although she is still early in her career, Rosa demonstrates an unwavering dedication to professional growth. She seeks out workshops, collaborates with colleagues, and embraces new strategies to make her instruction even more engaging and inclusive. Her enthusiasm for continued learning enriches both her own teaching and the experiences of the students she serves. Rosa's commitment to nurturing confident, culturally-aware musicians, and to elevating the role of music in the lives of children, makes her a shining example of excellence in arts education.



Tomica Lake - *June Teacher Hero*
Visual Art Teacher
H.G. Hill Middle School
Nashville, Tennessee
Principal: Carrie Jones
Superintendent: Dr. Adrienne Battle
Nominator: Christopher Taylor

Since coming to Nashville from Memphis, Tomica Lake has had a huge impact on her students and other arts teachers throughout her district. Tomica was recognized for participating in a district-wide project that involved creating a design for benches at bus stops around the city. She and her students now appear in a Frist Art Museum exhibit because of this project. Artwork by two of her students was chosen to be displayed at the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Board of Education. She supports her students by demonstrating various techniques so that they can find their area of interest and be successful in their projects. She encourages them by giving them advice on how to improve their art and displaying their work in the school and community to give each student time to shine. In addition to this, Tomica has led several professional development sessions to help arts teachers improve their classroom performance. The Coordinator of Visual Arts for the district, Allison Ross, has even recruited Tomica to assist in writing a middle school arts curriculum. These accomplishments occurred in the span of two years after becoming a Nashville teacher, and it demonstrates her passion for teaching and her ability to adapt to a new situation. This year she was awarded Middle School Teacher of the Year by the Tennessee Art Education Association.